

Chan | 禪 | Magazine

Summer 2011



Chan Meditation Center
Institute of Chung-Hwa Buddhist Culture
90-56 Corona Avenue
Elmhurst, NY 11373

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“I have been asked whether there is anything in my life that I regret. I have experiences where I did embarrassing things. I still do plenty of embarrassing things. But there is nothing I regret. When I make a mistake, I repent, accept responsibility, and keep going...It has been good to take up the story of my life and set it down in English. I hope it will be of some use.”

–Chan Master Sheng Yen
from *Footprints in the Snow*,
Doubleday, 2008

Chan Magazine

Volume 31, Number 3
Summer, 2011

Chan Magazine is published quarterly by the Institute of Chung-Hwa Buddhist Culture, Chan Meditation Center, 90-56 Corona Avenue, Elmhurst, NY 11373. The magazine is a non-profit venture; it accepts no advertising and is supported solely by contributions from members of the Chan Center and the readership. Donations to support the magazine and other Chan Center activities may be sent to the above address and will be gratefully appreciated. Please make checks payable to Chan Meditation Center; your donation is tax-deductible. For information about Chan Center activities please call (718) 592-6593. For Dharma Drum Publications please call (718) 592-0915. E-mail the Center at ddmbaus@yahoo.com, or the magazine at chanmagazine@gmail.com, or visit us online at: <http://www.chancenter.org>.

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*Cover and table of contents photos by
Kaifen Hu*

From the Editor

I found two headlines in the last two days profoundly disturbing: “Health Insurers Making Record Profits as Many Postpone Care,” and “Nursing Homes Seek Exemption from Health Law.”

To take the second case first, in what The Times describes as an “oddity” of American health care, one in four workers who take care of nursing home residents has no health insurance, and earns so little that it’s unaffordable even in the rare instances that it’s available. Among those who provide in-home care, it’s only one in three. These are the people who feed, and bathe, and toilet, and move and monitor our parents and grandparents and us, eventually, when they and we are no longer able to do these things for ourselves. It is, by the way, a difficult and dangerous job, with an on-the-job injury rate about double the national average.

The news is that the nursing homes want an exemption from the new health care law that would force them to either provide insurance or pay a penalty, which they can’t afford because so many of their patients are on Medicaid or Medicare, and the reimbursements from those programs keep going down, even though the real cost of care keeps going up.

This is important—this is how our system works (or doesn’t). There’s been a tremendous outcry about how much we spend on health care, and the system’s response has been for payers—Medicare, Medicaid and private insurers—to reduce the amount they pay, regardless of what the health care actu-

ally costs. If my doctor gives me \$10 worth of health care, my insurance company only gives him about \$6; if I were on Medicare that would be less than \$5; if Medicaid, probably \$3, depending on the state. And if I had no insurance, my bill would be \$30—the doctor’s got to make up the losses somehow.

We’re not doing anything about the cost of health care, we’re just withholding payment, and one result is that the people who care for our elderly have nobody to care for them.

To go back to the first headline, it tells us something about the market forces that have driven our health care system to the hell realm in which we now find it. Insurance companies are making record profits precisely because insured people can’t afford to use their insurance—they can’t handle the ever-increasing deductibles and co-pays. So they’re behaving more and more like the uninsured—putting off the non-emergent medical care that might discover an illness before it’s life-threatening, and waiting instead until it’s really serious, and really expensive to treat.

The news here is that the insurance companies, put on alert by these windfall profits, want rate increases to shield them against the possibility that the economy will improve and their customers will actually start utilizing the insurance they’ve already paid for.

Let’s be clear about the economics here. Markets theory tells us that the more you sell, the more you earn. But in the case of health care, insurers sell their product in advance, and

then make more money the less their product is used, so they have a big incentive to disincent the use of their product. And that's easily done—you just increase the deductible, increase the co-pays, and exclude some of the most popular services like the annual physical, and bingo! People stop going to the doctor.

What connects these two stories is that they both illustrate with stunning and depressing clarity how we have fashioned a system in which every effort to make it economically better makes it medically worse. By trying to fix the economics of Medicare and Medicaid we have pretty much guaranteed that our seniors will be neglected and abused. By trying to keep our private insurers solvent we have discouraged precisely the kind of preventive care that would keep people out of the emergency rooms and surgical suites.

But what is most absurd about our ongoing rancorous health care debate is that at its root there is almost universal agreement:

- 1) Everybody hates health care;
- 2) Everybody wants health care.

Everybody hates waiting in the doctor's office; everybody hates the little gowns that never cover your butt, the freezing treatment rooms, the invasive exams and the needle sticks. We all hate spending 40 minutes trying to lie still in a little tube that clanks and groans, and above all we hate that after all that we might get bad news. Everybody hates health care, and nobody, except the rarest of neurotics, wants to overuse it.

On the other hand, everybody wants a doctor when we're sick. We all want a diagnosis, we all want a treatment plan, we all want to be

cured. We all want to make medical decisions with our families and our doctors, and not be told what we can and can't do by bean-counters or bureaucrats, and we all understand—I believe, in my infinite optimism—that other people all want, and deserve, the same things that we want and think we deserve.

Above all, we all want relief from the suffering that comes with aging, sickness and death... and our medical science has gotten very good at providing that relief—our life expectancy is more than double what it was in the Buddha's time. Unfortunately, our medical system is really bad at allocating what our medical science is so good at doing—we expend a huge percentage of our resources postponing inevitable deaths by a few weeks, or even days, while we allow infants and children to die unnecessarily of entirely preventable and curable illnesses.

In the Autumn 2009 issue of this magazine, I asked you, our readers, in the name of reducing suffering, and in as non-partisan a way as I could, to please support meaningful health care reform. A law was passed; unfortunately, so far that legislation has produced little change and lots of name-calling. We have health care institutions refusing to make health insurance available to health care workers; we have health insurers getting rich by discouraging patients from going to doctors; obviously, the work of health care reform is not yet done. I have no specific policy proposal. I say only that for Buddhists enjoying the freedoms that only the richest country in the world can offer, it should be unacceptable that tens of millions of our friends and neighbors suffer because they can't go to the doctor.

Understanding the Stages of 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 21, 2009, on the morning of the second full day of a ten-day intensive Huatou Retreat at the Dharma Drum Retreat Center in Pine Bush, NY. It was translated live by Guogu (Jimmy Yu) and transcribed and edited by Buffe Laffey.



Without Discernment One Becomes a Withered Log

Let's continue talking about the different stages in the practice of Huatou: reciting and questioning. If there is no questioning but merely recitation of the Huatou, then it will be very similar to methods such as counting the breath, reciting the Buddha's name, or reciting a mantra. Using the Huatou in this way you will reach a state where your body and mind are very settled, with no discursive thinking and not many wandering thoughts. But if you continue in this way you will reach a stagnant stillness in which, even though there are no wandering thoughts, there is no clear discernment either. The ability to discern the different psychological and physiological changes, and to know whether one is using the method correctly or not, this clear discernment diminishes in time until one reaches sheer oblivion, darkness. Here, even though there is no arising and perishing of thoughts, and in that sense, no vexations, wisdom will never arise. Liberation will never be reached, and one will most definitely be far away from seeing self nature. This is what happens if a person simply recites the Huatou. Proceeding this way without discernment, you end up being what we call in Chan a withered log, sitting there, useless. So that's something to avoid.

If we examine closely the true meaning of counting the breath, or following the breath, methods such as this, the direct translation is actually "contemplation of the breath" or "contemplation on the counting of the breath". The word "contemplation" is the key here. In Chinese it's *guan* and can be variously translated as contemplation, discernment, or insight. This dimension of the practice must

be there, otherwise one can very easily slip into a drowsy state like ordinary people when they use counting the breath. The power of the mind, instead of becoming stronger and more focused, actually weakens and diminishes, along with the diminishing of wandering thoughts. It weakens to a state of haziness, and then that person enters into oblivion, stupor. Or, the mind settles down without wandering thoughts, but because of this lack of discernment it enters into this Chan state likened to a withered log, stagnant, a deadening stillness without clarity, without awareness of what's happening psycho-physiologically in the course of practice.

This discernment is very interesting and important. It doesn't really matter if you use a Hinayana method, a Mahayana method or a Chan method—it is indispensable. This discernment is variously named in Tiantai Buddhism—insight meditation or contemplative meditation—and it should be coupled with calming meditation because the two always work together collaboratively. Tracing back before the Tiantai School, in Indian Buddhism we call it *shamatha* and *vipassana*, stilling the mind and contemplation. These two ultimately have to work together, otherwise one can go astray from the practice. Only when you can work these two dimensions of cultivation together will you be able to derive power from the practice. The same holds true with Huatou—you must have this discernment so that when the mind becomes more concentrated from a scattered state (and from a concentrated state to a more unified state), you will clearly know the different stages and the changes that the body and mind go through, even in the unified state. Shifu himself has clarified this but it won't do any harm to review it here.

First Stage of Counting the Breath

Take for example the counting the breath method. One goes through stage by stage. In the first stage, because habit tendency is so powerful and vexations uninterrupted, when you use the method of counting you can hardly count up to five. You are constantly interrupted by the force, the momentum of your vexations and discrimination. Your mind is quite agitated. In this condition it's very important to garner enough force to really apply yourself to the method, to overcome these internal distractions, to concentrate your mind. Eventually you will bring the mind to a concentrated state, a second level. Of course at the first level we are really battling with habitual ways of the mind. It tends to stray off from here to there, and jump from this point to that point. Because the force of this habit is so strong you cannot really stop it. It takes a lot of energy to focus the mind. Sometimes the mind likes to construct stories when you have wandering thoughts. It can be quite attractive—these stories are like watching a movie with a beginning, middle and end.

Second Stage

When you reach the second stage you are able to focus the mind on one number after the next. This is not to say that you don't have vexations or distractions. You are distracted from time to time. The force of this mechanism of vexations and discursive thinking is still strong enough to interrupt you. But the frequency is much lower and the content is not as clear or sharp as in the first stage, meaning that when you are counting you know you are interrupted but you don't really know what exactly was the content of the wandering thought. You can even count si-

multaneously while your mind is being pulled away from it and you realize this, because of the discernment cultivated from your power of concentration. Furthermore, these distractions and vexations are more fragmented in that there is no beginning, middle and end to the stories. Perhaps they are images or discursive thinking but they really make no sense, they merely arise and perish of their own accord due to habit. There is no narrative to these discursive thoughts and you are able to not follow them.

