

# Chan | 禪 | Magazine

Winter 2012



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**Institute of Chung-Hwa Buddhist Culture**  
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“Buddhism advocates a doctrine of loving kindness and compassion. To provide sentient beings with happiness is loving kindness, and to relieve sentient beings from suffering is compassion. To someone carrying out “loving-compassion-ism,” there are no hated or despicable people, only wretched and pitiable people. So to a Buddhist, war is the utmost cruelty, and he would rather give his life to divert violence or win peace than engage in warfare...Buddhist scriptures mention summoning up the mindstate of a wrathful deity to destroy the power of evil demons, but such imagery is used to describe a strategy for inner spiritual cultivation and is not meant as a description of an actual practice in the real world.”

—Chan Master Sheng Yen  
*Orthodox Chinese Buddhism*  
Dharma Drum Publications and  
North Atlantic Books, 2007

# Chan Magazine

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# Chan 禪 Magazine

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*Cover and table of contents photos by  
Kaifen Hu*

# From the Editor

The New York Times runs a feature called The Stone, in which philosophers post comments from time to time that, in the editors' words, "apply critical thinking to information and events that appear in the news." I'm looking at a post now by Notre Dame philosophy professor Gary Gutting in which he asks, "How free is free will?" Prof. Gutting responds to a report of experiments that show that "prior to the moment of conscious choice, there are correlated brain events that allow scientists to predict, with 60 to 80 percent probability, what the choice will be." The problem is not the predictability in itself, but that the choice is evidently *caused* by the brain events (italics his). "How could a choice that is caused be free?" he asks.

Different kinds of cause might impact freedom differently of course, which he illustrates with an example: "If I remain indoors because I'm in the grip of a panic attack at the thought of going outside, then my choice isn't free." He uses the term *compelled*. If he stayed inside because he was enjoying reading his book on the other hand...the desire to read could be said to cause his choice, but the choice could still be said to be free.

Prof. Gutting has more to say; he examines the issue from more than one angle. What he doesn't do is examine the issue from the point of view of one who has spent much time observing, in a methodical and trustworthy way, his own mind in action, and who has the benefit of an analysis of mind that comes not from theoretical surmise or measurement of the attendant biology, but from a long tra-

dition of direct and detailed observation. In other words, he hasn't considered the Buddhist point of view.

The idea that Buddhism might have something to contribute to cognitive science isn't new—Buddhism could be said to be the original cognitive science. But even in the modern scientific context, it was over 20 years ago that the late Francisco Varela identified the fatal flaw in the Western project to understand cognition. We were using mind to study mind, and always in retrospect, never in the present, where experience was actually occurring. Whatever bad habits or limitations of mind we might have, we were bringing them to the work, and we had no methodology for breaking out of that little circle. Varela noticed that Buddhism had just such a methodology—mindfulness meditation. He proposed that a cognitive science that did not include human experience could never succeed in explaining us to ourselves, and that Buddhist methods were precisely what was needed to bring experience into focus so that it could be included in the scientific enterprise.

How might a Buddhist perspective alter Prof. Gutting's view? The first thing I notice is that the distinction he makes between the panic attack and the enjoyment of the book is a false one. Irresistible as the panic might seem, it is a mental state of which the "victim" is actually the author, just as he or she is of the pleasure of reading. Second, and more fundamentally, the fact that a choice is caused has little to do with whether it's free. Everything is caused—we live in a causal

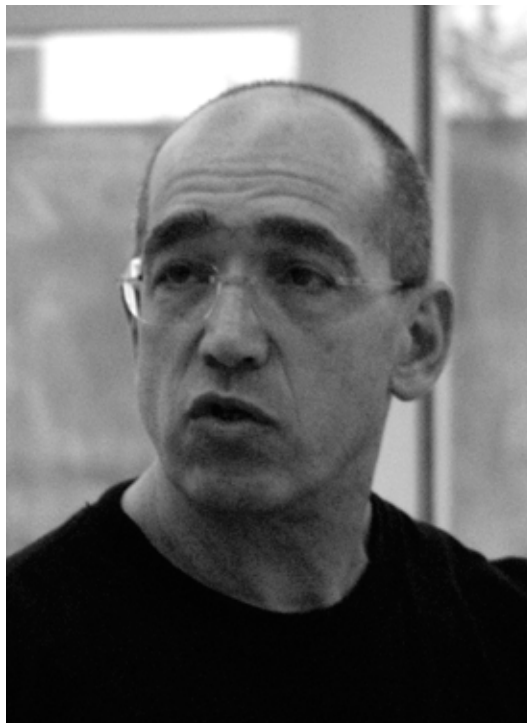
universe. And as for the brain events that precede the conscious choices...what about the cognitive events that precede those brain events? The field of previous causes expands infinitely into the past, and as we are both sentient and physical creatures, includes both cognitive and biological events.