Third Stage

When you reach the third stage of counting the breath, each number is clearly perceived. Your ability to stay with the method, your own internal state, is also clearly discerned. This is not to say that you don't have any vexations or distractions. It's just that the vexations and the distractions are extremely subtle, almost imperceptible. Their contents are definitely fragmentary and not perceived; they are so fast and subtle, experientially what you are aware of is a flash of something. It is like the directedness of the mind has shifted; that's the level of subtlety. It's not that there is a concrete thought but you sense that the mind has shifted or strayed, pulled almost before the formulation of the thought. That too is residue of habitual patterns of your mind. Seeing this way in the third stage you're able to discern this and still clearly maintain the number.

Fourth Stage

If you proceed further you will enter into the fourth stage where there are no residues, vexations or distractions, only clarity. The mind

is quite luminous. The numbers have also disappeared, leaving you in this state of clarity and luminosity. Now, if the practitioner is interacting with the environment, this practitioner can clearly see what lies before him or her. They perceive the forms, perceive the sounds, but there is no longer the mechanism generating like or dislike, good or bad. That is, the discriminating mind is pacified. So one sees things in their utter clarity, as they are. Experientially the person has an indescribable clarity and peace, which stems from being finally free from these habits of mind, the discriminating mind of attachment. All things are perceived as they are without labels, without discrimination. Yet the person knows quite clearly what he or she is experiencing at this moment. That is, the discernment is not lost. So that's the fourth stage.

Importance of Understanding the Stages of Practice

Those of you who are drowsy please do something about it.

[As previously instructed, some participants loudly exclaim "Hunh!" several times to dispel their drowsiness.]

If your drowsiness is quite severe you should just kneel on the hard floor. Descriptions of these stages are not just theory. I don't talk about these just for the sake of talking about them, they are for your own benefit. Understanding these different changes of body and mind is very useful. Even though you may not have experienced them yet, if you continue to practice you will. Outside of retreat time when there is no-one of whom to ask questions, even having heard them once will

leave some impression on you so that you will know what to do and at least you will not generate fear or attachment. When these states do arise, if one does not know the principles behind them, it's very easy for people who have never experienced them to be much afraid of what will happen next. Or when these blissful states arise, very easily the tendency of the mind is to latch onto them. Latching onto them is precisely how one can go astray. As soon as attachment arises, this is where demonic forces can enter into you, take over and utilize your desire and attachment and lead you astray. So it's important to understand them, clarify them, even if you have not experienced these states yet.

Or if you have experienced them it will also be good to hear the experience of others. For example, the state that I spoke about yesterday of excruciating pain and energy thrusting upward through my head. These are not things that you can read in a book. It's something that only a live person can talk about from personal experience. If somehow in the future you experience similar states you will know not to fear them. Even though scriptures and treatises talk about different stages of the meditation path they don't typically talk about it in such detail. It's important to understand them for your own benefit. So in the future if something were to happen to you and you blame me for not clarifying, then I will not accept such blame.

Unification of Body and Mind, Stage One

Shifu has spoken about different stages of unification, different stages of the one mind state. The first stage is unification of body

and mind. Ordinary people can't understand this. Why? Because they really don't know what "mind" is. Day in and day out they are actually led by their insatiable desire. They are pulled left and right by their attachments, their attraction and repulsion to things. They think they're in control, but actually they have no idea who is the master, who actually governs and manipulates all of the actions, decisions, opinions, and judgments. The master is one's desire.

Out of control, they have no clue what exactly this "mind" is, let alone "unification" of body and mind. Ordinarily we are not in control of these thoughts. Only when one begins to practice does one know what mind is. Ordinary people, being led by their own opinions and judgments, little do they know that all of these things are actually their desires, attractions and repulsions. Being puppets, they are led astray left and right. But when we begin practicing, then slowly but surely we are confronted with what exactly this mind is, and how uncontrollable it is.

Recognizing Chaos is the Beginning of Practice

The only way to understand the unification of body and mind is to go through this very harsh and difficult period of battling all the conflicts and contradictions between body and mind. What I mean by this is, when you first start practicing the very first thing you realize is that the body is pain. The body does not listen to you. Furthermore your thoughts are uncontrollable. When you try to not give rise to wandering thoughts, try to put the mind on one spot (for example counting the breath) it wants to go elsewhere and you have to pull it

back. Pulling it back, staying with the number, again you're interrupted by physiological discomfort, pain and aching here and there. There is this constant battle between body and mind, all of these reactions from sitting meditation. Then the practitioner begins to understand what mind is: sheer chaos, complete scatteredness. That is the beginning of practice, realizing exactly how scattered we ordinarily are in daily life.

Without practice, people usually think they are in control. Only when people start practicing, then they experience that they are actually not in control. This first step in the long process of practice is actually the most difficult because you have not disciplined the mind. The mind does not listen to you. You have not trained the body, and the body does not listen to you. When you sit in meditation you engage in all kinds of wandering thoughts and if you're not engaging in wandering thoughts, what is the mind to do? It falls asleep, or falls into a stupor. So the course of practice in the beginning is the hardest but it's a process that one has to go through in order to advance. One deepens one's practice, eventually reaching a point where one is settled yet without falling asleep, and the mind is clear yet not scattered. This process can be quite excruciating.

I remember when I first started doing retreats (this was before Shifu started to lead retreats), I was used to morning and evening sittings that seemed to be fine, with little blissful moments. Early morning when you get up, you didn't get enough sleep, so naturally when you sit you just catch up on some sleep. In the evening sometimes you'll sit very well, very calm and quiet. But when we started to do retreats it was a whole other story. Shifu had no assistants so I was the only one there,

I was the one being the timekeeper, the monitor. Sitting there I realized how much pain I could experience when sitting for prolonged periods, one after another. The pain starts to accumulate and the whole body is just burning. Furthermore, because the body is burning the mind is out of control, very agitated counting the breath.

Keeping the Mind Entertained

Shifu told us to count breath and I remember thinking, "What the hell do we want to count the breath for?" One to ten, one to ten, one to ten like an idiot. As if we don't have anything better to do. Counting the breath is a very painful process of trying to stick to mere numbers. Very soon I would give up and I would entertain myself. After all, I have to stay in the Chan Hall; I'm the only assistant. So I would watch one [mind] movie after the next. What was fun about it was I'm not only the actors in the movie, I'm also the director. It's like a one-man show. Directing the movie the way I want to and then watch, watch, watch one flick after another. But that too can become exhausting. You know you have to do all these things: you have to direct the movie, you have to act, you have to perform different personalities in the movie and have dialogs. So it becomes boring. After some time I discovered it's the same movie

playing over and over again. So sitting there it's not so much the physical discomfort and the horrible environment, the lack of ventilation, but it's the fact that there is really nowhere for my mind to settle. Everything I try to do gets boring and I want to do something else.

One time I went up to Shifu during interview and I said, "Shifu, I've had it. I quit. I'm not going to do it anymore. I'm not going to sit

"SHIFU, I'VE HAD IT. I QUIT. I'M NOT GOING TO DO IT ANYMORE. I'M NOT GOING TO SIT HERE AND COUNT THE STUPID NUMBERS AND BE YOUR ASSISTANT!" SHIFU, AFTER LISTENING TO ME COMPLAIN FOR A LONG WHILE SAID, "YOU CAN JUST TAKE A STROLL OUTSIDE, GET SOME FRESH AIR."

here and count the stupid numbers and be your assistant!" Shifu, after listening to me complain for a long while said, "You can just take a stroll outside, get some fresh air," and I thought, that's a good idea, I haven't tried that yet. Being the timekeeper I used to have a lot of pain. I had my own strategies; I could get up because I was the timekeeper. If my leg pain

was too much I would just get up, just walk around so my leg wouldn't be so painful. Now, I could walk outside by myself. The first time was quite refreshing. I felt free, liberated from the jail of being locked in this small room. But after some time, going out almost every period for fresh air, seeing the same scenery can also be quite boring. Looking at the same trees, the same neighbors, hearing the same damn funeral chanting for the deceased. After some time my mind couldn't be satisfied and it wanted to do something else.

Ferment and Mental Agitation

I remember those early days like a ferment, locked in a black room (because the curtains were black), and hearing people scream towards the end of the retreat. Loud cries and wails. I didn't know what the hell was going on, why people were responding to meditation like this. Perhaps because of the intensity? But I had my own theory: I thought that any normal person locked in this black pit for so many days, no wonder they start screaming and crying and having all kinds of psychological reactions. This space to me back then was really an insane asylum. So I comforted myself that way, being timekeeper and watching all these people acting funny.

In those old days, after the first ever retreat I promised myself, and I also told Shifu, "I'm not doing it again. I'm not going to assist you on retreat, I'm not going inside that Chan Hall." And then the next retreat would come and Shifu would always promise me, "Yes, yes you don't have to sit. If you feel pain just walk around. You can do anything you want." As soon as the retreat started he would state retreat regulations and he would typically look over at me and say, "This applies to everyone". Shifu would always stay in the Chan Hall (not like later when he was in his old age), he would sit with everyone, every period. Now, he is sitting right next to me, how is it possible that I can do whatever I want when my master is sitting right next to me? So I would have to sit through excruciating pain, mental agitation, scatteredness. But little by little, overcoming these, the mind and the body would become unified. Only by overcoming them, facing them, accepting them, and trying one's best to work on the method, then slowly but surely the physical

discomfort would disperse of its own accord. The mental agitation would settle down.

Unification of Body and Mind

I recall the first time I experienced this body and mind unification. Truly miraculous and indeed mysterious, it was as if the body and mind have completely disappeared yet clarity remains. You don't really know where you are, where you're sitting. You don't really know the environment. The burden of the body completely dissipates. The mind? The mind is restfully but wakefully on the method. And I remember even in that state I forced myself to generate thoughts. What kind of thoughts? I thought to myself, "What happened to the movie? Think. Go ahead, think. Generate some movie for me to watch." Yet the mind refuses, just sitting there in that utter clarity and simplicity. From without people may have perceived me as having nothing to do, sitting there at peace, at rest. But internally there is only this clarity. This is the state of unification of body and mind. It is indescribable because never had I experienced anything like it before. The body's burden, pain, agony all dissipated. The mind is extremely clear, knowing its own state.

Ordinarily the way people regulate their own bodies and minds, or what they consider harmonizing body and mind, is really chasing after desire, stimulation. It's really using the five desires arising from the five sense faculties to satiate, pacify one's desire, to seek external sensual pleasure. But all of this is insatiable, endless, a futile task. Because the five desires are not something that can harmonize one's body and certainly neither is external stimulation. The mind actually becomes more entangled and ensnared by these objects of

desire and it becomes more agitated. If we compare the pleasure, the joy and ease from the union of body and mind to these sensual desires there is a wide, wide gulf. Incomparable. This is something that each and every one of you must come to experience yourself.

Second Stage: Unification of Internal and External

The next stage is unification of internal and external. This too is a miraculous, mysterious experience. Of course one can gain a glimpse, a sense of this by going out to nature, looking at the distant mountains, the forest, the natural environment. In that visual perception it is as if one is together with nature. But that sense of togetherness is a very temporary, illusory type of perception because there is still a subtle division between self and other, internal and external. Why? In that peaceful harmonious perception of oneness, as soon as discrimination arises, for example something that is not to your liking, suddenly that union can dissipate and be cut off. It's a perceptual illusion where one feels at one with nature, nature being great as it is, allowing one to feel minute and part of something greater. But in these kinds of experiences there is actually still a strong sense of internal and external. The evidence is that as soon as something contrary in mind occurs these experiences can suddenly disappear.

However when one engages in Chan practice one reaches a state where self-grasping becomes diminished and dissolved, to the point where no vexations or discriminations arise, no deluded thinking, no wandering thoughts. When one's experience is like this, interacting with the external environment experientially

one reaches a unified state. Now, unified state sounds abstract. But what one really experiences is an intimacy, as if the pulsation of the external environment, nature or whatnot, is the pulsation of one's own being. So one's life is connected to the external environment. In fact, because the self has actually dissolved temporarily, there is no real division between internal and external. It's actually impossible for the person to give rise to a sense of discrimination or conflict. In that state there is no conflict. Contradictions cannot arise such that one feels one will lose this state of oneness. Seeing nature, experiencing the external environment, even a blade of grass or a leaf or a flower, one's experience is so indescribably harmonious it is as if there's a continual flow and communication, an experience of intimacy between the blade of grass and one's self. An indescribable closeness, to the sense that the blade of grass is one's self, is together with one's life. The life of the self and the life of the external environment really blend into one. The rhythm, the pulsation of the external environment and one's self are inseparable.

Third Stage: Unification of Time

The third stage is unification of time: the previous moment, the following moment. This itself is also miraculous, mysterious. For ordinary people, because their minds are so scattered, time drags on. Recalling the first retreat, I sat in the place where I could see the clock right above Shifu's head. It was an old kind of clock that made a ticking sound. Ordinarily people don't even hear the sound, *tick tock tick tock*. I remember sitting there, frustrated, with a lot of anxiety, a lot of pain. Everyone was sitting quite well and I didn't know what to do so I would just look at the

clock. And I could have sworn that the ticking was so slow it was more like *tick* [long pause] *tock* and sometimes it became even slower. Quite frustrating. Time dragged on. It felt like probably the morning period is over, and you look and it's only 10 minutes. It was then that I understood the ancient master who said: When one is very vexed, living one day is like living a whole year. For me it was more like eons. Sitting there, very vexed, I had no idea how to practice.

Until later, I think it was maybe the third retreat, or the fourth retreat, some time when using the Huatou I got myself into the state of the great ball of doubt. I was able to use the method quite smoothly. I remember being in that state for 14 to 20 days, even after retreat. In that state, even though there is clarity moment to moment, nothing leaves a trace behind. I would get up to hit the board to wake everyone up in the small temple and then it seemed like just the next moment I had to hit the morning boards again. Not really sure whether I actually slept or not, and not really sure what had happened, but the doubt is persistent.

Of course scientists say that time is experienced as inseparable from space, that so-called time is actually the distance between spaces. But from a practitioner's point of view, in that unified state of time, the dissolution of time is also the dissolution of space. Things have clearly been carried out; obviously I went to bed, obviously I did a day's work. Obviously I went to different spaces and carried out different events. But because the mind is unified it was as if I did not do any of them. This in itself is quite strange, inconceivable because ordinarily people are burdened by the various tasks that they have to do, by their own bod-

ies in space carrying out different endeavors. Time drags on because of all the vexations and attachments. Deluded thinking makes time drag on and there is a conflict between the previous moment and the successive moment. If a person can truly practice then this unification can be experienced. It is not as if the person is in a stupor, the person is extremely clear. It's just that in that clarity no traces are left behind.

Indescribable States

I remember being in that state sometimes; this is a juncture in practice where many different psychological states will arise, some of these states are just indescribable. I read an ancient Chan Master saying about this unification state that you can hear a kind of a thundering clash between two objects and you open your eyes and it's just two ants bumping into each other. I read this and I thought to myself, this must be some exaggeration, some kind of drama. In literature you have to dramatize things to make the reader more involved in the story. But indeed in such states the six sense faculties are so acute that they can experience things extremely far away. They can experience close things extremely sharply. They can perceive things through objects.

Normally if people can hear their breath, then they probably have some stability. Their mind is not so chaotic that they can't hear their own breathing. But imagine hearing the breathing and starting to hear internal organs working and also blood going through the vessels and all the different things that are happening. Not only hearing them, you can actually perceive them. This is merely the function of the five sense organs; there's also the sixth sense organ, the faculty of mind. The mind itself

during that state of oneness can actually produce many different so-called states: seeing the Buddha, perceiving miraculous things. So it's possible to experience all of these states. But an inexperienced practitioner will become attached to them. Luckily Shifu talked about the flaws of attaching to these states, dwelling in them and not knowing how to advance. He pointed out that essentially these states have nothing to do with the diminishing of vexations, the gaining of wisdom, nothing. Not only does it have nothing to do with real genuine practice, but if you're attached to them it can really become an obstacle. So there's nothing really worth dwelling on; the

practitioner can continue to move on to even deeper states.

Fourth Stage: Unification of Thought

Progressing further one experiences a deeper sense of unification of time, and that is the extinction of previous thought and the non-arising of successive thought. Essentially this means staying in one thought. In this state there is no arising and perishing anymore in the mind. This is unlike previous states in the course of practice, where one still sens-



es changes in one's mental attitudes, and thoughts and interruptions and so on; all of these are just arising and perishing thoughts. We call them "form". So this deeper stage is without form, without the appearance, the characteristics of arising and perishing. Yet it's not that there's nothing. If there was nothing then one would be in a state of oblivion. There is something, and that something is this clarity of what is happening in the moment. Of course this moment is not something that's experienced as changing. It's just this clarity of awareness. No more words, language or labels. No more arising and perishing thoughts. There is this state: one form, one thought.

Sensing Subtle Energy Flows

Shifu has talked about these states in general terms. There are more detailed elaborations from various texts dealing with dhyana practice, samadhi practice, it's not worthwhile to go into depth on them. But I should point out two specific things to be aware of, specifically between the states of unification of body and mind, and unification between inside and outside. The first thing is that when the burdens of the body have disappeared the mind becomes very quiet and concentrated, as if it's completely emptied inside and out. This is the state of unification of body and mind. It is likely that during this state or just prior to this state one can sense the energy flow within one's body. It's very likely for a practitioner to start to pay attention to this energy flow and different chakras, and get involved in that. The problem with getting involved is a subtle assumption of the solidity, the concreteness, the materiality of the body. In other words, there's an attachment to form.

When there is attachment to form then it's no longer Buddhist practice. These cultivations of the material body you can find in other non-Buddhist paths. For example, in Confucianism they talk about a way to regulate, sort of nurture one's body. In Taoism they talk about guiding one's qi. All of these things lead essentially to perpetuation of the physical, material body. So, starting to become aware of them, the best thing is to not attach to them. Don't pay any attention whatsoever to these internal movements of the qi. Otherwise you may become strongly attached to them. When the qi energy travels through different channels and meridians of the body, it can actually bring health to the body. You'll feel refreshed, strengthened. Because of your attachment to wanting to be in a better material condition, you can actually guide the qi to different areas. Wherever the mind focuses the qi can follow. This can be an endless game where you're just sitting there involved in your own energy flow, attached to your own form. For Chan practitioners this is not the correct way to practice.

Danger Of Attaching to Form

If one continues to be attached to the body, in tune with subtle internal energy flows, the person will also come into attunement with external energy. Energies of the sun, of the moon, of mountains, rivers, boulders and rocks and so on. One is able to bring oneself in alignment with the external qi and use it to harmonize and strengthen the body, further wallowing in this game of attachment. From the perspective of the scriptures, the Suran-gama Sutra in particular talks about these types of practitioners.

If the person has been practicing this their entire life, they think they're going to attain some sort of immortality, achieving liberation in this very body, which is ridiculous. But because of their attachment to a corporeal form it's very likely that at the end of their life what they actually attain is a lower realm of existence. Because they have cultivated their mind they have accumulated a kind of merit. Because of this they become not an ordinary kind of spirit or ghost, but a nature spirit that lingers around the forest, around trees and so on. So they can't be separated from form. Worse, at the time of death or even before they die, external demonic forces in the six realms of existence start to pay attention to them, and can actually take over that person. The demonic forces can make that person believe in having attained some realization, Buddhahood within a single body, an immortality state, even giving that person some supernatural ability. Meanwhile the person is actually possessed by these external demons. So either way attachments can only lead to trouble, can only lead to these very negative outer-path states.

Practice and Sexual Desires

Another thing is quite common during retreats; sometimes people (both men and women) ask me why it is that after intense periods of practice, sexual desires are even stronger? Not only sexual desire in the mental realm, but there are also physiological changes. This is basically because in the course of practice, in seated meditation for example, one's energy is settled downward. When one's qi, one's vital spirit essence, is pushed downwards for a prolonged period of time this will stimulate different biological reactions which in turn generate a kind of desire.

The mind and body are inseparable. So, generating a kind of desire, that desire can lead to different illusions or hallucinations in meditation. If the person's practice is quite strong and deep, the power of the energy is very strong, and that can stimulate the body and mind. If the person has experienced samadhi states then coming out of it, or even within the samadhi state, they can release energies producing desirous kinds of thoughts. It's not that the energies are producing desirous thoughts per se, but the energies are stimulating biological reactions. These biological reactions serve as auxiliary conditions that ripen karmic seeds already planted in one's mind. They ripen and manifest as all sorts of illusions and different states. In these states one can even experience copulation and sexual union; one can also lose one's essence, bodily fluids. This pertains to both men and women.