But now we get back to the professor's original question, "How free is free will?" The fundamental problem, he writes, is that "we do not have a sufficiently firm idea of just what we mean by freedom to know how to design a test for it." I would say that however we define free will, we cannot do so without reference to self. Who else's choices could be either free or not free? And since, from the viewpoints of both cognitive science and Buddhism, the existence of self cannot be established, it's no wonder that the meaning of freedom is still up in the air.

Actually, we use the term "freedom" differently in the Buddhist tradition. It is understood that sentient beings are far from free, though it is equally understood that our bondage is entirely our own doing, and that true freedom does not consist of choice that is well-aligned with desire, but of action that is free from it. That might be a formulation with which cognitive science can as yet do nothing, but who knows? One day it may be discovered that there are correlated brain events that will allow scientists to predict, with 60 to 80 percent probability, the realization of emptiness.

Speaking of choices, I have made a difficult one. After over ten years and 45 issues, this will be my last as editor-in-chief of Chan Magazine. The decision was eased by the knowledge that I'll be leaving the magazine in the capable hands of associate editor Buffe

Laffey. I offer my gratitude to Master Sheng Yen for having so deftly manipulated me into taking the job, which has been one of the great educational experiences of my adult life, to Virginia Tan, whose title of "coordinator" cleverly disguises how indispensable she has been, to Ernest Heau, who as lead editor at Dharma Drum Publications has had primary responsibility for supplying the magazine with the content that makes it worthwhile, to all the many, many others who have contributed over the years, and most of all to you, the reader, whose continued interest is what keeps Chan Magazine going. I hope that whatever little I've been able to contribute has been useful.



David Berman  
Editor, Chan Magazine

# Expanding Practice Into Daily Life

by

Venerable Chi Chern

*Venerable Chi Chern was Master Sheng Yen's first Dharma heir. Born in Malaysia in 1955, he is one of the most respected meditation teachers in Malaysia and Singapore. What follows is a Dharma talk given by Ven. Chi Chern on July 22, 2011, during an intensive Chan retreat at the Dharma Drum Retreat Center in Pine Bush, NY. The talk was translated by Chang Wen Fashi and edited for the magazine by Buffe Laffey.*





## Changing Perspective Playfully

Good evening fellow practitioners. I see a lot of people wearing shirts with the tags sticking out. (Editor's note: on retreats at DDRC, participants are asked to turn printed t-shirts inside out to hide words or images that might distract other participants.) Sometimes this happens to my shirt as well. One of my students may see it and whisper to me, as if it is something embarrassing, "Hey Master, you're wearing your t-shirt inside out." Then I tell them (whispering back) "It's a designer shirt, see the tag?" as if it were something fashionable. Just changing the perspective makes it seem very different.

At the Master's Quarters there's a wooden walking stick that Master Sheng Yen used to use. I take it when I go for a walk. Sometimes when people see this they will ask me, "Hey, Master, is something wrong with your legs?" and I'll say "No, my legs are fine. It's the stick that has a problem; it can't walk. I'm actually just taking the stick for a walk."

Occasionally people ask me, "Can you drive a car?" and I'll say, "Well, I can open the door." (In Chinese the words *kai cha* could mean drive and kai could also mean open.) Something that was originally negative quickly changes to be positive. If people ask me, "Can you drive?" and I say, "No, I can't drive," that's a little negative, it diminishes me. But instead of looking on the downside where I can't do something, I look at what I can do. I say, "Yes, I can open the door and I can sit in the car and ride." Just by changing perspective the whole situation changes.