Engaging in these mental sexual unions not only depletes the body's energy, it can also induce external demonic forces to actually appear to you as blissful deities to copulate with you. After a while it becomes a source of attachment. Becoming attached to these states we cannot set free from them. As a result not only will one eventually lose one's samadhi power but it also depletes one's energy. These types of practitioners tend to die quite young. Very often when beginners experience something like this they will want to suppress it. The more energy one uses to suppress these thoughts the greater it bounces back. It's not something that can be suppressed.

But returning to these illusory states of copulation, you actually see it in Buddhism. For example you see representations of thankas where they have blissful unions of some Bud-

dha or Bodhisattva with some practitioner. Perhaps it's possible that some Tibetan practitioners are able, when these states arise, to transform them, maintaining the non-outflow of their vital energy on the one hand, on the other hand maintaining an understanding or perception of the nature of emptiness. But from a Chan perspective these kinds of practices are way too dangerous for any ordinary practitioner to engage in or play around with. Because for a person who is deeply unenlightened and deluded, and even for a person who has gained some not-so-deep insight, if they persist in states of illusions that are seemingly so real and overpowering it is practically impossible to maintain practice. It is very easy for a person to enter into what they may think is practice but is actually a demonic state.

Of course it is possible to engage in contemplation to transform these experiences, to enhance one's understanding. But although practices of this kind existed in China, they never really took root. One reason is that these great masters discovered it is very difficult to subtly use these states to fulfill one's own desire without leaving subtle traces of attachment. So practices like this never took root in China.

Of course this Taoist practice of sexual union has precedents in China. Returning to what I was saying before about absorbing qi from the external environment, sometimes for these Taoist practitioners the purpose of the sexual union is actually to absorb the energy from the partner (in most circumstances a female partner) so that they can strengthen their own body, their own qi, to reach whatever goal they set out to accomplish. The first

kind is for their longevity practice, to reach immortality, becoming a celestial being. The second kind is strengthening one's desire. This leads to biological or physical changes where the practitioner can actually last a long time or be very powerful during sexual intercourse. There are stories in China of emperors who requested Taoist meditators to teach them these skills. Because they had so many concubines they had to be very strong, they had to enhance their sexual prowess. So they would learn these skills to further that kind of practice.

Do Not Attach to the State of Unification

All of these pitfalls and dangers in practice really stem from something innocent: starting to be aware of one's energy flow in the body and becoming attached to corporeal form and from that becoming attached to other kinds of things. This is laid out quite clearly in the Surangama Sutra. It is important for Chan practitioners to not get involved in these forms of practice based on materiality.

As a Chan practitioner one will inevitably experience different states of unification. But the purpose of unification is not an object of attachment, an object of concern. It's merely a natural result of practice. It is more important not to linger around in these states, not to be too concerned with them, but to continue forward. To understand the nature of emptiness, of dependent origination. To see through the veils and the enticement of these samadhi states so that genuine wisdom can arise and vexations can actually be alleviated, as opposed to cultivating more vexations, desires and material attainments.

A Person of Noble Aspirations: Remembering Ven. Ren Jun

by

Paul Kennedy

Paul Kennedy was one of Chan Master Sheng Yen's first students in the U.S. and his first western monastic disciple. He attended his first meditation class and received the Three Refuges and Five Precepts from him in 1976. He took the Sramanera Precepts in May, 1978, after graduating from Rutgers University with a degree in Chinese language, and accompanied the Master to Taiwan in September of that year to receive the Bhikshu ordination. Paul remained a monk until January, 1983. After returning to lay life he continued to translate for Shifu on retreats and for lectures until the early '90s, and continued to practice under his guidance until Master Sheng Yen's death in 2009. (N.B. During most of Ven. Ren Jun's career in the U.S., and often in the pages of this magazine, his name was rendered Jen Chun, using an older system of romanizing Mandarin Chinese.)



Ren Jun Fashi was born on July 11, 1919 in Jiangsu Province, China; his family surname was Liu. At seven years old he had his head shaved and became a monk. As a child monk he was fortunate enough to receive an education, a privilege that would not have been available to everyone in his situation at that time and place. At 17 he went to stay at Lung-Chang Si at Pao-Hua Shan, the most prestigious large monastery for Vinaya (precept) training in all of China. It was here along with several hundred other monks that he received the Bhikshu and Bodhisattva precepts.

After full ordination he continued his studies at the Tian-Ning and Ming-Nan Buddhist Academies. Upon graduating at age 25, he began teaching; at 30 he was teaching Chinese literature at Jing-An Buddhist Academy in Shanghai. Among his students was a nineteen-year-old monk, the future Chan Master Sheng Yen.

In 1949, with the communists advancing on Shanghai, prodded by and with the aid of his shifu (teacher) Chang-Dao Fashi, he was able to escape and make his way to Hong Kong. It should be noted that from the time he shaved his head until he left the mainland, Chang-Dao Fashi had been his great benefactor. It appears he always took great care to look after the welfare of Ven. Ren Jun, even to the point of helping carry his bags for five or six hours at the beginning of his escape to Hong Kong. The student, in turn, worried about his master's safety as he returned to his village temple. There was great mutual affection between this shifu and his disciple.

In Hong Kong he met Ven. Yin Shun, who was arguably the most prominent Chinese scholar monk of the modern era, and who was the next big influence in his life. Ven. Ren Jun lived and studied with him both while in Hong Kong and after emigrating to Taiwan at the age of 35. In 1972, at 54, at the invitation of Upasaka C.T Shen, Ven. Ren Jun came to the Temple of Great Enlightenment in the Bronx, NY, where he became the abbot in 1974, in which capacity he greeted his former student, Master Sheng Yen, upon his arrival in New York in 1975. In 1977 he stepped down as abbot of the Temple and was succeeded by Master Sheng Yen.

After a period of seclusion Ven. Ren Jun founded the Yin Shun Foundation, and in 2000 established the Bodhi Monastery, where he resided as abbot during his remaining years. Throughout the last decades of his life he maintained close relations with both the Temple of Great Enlightenment and with Master Sheng Yen's Chan Meditation Center, where he regularly gave Dharma talks and helped preside over Dharma activities. He left

behind numerous writings, including many poems, and was also involved in charitable activities. Ven. Ren Jun passed away on February 9, 2011.

* * *

I first encountered Ren Jun Fashi in November 1975. Yu Chun Fang, then Professor of Buddhist Studies at Rutgers University, brought several students on a trip to visit a couple of Buddhist temples in the Bronx, including the Temple of Great Enlightenment. It was the first time I had actually visited a Buddhist temple or had seen a Buddhist monk. Ren Jun Fashi was the first Chinese monk that I saw and it was his Dharma lecture that we attended; he made a deep impression on me as an ideal monk.

During the next few years, I had extensive exposure to Master Ren Jun. Master Sheng Yen, whom I came to call Shifu, arrived at the Temple of Great Enlightenment in late December, 1975. From that time on I regularly visited the temple on Sundays and over the next year spent as much time there as possible, attending Shifu's training classes, Sunday gatherings and other activities. In 1977 I lived at the temple in preparation for becoming a monk, and in 1978 continued to live there after Sramanera ordination, at which Ren Jun Fashi was one of the five presiding monks. After that period my contact with him was less frequent, but it must be said that what was true of him then was also true of him later.

So, what was it that had made such a strong initial impression? I can sum it up with one term, *wei-yi*. *Wei-yi* is a term that is important in Chinese Buddhist monasticism. It can be translated as "dignified demeanor."



*Top row, left to right: Chan Master Sheng Yen, Ven. Min-Chi, Ven. Ren Jun, Mr. C.T. Shen.
Bottom row, second from left: Paul Kennedy*

It includes posture, etiquette, restrained behavior, behavior that is the same whether one is alone or in public, virtue and activities of body, speech and mind that affect one's demeanor. Greedy, grasping, aggressive behavior, anxious or nervous fidgeting, gossiping, treating others disrespectfully, lounging around in a slovenly manner, loud and boisterous behavior would all be examples of a lack of *wei-yi*. The concept is not unique to Chinese Buddhism; it has been part of monastic training since the time of the Buddha, and is an important component of Sila (precepts). It serves the triple purpose of cultivating oneself, facilitating harmonious communal living with fellow monastics, and inspiring respect, and not contempt, in the laity. These effects, in turn, contribute to ensuring the longevity

of the Dharma in the world. Ren Jun Fashi exuded *wei-yi*. It was not merely a pretentious pose; it flowed naturally from his inner virtuous quality, a product of a lifetime of cultivation. This is what had incited the respect and awe I felt towards him. From that first encounter in November 1975 until the last time I saw him in 2010, that feeling of respect and awe for this venerable monk never wavered.

It is also worth noting that Ren Jun Fashi's Dharma name was very descriptive of his person, *ren* meaning virtue, benevolence, and *jun* meaning refined, eminent, handsome. As this name was given to him when he was a child, I can only speculate that Chang-Dao Fashi had detected the seeds of these qualities in that small boy and named him accordingly.

When I looked at Ren Jun Fashi I saw the unbroken transmission of Buddhist monastic tradition stretching back to the time of the Buddha. More specifically, he was very Chinese, an excellent example of the almost two thousand years of Chinese monasticism. Indeed, he was one of the last of that breed. The world changes; the venerable old large monasteries and the aura that pervaded them are gone. More importantly, Buddhism today has to contend with the modern world and is still finding its footing. Monks like Ren Jun Fashi will likely not be seen again. He was like a beautiful work of art that was produced in the last years of a dynasty that has since passed into history.

Ren Jun Fashi was always a joy to be around. The fact that he was not my Shifu probably made it easier to enjoy his presence, for he was not responsible for disciplining me. He was more like a kindly old uncle, but with a loveable childlike quality about him. Many a time, upon seeing me, he would greet me by grabbing hold of my hand and patting it, with a broad smile full of warmth and joy, as if he were being reunited with a long lost friend. At other times, he would be in his room in the basement of the temple meditating or studying, his alarm would go off, the door would fly open, and he'd come shooting out of the room at high speed, circumambulating, round and round, perfectly erect, the bottom of his robe wafting in the breeze behind his heels, like a little wind-up toy. Our eyes would meet, his eyebrows would rise up and his face would break out into that wonderful smile—how could you not love this guy? I once ran into him on a Sunday as people were finishing the noon meal, he was not sure whether I had eaten or not, so he asked me in this very soft, sweet and concerned voice, “*Paul, ni chi*

bao le ma?” (Have you eaten?), I replied, “*Chi bao le*” (I’ve already eaten), and he replied in a very affirmative and strong voice, “*Chi bao le, jiu hao le.*” This had me rolling with laughter, a little rhymed couplet that meant, “Hey, if your belly’s full, what could possibly be wrong with the world!”