We can transform the way we view our daily life and respond to situations. With the first

example, someone points out that your shirt is inside out. One type of response might be, "I only have a few clothes and no place to wash them so I have to turn it inside out to wear it twice." Or, "They told me to turn it inside out so the writing doesn't distract others." Giving all those explanations is a downbeat response, long-winded and unnecessary. Why not just say, "Well, this is a designer shirt, you see?" and show them the tag. A simple response like that gives a unique perspective. You take something that was originally troublesome, a lifeless thing bringing everybody down. Change the outlook and suddenly there's a creative space, there's joy. It's the same thing with the walking stick example, a dull situation becomes something lively. This is really the purpose of Buddhism, to be able to see things from a fresh perspective. With practice we can apply this attitude. We can look at things differently and have a straightforward approach of expressing our viewpoint. In doing so we get a message across that's lively and creative.

## Greeting Yourself in the Morning

The same goes for how we view ourselves, and this is an important point: How do you look at yourself in the mirror when you wake up in the morning? For me, I smile and say, "Good Morning!" I feel good. There's a sense of joy there. But some people look at themselves and [makes a dour face] they see something dull and lifeless. Or the first thing they see is another white hair! Maybe some of the younger folks see another pimple. These people, the first thing they see when they look in the mirror are all the blemishes and imperfections. They use all sorts of makeup and goop until their original face is completely out of sight. At that point it's just a mask to cover

up all the imperfections. If we look at ourselves this way every day what happens after a while is that when we wake up in the morning we feel lifeless and don't see any hope.

Looking in the mirror for imperfections is just an analogy for how we look at ourselves in general. We may look at the state of our mind and always see only the flaws. We may think, "Oh, even after studying Buddhism I have so many vexations. Every single thought, every single move I make is karma." We are filled with self-pity and think of ourselves as a terrible person. Here we thought Buddhism was supposed to help us be joyful. But it turns out that we use Buddhism to look down on ourselves and see only imperfections.

## Wholesome States of Mind

If we see only the negative side we weigh ourselves down with negativity. We may eventually lose all faith, and then Buddhism becomes a vehicle for self-criticism. In fact Buddhism teaches us that while we have flaws, we should recognize our positive traits as well. We should know our faults but it's more important to know our wholesome qualities and nourish them. Then we have a sense of confidence; we have self-worth and value. We have creativity and the potential to bring joy to others. We are full of hope; this is the liveliness we get from adjusting our attitude. So how do we maintain this positive perspective in daily life? By cultivating more wholesome states of mind.

Of course there are vexations. The Buddhist school of Consciousness Only analyzes the different states of mind and subdivides them into categories of unwholesome and whole-

some states. According to this analysis the unwholesome states may be more in number, but it's just a way of describing these states of mind. Some people who study Buddhism seem to forget that there are wholesome states of mind and that these are what we want to nurture. Usually our mind fluctuates from wholesome to unwholesome states. By cultivating wholesome states of mind we counterbalance unwholesome states.

When we practice meditation for the most part we're focused only on ourselves, using the method and taking care of this calm yet clear state of mind. However in daily life our practice is not only limited to ourselves. We have to interact with others and take care of various affairs. How do we extend our practice into these activities and relationships? Precisely through cultivating wholesome states of mind.

## Reaping What You Sow

When a person always has a negative outlook, it's almost as if they emit a dark energy. It seems they're calling for some negative reaction from the environment to come back to them. This constant feedback of negativity multiplies and the person comes to feel flawed. On the other hand we know that when we cultivate positive states of mind we have a brightness about us. We may know people who are like this; they have a joyous quality about them. They emit a wholesome energy and it seems that the response that they get is also wholesome.

We can see this very clearly in our own interactions. What happens when we scold someone or pressure them? Do they smile and

give a happy response? Of course not. Most of the time the response we get is negativity bounced back at us. In the beginning we have a stronger will. Then it seems we win. They listen to us, but they're afraid of us. When they see us they immediately get tense. When we're pressuring people we ourselves are agitated and uncomfortable. We also fear that one day they might retaliate. What about the day when they have the stronger will? Then they may give us pressure. On the other hand if we have a very joyous approach to interacting with others we get a joyful response.

## Giving Joy and Removing Suffering

We are practicing Buddhism because we want to relieve ourselves of suffering. If we are sensitive to this we realize that other people also want to be free of suffering. So we start to see that in interacting with others the practice is cultivating wholesomeness, sharing joy. This in fact is compassion, one of the cornerstones of Buddhist teaching. The two Chinese characters for compassion mean "giving joy" and "removing suffering". This practice is actually the whole of Buddhism.

We cultivate this simply by nurturing wholesome states of mind. This begins with having an optimistic perspective on life, beginning most importantly with an optimistic perspective on ourselves. If we look in the mirror ev-

ery day with the attitude of seeing our own faults, are we able to help others with their suffering? Or bring them joy? Most likely we will just bring them down.

Just by changing our attitude and the way we express ourselves, we change our perspective. We can use a certain physical or verbal expression to communicate this wholesomeness. For example, to some of my younger students I may say [in a playful friendly voice], "Wow, you have so many pimples on your face! What happened?" I smile and say this in a very cheerful way and do you think they get upset? Actually they don't. Because the way I express myself is very lighthearted.

"ON RETREAT SITTING IN MEDITATION THE EMPHASIS IS ON OURSELVES, HARMONIZING OUR BODY AND MIND... BUT IN DAILY LIFE, BECAUSE MOST OF LIFE IS INTERACTING WITH OTHERS, THE EMPHASIS SHOULD BE ON COMPASSION..."

It's not that I want to hurt them. I may say something like this to loosen them up or cheer them. But I'm also trying to show my care for them. Because actually if many blemishes suddenly appear it could be a sign of some imbalance in their health, something they need to pay attention to.

It's a way of saying, "You've got to take care of yourself," a cheerful way of expressing concern. It's not like I'm saying [in a harsh annoyed voice], "Look at all those pimples on your face! What are you doing?" and giving them pressure. Some parents do that to their kids. Every day they say, "Ah, look at you, you're failing, you're worthless!" using a constantly negative attitude. For parents who drill their kids like that, do you think

the kids feel comfortable with their parents? No. When their parent comes near them, they cringe to block that negativity.

## Genuine Compassion

On retreat sitting in meditation the emphasis is on ourselves, harmonizing our body and mind, having this calm yet clear state of mind. But in daily life, because most of life is interacting with others, the emphasis should be on compassion. And how are we compassionate? First we change our attitude, seeing things in a positive light and cultivating positive mental states. We are sensitive to the needs of others. We use a wholesome way of interacting and this becomes something mutual. We should be aware that compassion is the foundation of our practice in daily life.

When we say we are practicing compassion, are we really? Even something as simple as saying good morning to others, is it just obligatory? If we say [in a low-energy downbeat tone], “Oh, good morning,” do they feel that it’s a good morning? I think they would wonder how you could be having a good morning when you sound that way. Do you start by smiling in the mirror and saying a cheerful, “Good morning!” to yourself? When we interact with others is our compassion genuine? And how do we make it genuine? It has to come from within our own experience. Only then can we genuinely express this wholesome energy to others. It’s crucial that in order to authentically practice compassion towards others we have to be compassionate towards ourselves.

## Expanding Practice Outwards

We say that a person who practices compassion for the sake of all sentient beings is a bodhisattva. Some bodhisattvas go deep into the mountains on solitary retreat. People may criticize them and say, “How can you deliver sentient beings by isolating yourself?” The bodhisattva may respond by saying, “When I go into the mountains to do solitary practice I am cultivating wholesomeness, I am cultivating joy within myself. This gives me the energy and the aspiration to help others.”

I think we can all relate to this. When we are using the method well, when our body and mind are relaxed and we have fewer wandering thoughts, we feel a certain joy. In our body there is lightness and ease, in our mind a wholesome energy. This pleasant sensation arises from personal cultivation, the harmonization of our own body and mind. Naturally when we express ourselves to others from within that state of mind they sense that it’s truly coming from our heart and is something real. This joy can influence others and encourage them to practice, or at least it helps relieve their suffering.

So, practicing compassion, we have to work on ourselves. But at the same time we must be careful not to isolate ourselves in a bubble, concerned only with our own vexation. Some people when they practice meditation just get wrapped up in themselves. Instead of cultivating joy it may just do the opposite and become self-criticism. But the practice of Buddhism is not about emphasizing the negative





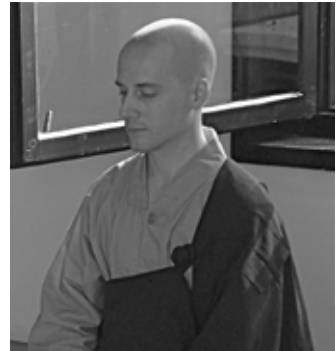
# Leaving Home

## David Kabacinsky Becomes Changwen Fashi, Part Three



by

Ven. Changwen



*Venerable Changwen is a western monastic disciple of the late Chan Master Sheng Yen. Formerly known as David Kabacinsky, he was ordained as a novice in*