This account would not be complete without mentioning Ren Jun Fashi’s relationship with Master Sheng Yen. I marveled when I heard, only a couple of months after Shifu’s arrival, that Ren Jun Fashi had been his teacher in Shanghai—how amazing it was that the karma between these two monks had brought them back together decades later at the Temple of Great Enlightenment half a world away. A Chinese Buddhist phrase that I’ve always liked flashed through my head, “*Yin yuan bu ke si yi,*” causes and conditions are inconceivable. Ren Jun Fashi was always very supportive of Shifu, which was especially important, for as abbot of the temple he could easily have created obstructions for him. A person with Shifu’s energetic, motivated, and capable personality could have easily incited jealousy in his peers or seniors, but I never saw even a hint of that in Ren Jun Fashi. Their relationship exemplified the type of harmony within the Sangha that the Buddha had extolled in the Sutras and Vinaya.

On one occasion, I arrived at the Chan Meditation Center, looked at the schedule for the day, and noticed that Ren Jun Fashi was giving the Dharma Lecture, as he often did when Shifu was in Taiwan. The title of the Dharma lecture was “A Person of Noble Aspirations.” My face broke out into a big smile and I chuckled to myself as such a title was just so characteristic of Ren Jun Fashi—a person of noble aspirations, indeed!

Song for the Year of the Horse—Please Learn from the Horse!

*A Poem for the Chinese New Year, 2002, by Chan Master Ren Jun
Translation by Ken Chen and Wei Tan*

Blazing and opening unexplored lands, galloping
through empty space,
The white horse whinnies on its long journey—a
worthy model for all.

The supreme horse sees but the shadow of a whip:
he flies like a dragon,
Bursting through boundaries, revealing new re-
gions, transmitting the two human qualities.
It was just such a horse that brought the Sutras
to the East,
Thus, the light of Dharma shines brightly every-
where.

Gentle, kind, barely fed, demanding no reward,
Five admirable virtues make a worthy paramita.
Strong of bone, it springs to serve, wherever need
arises,
Heroic, upright, wonderful, it freely spans the
heavens.

A majestic neigh thunders through the autumn
air,

Head erect, it roams the sky with unobstructed
mind,
Nothing harbored, nothing held, dedicated, giving
Its blood and sweat, through wind and dust; a no-
ble, mighty spirit.

Marching on the long journey toward the rising
sun,
Never wasting daylight, never hiding in the sta-
ble,
Paired hooves, paired wings, in every moment
new,
A truly worthy mirror for humanity to view.

Eyes wide open in the bright, spring sun,
The horse, a dragon, lightning, spirit luminous
and pure,
Strides through wind and cloud, and penetrates
the horizon,
So quick, so agile, letting no dust alight.
(The light of wisdom burns through the illusion
of the self;
The virtue of compassion gathers others to the
path.)



Chan Masters Sheng Yen and Ren Jun

Leaving Home

David Kabacinsky Becomes Changwen Fashi

by

Ven. Changwen



Venerable Changwen is a western monastic disciple of Chan Master Shen Yen. Formerly known as David Kabacinsky, he was ordained as a novice in 2004, received his monastic edu-

cation at Dharma Drum Sangha University in Taiwan, and received full ordination in 2006. He currently serves as Director of the Dharma Drum Retreat Center in Pine Bush, NY. The following is the first installment of his autobiographical account of becoming a Buddhist monk. It was originally published in Humanity Magazine in Taiwan, and was edited for Chan Magazine by David Berman.

When someone meets this Western Buddhist monk for the first time, after a few minutes of friendly conversation they often ask, “So, what made you decide to become a monk?” Depending on the situation I may reply, “Well, did *you* ever think about becoming a monastic?” and I’m quite surprised at how many people answer, “I’ve thought about it,” but more often people are just curious. When I’m in the Far East, people are quite curious about this “foreign monk,” and in the West people are also wondering, “Are you really a monk? Do you know kungfu?” Those not familiar with Buddhism may ask, “So what does a monk do?” To laypeople, whether familiar

with Buddhism or not, and whether actually contemplating the monastic life or not, there is something very mysterious about monastics. A nun’s or monk’s appearance in itself is quite unique, yet even more curious is their lifestyle and inner experience. People want to know what monastic life is all about, and how a monastic person views life. Some ask to satisfy curiosity, others ask to help themselves look more deeply into the path of their own lives.

It seems that there are not many written accounts of the lives of modern Chinese Buddhist monastics. There are autobiographies

of great masters like Hanshan Deqing of the Ming dynasty, and of modern masters like Xuyun (Empty Cloud) and our own Shifu Sheng Yen. We also have accounts by well-respected and renowned teachers and social-activist monastics like Ven. Cheng Yen and Ven. Hsing Yun. But there are not many detailed biographies of ordinary monastics. Even in the accounts of the Chan masters in the *Recorded Sayings of the Chan [Tradition]* of the Buddhist canon, there is not much explanation of the personalities, inner experiences, or detailed events of the masters' lives. Even less common are biographies of Westerners who have taken Chinese Buddhist monastic vows, probably because there are not many Western Chinese Buddhist monastics in general.

I originally had no intention of writing a journal of my experiences as a monk. When others asked me to write something, I replied that my experiences were nothing special, quite ordinary, and probably boring to someone else. I thought, "All these memories are just illusory thoughts—like flowers in the sky—why waste time putting them on paper?" Later on, at Shifu's encouragement, I started keeping a journal, occasionally writing when something notable happened, like a special trip abroad. Some of these accounts were published in *Chan Magazine* or *Dharma Drum Magazine*. But after some time I stopped writing, as I found that when I had time to write, I preferred reading, finding inspiration in the Buddha's words. So there are many blank-paged journals sitting on my bookshelf behind my desk.

Recently however, at the request of the staff at *Humanity Magazine*, I agreed to write a short account of my experience studying the Dharma and walking the path of a home-leaver.

At first I was reluctant, but later realized that I shouldn't be so selfish. Although my own experience is nothing special to me, someone else might find it an inspiration to study the Dharma or even to become a monastic. So these illusory thoughts and memories, set on paper, could have some value. After all, our own Shifu wrote volumes of his own experiences, so that they might move and inspire others. It's with this intent that I agreed to share my own experience.

Interestingly, every time I share my experience with someone, the story is a little different. Every time I write something down, something new emerges. Some parts of the experience are forgotten, some parts newly remembered. Maybe some details are imagined or even invented, due to the limits and faultiness of memory. Regardless, I hope that readers can get a taste of my experience on the path of practice, and relate it to their own lives, perhaps gaining some insight into their own situations, perhaps even finding inspiration to engage the path of Chan practice, and perhaps even the monastic path.

And now, I find that sharing this story is also a way to repay the kindness of Shifu, the whole Dharma Drum Mountain sangha, my parents, and all the teachers and friends who supported me on the path, for providing me the causes and conditions to join the community of practice and transform my life. May all beings realize liberation.

American Boy, China Man

As far back as I can remember, I was always fascinated with Chinese culture. Whenever I saw something on television related to Chinese art, music, architecture, and of course,

martial arts, I would watch it, even record it. For the shows that aired at 2–3 in the morning I would set the VCR to record automatically, so that I could watch them later that day, or repeatedly. At seven years old, I was already determined to see all the presentations of Chinese culture possible. There were children's shows like *Reading Rainbow*, adult educational shows on PBS and the Discovery Channel, and even Chinese cooking shows, all of which I watched religiously. Of course I greatly admired Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, and Jet Li as heroes, and watched the kungfu movies that aired every Saturday at 3. They may not have been the most accurate representations of Chinese culture, but they were Chinese enough for me.

In addition to watching television programs, I would often accompany my mother to the library and search the shelves for anything related to Chinese culture. Most often I'd end up in the martial arts section—the reading-level was mostly adult, but I found the pictures captivating. I even enjoyed reading about Chinese history and warfare, and felt as if I had travelled back 1,000 years just by reading a book. I may have flipped through the same book 100 times, yet still enjoyed looking at the pictures of old Chinese warriors, or paintings from the walls of Shaolin Temple, or pictures of monks in fighting poses, or statues of heavily armored fighters from ancient times. I also admired the majesty of Chinese art and architecture—drawing and painting was a hobby, and often the subjects of my own paintings were what I had seen in these books.

I also practiced Chinese martial arts, and partly to protect myself. I was a short kid, often the shortest kid in class, so I was frequent-

ly the object of teasing or bullying. Kungfu was a violent solution to the problem, but it seemed to work, and studying at a Hung Gar Kungfu school gave me more exposure to Chinese culture. I continued to practice martial arts on and off over the years, eventually losing interest due to other hobbies—guitar, composing music, computers, girls.

However, through all this exposure to Chinese culture, what caught my attention most were the Chinese Buddhist monastics. When seeing images of these simply-dressed, solemn-looking, peaceful yet powerful mendicants, as well as reading their words and hearing of the hardships and difficulties they bore, I was deeply impressed. There was something very admirable about a person who could face difficulty, physical hardship, verbal and physical violence with equanimity. I only had a very superficial exposure to monasticism, but it seemed quite virtuous, and these impressions stayed with me through the years.

Low Times During High School

High school years were difficult. First, my parents sent their two boys to Chaminade, a Catholic high school in Mineola, New York. The school is renowned for its excellent academics, and looking back, I am very grateful for the education I received there, but at the time, I rejected my parent's decision 100%. It was an all-boys school, and I could not accept the fact that I wouldn't see a girl for another 4 years. I also would have to wear a uniform and a fancy blazer. To me, this was an outrage; I completely rebelled. I reluctantly went—hating my parents, hating the school, hating everyone, except the few friends I made who also hated everything. Gradually, after the first year, realizing that there was social

life outside of school, and that the uniform was not that bad—they even let me wear a tie with a detail of the Mona Lisa painting on it—I began to accept my life as a Chaminade student.

But I soon came face-to-face with maturation and responsibility—having to do things I really did not like, like giving presentations and engaging in debates. Then there were the physiological and social changes of adolescence. I had friends, but I didn't feel I fit into any cliques; I was able to get along, but still felt distant from most people. The kids I spent time with from my neighborhood outside of school would often get into trouble—getting into fights at parties, or ending up running from police—so I eventually sought peace in solitude...but that led to a feeling of isolation and a lack of social skills, which in turn led to a lot of anxiety. I began to feel very insecure, and at one point had some kind of illness that made me feel as though I had to urinate all the time. I believe this was due to tension and anxiety, and not merely a physical condition.

Eventually I began looking for a way to deal with these anxieties. I tried alcohol and marijuana, but none of these solved my internal distress, and sometimes magnified the sense of fear and insecurity a hundred-fold. A turning point occurred one night, while smoking marijuana with a friend. We were playing chess, joking around and letting our imaginations go wild, and he suddenly stopped and asked me, "Dude, do you like yourself?" It was like an electric shock. My mind froze, my body became numb, and nothing but an extremely uncomfortable self-consciousness and self-pity overwhelmed me. I didn't reply. He apologized and we continued to play chess in silence.

After that we talked more about our inner turmoil, and he introduced me to some books he was reading on Native American shamanism by the late Carlos Castaneda. There is some doubt as to whether his books were legitimate works of anthropology or fiction, but at the time I was quite interested, and I immersed myself in these works, not as entertainment but as a study of how to resolve my own inner anxieties. They included some methods of sitting meditation and quieting the discursive mind, and after reading and practicing these methods for almost 3 years, I found some release from the bondage of my anxieties, and even a freedom of mind to engage in social situations I had previously feared. My mental state calmed somewhat, my grades even improved, and even though I gradually lost interest, I gained a heightened awareness of my inner self, and a new ability to reflect on and quiet my mind.

Outer Freedom to Inner Bondage

As soon as I left for college, the whole quest for spiritual fulfillment was temporarily forgotten. I chose to attend Syracuse University's College of Environmental Science and Forestry, about a six-hour drive from my home in Deer Park. I had no clear goal other than a career in protecting the natural environment, but I was happy to be free from the fetters of parental guidance. The freedom I experienced at college was without bounds—meeting new people, going to parties, girls everywhere! The music scene was unique, and I was introduced to jazz, fusion, funk, all sorts of styles. My composing and guitar-playing flourished, and although I wasn't doing so badly academically, I wasn't focusing very much on studies.

However, after about two years of this lifestyle, I began to feel mentally exhausted and anxieties arose again. The more I had to face the responsibilities of academic life, the more I felt spiritually weak and directionless. I also felt less affinity with scientific approaches to environmentalism. I became quite pessimistic towards science, and even angry at how much time I had to spend analyzing the world, while my inner world was in such turmoil. Once again I started to turn inwards.

Knocking on the Gate

I began again searching for a cure to my inner turmoil. At one point in my sophomore year, I had the option of taking an elective course in religion. I had two choices that interested me—a course on Magic and Religion and one on Buddhism. It turned out that the “Magic” course was already filled up, so I thought about taking Buddhism. Before signing up for the class, I wanted to get a better understanding of Buddhism and went to browse the voluminous Buddhist collection at the Syracuse library. One of the first books I took off the shelf was a translation of Great Grandmaster Empty Cloud’s Dharma talks during a Chan retreat. This was one of a series of books called *Chan and Zen Teaching*, consisting of translations and commentaries by Charles Luk (Lu K’uan Yu). As soon as I read the first page of Empty Cloud’s talk, the teachings immediately resonated with me. Most impressive was the teaching that all sentient beings possess an awakened nature, which merely needs to be uncovered from underneath layers of deluded thought.

Also, I was very moved when I saw a picture of the old master, taken in a temple garden when he was nearly 100 years old. He stood firm

and upright like a pine tree, with an expression so solemn and noble; wearing a simple black robe and holding recitation beads, he had a sense of eternal peace about him. I had the thought that this old monk—and Buddhist monks in general—must have found the way to inner peace. Thereafter I committed much of my time to reading more of the master’s teachings and subsequent books by Charles Luk. I also read a translation of the *Platform Sutra of Huineng*, which gave me a deep impression of the spirit of Chan Buddhism. From this point on, although academically majoring in Environmental Studies, my true “major” became studying Buddhadharma.

Taking the course on Buddhism was a turning point in my life. It provided me with the foundation of Right View as taught in Buddhadharma. With this new worldview, I felt much more grounded in my daily life. I knew that the potential for spiritual awakening and psychological release was possible within my self; it was just a matter of clearing up my own delusions. Thus, any problem that I faced seemed solvable. Having heard about this 2,500-year-old path, and seeing by the example of modern masters that it was possible to become awakened, I was reassured that Buddhadharma was a legitimate practice. Also, I had the chance to meet a real Buddhist master in the flesh, a teacher from a nearby Zen practice center. The peace she exhibited in her demeanor and words gave me great faith in the teaching, as she seemed a living example of what the old master Empty Cloud had been talking about. I was convinced that I had discovered my life’s purpose.

After about a year of trying to learn from books and getting mixed teachings from a variety of sources, I had even more questions.



Since I did not have a direct connection to a living Chan master, it seemed there was no one to ask. This led me to have an even more active and anxious mind, as I tried to find my own answers intellectually. I was constantly reviewing the concepts I had been reading about, internally conversing with “other people” about Buddhism, making sure that I had all the answers. At the same time, I became more critical of others’ behavior, especially those with whom I was closest. Rather than focus on improving my own behavior, I was convincing myself that other people had all the problems. And I had an evangelical twist in my attitude—I hoped that everyone would think Buddhism was great, so I was subconsciously trying to convince everyone. I was a confused know-it-all—the height of self-deception.

However, I did have some powerful experiences while reading or meditating, where my mind became quite calm and clear, and my perspective on life became somewhat more expansive. I began to see situations in a new light, which lessened some of my heavier vexations. Having a clearer vision of purpose in life, my interactions with people took on new meaning: Life was about realizing one’s

awakened nature and we should help all people do the same.

In junior year I took a course on Chinese religion and had further exposure to Chinese Buddhism and Chan in particular. It provided a forum for discussion, and I found great relief in being able to share with others, as well as learn from my teacher. The most powerful insight I gained was that to practice Buddhism was to help oneself realize one’s relationship to the world. My sense of isolation dissolved in the view that life is all about relationships, or as Master Thich Nhat Hanh puts it, inter-being. I discovered that my previous anxieties had stemmed from a fear of exposing my imperfections, and I began to see that spiritual practice is actually all about discovering, facing, and resolving our character faults. Thus, for my final paper in Chinese religion, I chose the topic “Spirituality is Embracing our own Anger, Greed, and Ignorance.” I began to accept that I had a lot of imperfections to see, know, and to resolve.

In senior year there were no more religion electives, but my interest in Chinese Buddhism had inspired an interest in Chinese language. Syracuse had an extensive Chinese curriculum, and I decided to learn as much as I could in my last year of college. Thankfully, my advisor was supportive of my direction; she not only encouraged me to take the class in Chinese, but also to direct my senior thesis toward my current view—that “Self-awareness is the Key to Environmentalism.” This thesis was based on the view that people can use spiritual practice as a basis for bringing about environmental balance.

During this final year of school, I also worked at cleaning up my lifestyle, as I realized that

in order to have a pure mind one must have purity of behavior. I still spent time with friends, but I completely refrained from smoking and drinking. I stopped going to wild parties, and I began to take a class in Chinese martial arts, and in addition to improving my health, found like-minded friends, interested in the path of well-being.

In the winter break of senior year, I decided to travel up to Thich Nhat Hanh's community retreat center in the Vermont countryside, which was holding a three-month winter retreat. I spent one week with the brothers in silent retreat, practicing meditation, doing mindful work and other retreat practice activities. It was one of the most peaceful times I had ever experienced. By engaging in a simple routine of meditation, work, wholesome communication, and by having a balanced diet, I experienced a feeling of lightness and overall well-being. Previous to this retreat, I had been doing a lot of study and my practice was quite intellectual. After retreat, I realized that although Buddhadharmā contains a vast canon of teachings and concepts, it is quite simple. To realize its simplicity one just needs to have a simple approach of mindfulness, cultivating an awakened presence in our every moment of life, guided by the correct views of Dharma.

After that retreat experience, I stopped studying martial arts and spent even more time reading and nourishing the seeds of Dharma within myself. I found my daily life and relationships to be more meaningful, yet still missed belonging to a spiritual community. I graduated, happily, left with a sense of deep gratitude for my college experience. In addition to being the place where I had made many close friends, Syracuse was home to the

places and people who had provided me entry into the practice of Dharma. Yet I also felt a longing for a teacher—someone who could guide me along the path—and I returned home, determined to find one.

Cleaning the Beach, Cleaning the Mind

During the summer, from senior year of high school through four years of college, I worked at a beach-side recreational area called Robert Moses State Park, on the south shore of Long Island. I enjoyed the simple labor of a beach maintenance worker, picking up trash and keeping the beach clean. I appreciated it even more after I encountered the Dharma. I found that maintenance work was a great way to practice mindfulness. Just putting my mind to the task at hand—being aware of my movements, actions, and mental reactions—was a great opportunity for spiritual cultivation.

In my personal relations at work, I also found an increasing sense of ease that came from being more understanding of others, and treating them with compassion. I still was sometimes overly playful, sarcastic, or critical of others, but I also had an increasing respect for others, which seemed to grow along with my sensitivity to my own thoughts and emotions. I began to see how critical reactions to others were harmful, and how they came from my own one-sided perceptions.

After working there for a couple of seasons, I was given the position of foreman, responsible for a particular beach field and a crew of workers. It gave me even more opportunities to practice mindfulness while dealing with people of all different cultures and back-

grounds, including those who may not have been the most motivated of employees. The practice seemed to change me and positively influence those around me. However, there were also times of anxiety where I felt like running away from myself. Certain conflicts arose at work—some of which were violent, some merely involving the stress of dealing with angry and over-heated beachgoers or aggressive co-workers. I wasn't sure how to deal with these anxieties, yet knew that the problem was within my own mind, and could be resolved through practice.

Despite the increasing stability that I felt during these summers, I also had many unanswered questions related to Buddhadharma. "What is true mind? What is no-mind? What is no-thought? If we should strive for no-mind, does that mean we should get rid of thoughts and reactions to things? If Chan enlightenment is sudden, then how come even if I know this, I can't suddenly wake myself up?" Also, although the Dharma that I encountered in books and in my interactions with people was a great teaching in itself, I still felt the need for a community of fellow-practitioners and a teacher to guide me in understanding the principles and methods of practice.

Up to this point I had not found a teacher-in-the-flesh; I merely felt a certain connection with the teachers whom I had read. I had been reading various books by well-known Dharma teachers such as Thich Nhat Hanh, Chogyam Trungpa, Thich Thien Anh, Sogyal Rinpoche, and also my future Shifu, Chan Master Sheng Yen. Their books were all very helpful in giving me the proper view of practice. Yet I was particularly attracted to Shifu's teachings, as they were very direct and practical. His explanations of the path of practice pointed out the flaws in both practitioners and teach-

ers; he explained the misconceptions about enlightenment, and taught about the not-so-glamorous side of practice—discovering one's faults. Because of this, I felt that I could trust Shifu. In addition, since I had read that he was in the same Dharma lineage as Great Master Empty Cloud, I thought for sure that he must be a teacher of great wisdom. So I focused a lot on his teachings, and continued to read his books with a sense of loyalty. I had no idea that he was not so distant from my hometown.

It was my friend—the same one whose question had jolted me into pursuing spiritual practice—who pointed out that Shifu's Chan Meditation Center (CMC) was so close by, only a 40-minute drive to Elmhurst, Queens. It was very exciting news...but I was at the same time filled with joy and fear—overjoyed that I might have found a teacher, yet afraid that he would see all my imperfections, even read my impure mind. Studying on my own, I was somewhat safe from revealing that I had a lot of problems to work on. I knew that working with a teacher and a community meant that these hidden vexations would have to be exposed.

Dharma Protectors and Virtuous Friends

When I first arrived at the Chan Meditation Center, I did not meet Shifu right away, as he was in Taiwan at the time. Upon my arrival I was greeted by two people, whom I came to think of as "Dharma protectors." One was Wei, who at that time was serving as one of Shifu's translators and dedicating much of his time to the Center, and the other was Ivy, a volunteer who lived at the Center and



dedicated all of her time to supporting its operations. Both were very kind and genuine, and their warm and welcoming attitude encouraged me to return to CMC regularly. Very quickly I came to look forward to having dinner and chatting with them before and after the Tuesday evening meditation. I especially connected with Wei, who was quite humorous—without making one feel like the target of a joke, he brought out the comical nature of how we vex ourselves. He was also quite knowledgeable—an excellent translator as well as a genuine practitioner—so I often asked him Dharma questions.

After some time, Wei introduced me to two great, well-respected monks who were staying at monasteries close by. One was Venerable Zong Cai (宗才法師), at Guanyin Temple in Chinatown, New York City. Wei had studied Dharma with the old monk, and told me that he had been quite moved when Master Zong Cai replied to his question, “How do we get rid of our vexations?” “Just know that everything is impermanent, and you won’t attach to them.” These few simple words also left a deep impression in my mind, after having

complicated my thinking with lots of reading and Dharma study. When Wei took me to visit the master, I was expecting an old Chinese monk with whom I wouldn’t be able to communicate—I thought I was just tagging along. He was an old-looking fellow with lots of wrinkles, yet with a very robust and solid physical appearance. I joined palms and bowed, feeling a little awkward, not knowing the proper etiquette to greet an elder monk. To my surprise, he extended his hand and said in very clear English, “Ah, nice to meet you.” He had a very firm but gentle shake. Then after some polite introductions, he said in Chinese, “Please, come this way.” We followed him downstairs to the cafeteria to have some tea.

The conversation that ensued was part Chinese, part Mongolian, and part Spanish, with some English here and there. Wei asked a few questions and the master sat listening intently, radiating compassion and gentleness. His demeanor was so relaxed, I couldn’t help but feel at ease myself. When Wei went to the bathroom, the old master chatted with me a bit about his upcoming trip to Mongo-

lia, and how the language sounded a bit like Spanish. He imitated it for me, and laughed at his own poor pronunciation. I was thoroughly amused, and liked him very much. To this day, his genuine cordiality and graceful movement remain clear in my memory.

The second great monk that Wei took me to meet was Venerable Elder Master Renjun (仁俊長老). Interestingly, the old master had been one of Shifu's teachers when he was a young monk in the seminary in Shanghai, and they had both resided at the Temple of Great Enlightenment in the Bronx when Shifu first arrived in the United States. I had previously attended Master Renjun's Dharma talks at CMC on Sunday mornings, and had been quite impressed by his unique style of lecturing. He sounded almost theatrical, with dramatic rising and falling of pitch and drastic changes of dynamics from soft to loud. Then in his eighties, he had a strong and full voice that he used with such confidence and ease, it was like a lion's roar.

Wei brought me to Bodhi Monastery in New Jersey, where the Master resided and spent most of his time, lecturing on Dharma and doing studies. There were three or four other monks studying under him, and a western lay practitioner visiting, and we spent a couple of nights engaging in group practice, waking up at 3:30 A.M. to exercise, meditate, and do morning chanting. Afterwards, we helped with some chores, talked about Dharma with the monks, and had some time to meet with the old master. Once, in the kitchen, while we were preparing breakfast, we asked him his age, and he told us. Then he said in English, "I'm very young!" and laughed heartily along with all of us. He seemed curious about me, and when he heard I spoke a little Chinese,

he said encouragingly, "Oh, great! You speak very well," and laughed aloud. His laugh reminded me of a Buddhist Santa Claus, hearty, yet warm and compassionate, with a "ho-ho-ho."

I was very moved by his character—he seemed at once strong-willed, clear-minded and gentle. His eyes were very steady, and seemed able to see right through people. There was a great calmness in his behavior and expression. In particular, I was very moved at the way he bowed before Buddha statues. Once, as he walked us down the hall, we passed by the Buddha statue at the main entrance. I was prepared to hurriedly bow and continue walking. But the old master stopped, turned to face the Buddha with palms joined, and then very mindfully bowed, then returned upright with palms joined, and paused. Then he turned and continued to walk, leading us down the hall. Standing next to him, it seemed that he had a great sense of reverence for the Buddha, displayed by the single-minded sincerity of his movements. Since then, whenever I bowed to the Buddha, I became more aware of the importance of truly bowing mindfully, and generating a sense of reverence for the Enlightened One.

Meeting these two old masters made a deep impression on me. I felt that monks were truly the most content and compassionate people on this earth, and that it was possible to realize the fruit of enlightenment. I sensed from their behavior and compassionate disposition that they were truly wise people, and I had a sense of what the Buddha may have been like. This gave me a great sense of faith and confidence in Buddhist practice and in the virtue of monastic life.

The Past

News from the Chan Meditation Center and the DDMBA Worldwide

Passing On the Lamp of Wisdom: Chan Master Sheng Yen Commemorated Worldwide

On the second anniversary of Shifu's passing, now marked as the Dharma Drum Passing of the Wisdom Lamp Day, Dharma Drum affiliates in Taiwan, Southeast Asia, Europe, Canada and the United States held events to pay gratitude to Master Sheng Yen and to pass on and practice his teachings. The following is only a small sampling of reports from those activities.

At the **Dharma Drum Retreat Center (DDRC)** in Pine Bush, NY, the center's Director Changwen Fashi led a weekend of activities entitled "Passing On the Lamp of Wisdom," including a one-day meditation retreat on Saturday, February 12, and a special Sunday service the following day. Both events featured videotaped Dharma talks by the late Chan Master Sheng Yen.

The free retreat was attended by 25 people, including both experienced and beginning practitioners from both near and far. It included a simultaneous "Little Bodhisattvas" kids' retreat, an educational childcare program that encourages parents to come to retreat by allowing them to bring along their children. The Sunday service saw the usual mix of residents, staff, volunteers and locals, who were

delighted to see a video of Shifu's Dharma talk on "How To Realize Selflessness."

The Tallahassee Chan Group, led by Guogu (aka Dr. Jimmy Yu, Assistant Professor of Religion at Florida State University), held a weekend retreat, Friday evening to Sunday evening, at the Center for Global Engagement on the FSU campus. 23 people, both FSU students and working professionals, attended the event, which included meditation, yoga and Dharma talks.

A number of the retreatants wrote reports of their experiences:

Louie Castro-Garcia: "This weekend retreat with Guogu has been an amazing experience. Some of the things I learned were the importance of faith in oneself, one's teacher and the three jewels of the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, and the method. At first I wanted to practice huatou so that I could experience the doubt sensation; now I know that I am doing this with no such expectations. This retreat has changed my life and I would do it again in a heartbeat."

Justin: "This was my first retreat. One of the most useful things that was brought up was how do deal with feelings or thoughts of doubt. The lesson did not truly strike home until Monday night after the retreat was over when I was confronted by extreme doubt.



Then I remembered Guogo's words: Concentrate on the method, relax, refocus your energy, once I did this, it was as if relief just washed over me."

Zack Bowman: "Although I had a lot of bad thoughts and feelings about myself that came up during the retreat, I noticed that I felt better the longer I was there. By the end of the retreat, I had a much more positive attitude and felt much happier! Guogu and all the wonderful people who participated in the re-

reat helped me very much, and they have my undying gratitude."

The Seattle chapter of the DDMBA, led by chapter president Winston Chen, held their commemorative event on Sunday, Feb 13, with 20 in attendance. It included the screening of an episode from a new documentary series about Master Sheng Yen, "Traces of His Being," a period of sitting meditation, and a discussion of the recently published Master Sheng Yen: Treasured Teachings from Life.

Little Bodhisattvas Children's Program

DDMBA Ontario in Toronto, Canada held a one-day memorial retreat on Saturday, Feb 12. 25 participants gathered for a full day of practices, beginning with the Eight Form Moving Meditation, followed by sitting meditation and discourses on karma, the four types of mindfulness, and precepts from Shifu's Great Dharma Drum television episodes. After an excellent potluck lunch, the afternoon included walking meditation, sitting, yoga and prostration practice, and ended with a candle-lighting ceremony and sharing.

DDMBA San Francisco was delighted to have Venerable Guo Cheh, ordained by Master Sheng Yen in 1984 and currently teaching at Dharma Drum Sangha University, lead their One-Day Commemorative Meditation Retreat. Guo Cheh Fashi began by making clear the dual purpose of the day: To commemorate Shifu's untiring teaching with our deepest gratitude; and to pass on the lamp of wisdom by sharing Shifu's teachings with sentient beings. The program began with a documentary film about Shifu's humble beginnings in New York – "His Shadow" – and continued with a full day of meditations and Dharma teachings.

And Sophie Muir reports that the **Lizard Chan group in Cornwall, UK** held a one-day retreat attended by 7 people, including newcomers. A day of sitting and walking meditation, taiji and sharing at the close, including a brief ceremony of gratitude with light offerings to Kuan Yin. There was an atmosphere of joy, on a day of bright sky and rainbows, with warm smiles and appreciation flowing from all, in remembrance of Shifu and the opportunity to practice together.

The Dharma Drum Retreat Center now offers a children's program in conjunction with its monthly one-day retreats. Parents can attend the retreat while their children enjoy nature walks, healthy vegetarian food, art activities, and making new friends. The program's mission is to raise children's awareness of the basic principles of Buddhadharma, such as impermanence and cause and effect. These concepts are presented in a simple way using the child's own creative abilities. For example, interdependency is demonstrated by showing how a flower requires sunshine, water, nutrients, and care.

The program was initiated by Soledad Kaplan, a mental health counselor with degrees in psychology and education. She has been an active participant at the retreat center but found that her ability to attend more frequently was limited by her need to care for her child on the weekends. She approached the Director, Changwen Fashi, about the possibility of extending the program to children, who would undoubtedly benefit from a day of tranquility, thought, and beauty. Changwen Fashi told her that other educators and



practitioners had approached him with similar ideas. Subsequently a group of five enthusiastic individuals was formed: Soledad Kaplan, Kamila Dvorakova, Lingyun Wang, Alison Orsi, and Jia-Ling Syu.

The women, professionals in the fields of psychology, education and business, are also practitioners who want to share the calm and tranquility of the retreat center with their own



and other people's children. They met regularly with Chang Wen Fashi as their monastic advisor to develop a program that would be a structured, wholesome, and interesting experience for the young participants. The Little Bodhisattvas program was launched on a trial basis in the autumn of 2010 and has now become a regular monthly event. The children who have participated have enjoyed the day very much, and look forward to coming again and again. The parents are glad to be able to benefit from a day of meditation while their children are so well cared for.

The Little Bodhisattvas Children's Program is open to children from age 2 to 12. It is currently offered once a month on the Saturday corresponding to DDRC's 1-day retreat. The program runs from 8:30AM to 5:00PM; the cost is \$5. For more information write to: littlebodhisattvas.ddrc@gmail.com.

VIP's Visit Chan Center

On Sunday, April 4, 2011, the Chan Center was honored by visits from Narayan Liebenson Grady and Tynette Deveaux. The two women were in New York as part of a program sponsored by the Shambhala Sun Foundation and the Omega Institute. They were accompanied by Noveletta DeMercado and her sister Joan, who kindly chauffeured them to the Chan Center and back to New York.

Narayan Liebenson Grady is a Guiding Teacher at the Insight Meditation Center in Cambridge, MA. She is also a panelist in the popular feature in *Buddhadharma Magazine* called "Ask the Teacher." She had also attended retreats given by Shifu at DDRC.



From left to right: Chang Hwa Fashi, Tynette Deveaux, Guo Xing Fashi, Narayan Liebenson Grady, Ernest Heau

Tynette Deveaux is the long-time Chief Editor of *Buddhadharma Magazine*, and is also active in the work of Shambhala Sun Foundation. She has been very kind in publishing several articles by Master Sheng Yen over the years. The Magazine ran a touching tribute for Shifu when he crossed over to nirvana.

The visit featured a tour of the Chan Center by hosts Guo Xing Fashi and Chang Hwa Fashi. The highlight of the visit was a delicious vegetarian dinner prepared by volunteer cooks, and lively discussion and laughter. Most of the discussion was about Shifu, and Buddhism in America. Eventually the talk got around to questions about huatou practice, and Guo Xing Fashi gave a nice teaching on the role of Chan doubt in huatou practice.

Another touching highlight came when Chang Hwa Fashi presented all the visitors with several books by Shifu, including his autobiography, *Footprints in the Snow*. Chang Hwa Fashi also gave each of the visitors a wrist mala. The gifts were much appreciated.

SWCF Relief Efforts Ongoing

Reaching Out in Flood-Stricken Districts

On January 21-23, DDM's Social Welfare and Charity Foundation (SWCF) conducted a three-day camp for adolescents in Kaohsiung City's Liukuei district as part of ongoing efforts towards recovery from severe flooding which struck the region in the summer of 2008.

The focus was on building self-confidence and tapping one's potential. 100 people took part, including instructors and volunteers, while most of the young people were students at Liukuei High School.

"They have enjoyed these programs so much," observed Venerable Chang Fa, Vice Secretary General of SWCF, noting how students appeared energized and uplifted as the gathering drew to a close, with their spirits "sparkling in their faces."

Rebuilding Communities

On January 22, the Peace of Mind Relief Station in Kaohsiung City's Linbian district hosted an End-of-Year Philanthropic Party for economically disadvantaged households attended by more than 200 local residents.

Venerable Chang Fa launched the festivities wishing everyone peace and wellbeing in the year to come. In response, the Magistrate of Linbian expressed his appreciation for SWCF's long-term efforts towards rebuilding and recovery after the 2008 flood, noting how it had done so much to raise people's spirits in a dark time.

It was a long and lively party, featuring entertainment by volunteers, and ending with the distribution of relief goods and financial assistance.

2008 Flood, Then Typhoon Morakot

On March 26, the Peace of Mind Relief Station in Liukuei distributed financial assistance to 277 students whose lives were seriously disrupted by Typhoon Morakot, which struck Taiwan in August of 2009, causing enormous mudslides and severe flooding that devastated the region, even as it was still reeling from flooding the year before.

Ever since, SWCF has been helping area residents to rebuild their lives, while providing vital financial aid to students who otherwise might not have been able to continue with their studies.

On April 10, as part of the same initiative, SWCF provided scholarship assistance for 177 students in the Linbian District.

On this occasion, Venerable Chang Fa urged students to pursue their dreams fearlessly, and joined them in prayers for peace, wishing comfort and relief particularly to those suffering in Japan in the aftermath of the tsunami.

New Year's in Thailand

On February 3rd, DDM Thailand held a New Year's Prayer Ceremony attended by more than 100 people living in Bangkok, jointly hosted by Venerable Guo Jie, Venerable Guo Chen and Venerable Guo Chuan from Taiwan, and Mrs. Miao-Fen Sulin, President of DDM's Dharma Upholders' Society in Thailand.

Refuge at Nung Chan Monastery

On April 17, more than 1,200 people assembled at the Grand Buddha Hall in Taipei's Nung Chan Monastery to take refuge in the Three Jewels.

Singapore Hosts Three-Day Dharma Assembly

On April 14-16, DDM Singapore held a three-day Dharma Assembly attended by approximately 200 people. Except for the chanting of scriptures, participants observed a noble silence for the entire three days, while the use of electronic devices was prohibited.

Dharma Pilgrimage from Croatia to Taiwan via Mainland China

On April 26-30, 11 members of Dharmaloka Croatia visited the DDM World Center for Buddhist Education, following a 16-day Dharma pilgrimage in mainland China.

Dharmaloka is the largest Buddhist practice group in Croatia. Many members have participated in 7-day Chan programs held by the Chan Meditation Center in New York, and faithfully follow the teachings of the late Venerable Master Sheng Yen. Some have even engaged in translating the Master's English publications into Croatian.

"We are finally home," said Mr. Zarko An-dricevic, leader of Dharmaloka, who appears to have inherited Master Sheng Yen's passion to promote Buddhism in the west.

During the 5-day visit, the guests met DDM Abbot Venerable Guo Dong, took part in Chan meditation, shared their experiences of Chan practice with DDM monastics and paid a visit to the Tien Nan Monastery in Taipei's Sanxia District.



Photo: Kaifen Hu

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

7-Day Buddha's Name Recitation Retreat

Led by Guo Xing Fashi

Friday - Saturday, July 1 - 9

Ten-Day Intensive Chan Retreat (Silent Illumination and Huatou)

Led by Chi Chern Fashi

Friday - Sunday, July 15 - 24

7-Day Surangama Chan Retreat

Led by Guo Xing Fashi

Monday - Sunday, August 1 - 7

Young People's Workshop

Led by Chang Ji Fashi and Guo Chan Fashi

Friday - Sunday, August 12 - 14

Young People's Retreat

Led by Chang Wen Fashi

Friday - Sunday, August 26 - 28

One-Day Retreat

Led by Chang Wen Fashi

Saturday, September 3

Classes

Beginner's Meditation, Parts 1 & 2

Led by Chang Wen Fashi

Saturdays, September 10 & 17

Regular Weekly Activities

Thursday Evening Meditation

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

Sunday Service

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

Special Events

Family Chan Camp

Wednesday - Sunday, July 27 - 31

Bonfire, outdoor meditation, family workshops, story telling.

Three-Day 360-Degree Chan Camp

Led by Guo Xing Fashi

Friday - Sunday, September 9 - 11

Chan Meditation Center Elmhurst, Queens, NY

E-mail: chancenter@gmail.com
Websites: www.chancenter.org,
www.ddmusa.org

Retreats

Monthly One-Day Retreats

Last Saturday of each month
9 am - 5 pm (8:45 arrival) \$25

Classes

Beginner's Meditation, Parts 1 and 2

Saturdays, September 3 & 10, 9:30 am - noon
Led by Nancy Bonardi; \$40

Intermediate Meditation

Saturday, July 7, 16, 23 10:00 am - noon
Led by Bill Wright; free of charge

Dharma 101 (The Four Noble Truths)

Three Saturdays, September 3 & 10, 9:30 am - noon
Led by Nancy Bonardi; \$40

Saturday Night Movie and Mind

Saturday, September 10, 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 - 9:00 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 - 9:00 pm, ongoing
Led by David Ngo
\$25 per month, \$80 for 16 classes.
First class is free for newcomers.

Saturday Sitting Group

9:30 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

One-Day Recitation and Chanting Rituals

Saturday, August 20, 9:30 am - 8 pm
AM: Chanting of the Sutra of Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha's Fundamental Vows
PM: Recitation of the Sutra of Amitabha Buddha (English versions available)

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
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Mexico phone 01-800-505-8005
Email: info@mardejade.com
Website: http://www.mardejade.com
Daily meditation; regular retreats;
2005 residential period

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