*2004, received his monastic education 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 third 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.*

### Making the Decision to Leave Home

After having worked at the Department of Agriculture for about a year and having saved some money, I realized that I had just about enough to pay off my school loans. This meant that I would no longer be in debt or have any financial burdens to be concerned about, and I would have the freedom to decide on making either a career change, or a complete lifestyle change. Most importantly, this meant that I would be able to do what had been on my mind for a few years—become a monk.

One evening at CMC in the late spring of 2003, sitting next to Shifu and Guoyuan Fashi while having medicine meal (the optional evening supper at monasteries), I had a conversation with them that changed the direction of my life. Shifu began to speak very casually about the Dharma talk he had given that morning during the Sunday open house. Shifu had asked the audience, “So what should one do to eventually realize enlightenment?” I had answered simply, “Practice the path” [修道]. During dinner Shifu commented on this and asked me, “Did you understand my Chinese during my Dharma talk?” I said, “Just a little.”

He gave me a little “pop quiz” on the topic of the Dharma talk, and then asked, “Changwen Pusa, have you ever thought of becoming a monk? You’d make a good monk.” I thought he must have read my mind. I said, “Yes, Shifu. I still have to pay off my school loans, but afterwards... is it possible?” He then asked, “You don’t want to get married?” “No,” I replied. He then explained the differences between being a monastic and a layperson. When he finished, he asked if I could accept the lifestyle and attitude of a home-leaver. I said I wanted to try, and he said, “It’s not about trying. If you say, ‘Oh I’ll just give it a try,’ you won’t last—you won’t be determined. You have to just make the commitment and persevere along the path.” “I can do it,” I said. “We’ll see,” Shifu said, and we ended the conversation and finished the meal.

During the next two weeks, I mentally arranged my future, planning how to pay my loans. I asked myself, “I want to be a monk, but is there anything about lay life that I cannot give up?” I wrote a brief list of things that I owned, or activities that I did, or relationships that I had, and let the question sit in my mind. I continued to work and take care of everyday affairs with this question churning. Actually, I felt that nothing would be in the way of my becoming a monk—almost nothing. My lifestyle at that point was pretty simple and pure. Most of my time was spent helping to edit Shifu’s Dharma talks, meditating, exercising, occasionally going to parks with friends, composing music, and playing guitar. I was willing to give up those hobbies, as I felt that doing the work of introspection and Dharma study brought a greater joy than any sensual pleasure. There was however a small doubt of whether or not I could “give up” girls. I wasn’t so

interested in a relationship as such, but I’d always enjoyed the company of women and the many facets of affection and play. I was sure, however, that emotional relationships could not resolve suffering, and I recognized that the craving for affection itself was a great burden on my mind. After a few days of contemplating this issue, I resolved to give up all those attachments and make the commitment to monastic life.

I told my parents of my intention, and that it might be possible to become a monk under Shifu. They were not surprised, at least not visibly, as they had seen my increased interest in the spiritual path over the previous few years. Actually, at the time I began going to the Chan Meditation Center, they were going to a Zen center, and began their own study of meditation with a Catholic priest who was a Dharma heir of a Japanese Zen Master. Also, when they were only 20 or so, they had “left home” as a couple, with a new-born son, and traveled to Canada to do missionary work for the Catholic Church. So having their own experience of Zen, and a background of commitment to a spiritual path, they understood and sympathized with my decision. They always supported us—my brother, sister, and me—whether or not they wholeheartedly agreed with us, and for this I was very grateful.

My other family members had mixed reactions. My brother felt that for me to become a monk was a waste of my life. My sister couldn’t understand why I wanted to leave everything behind. My cousins and extended family weren’t sure what being a monk was about, but seemed disappointed to lose a family member to a foreign religion. Despite meeting some resistance, I was sure of my decision,

and clear that the monastic path would lead to a life of joy and freedom from vexations. Far from being a waste, I knew that I could use my talents and abilities to help share the Dharma with the world.

After a couple of weeks of consideration, I called Guoyuan Fashi and said, “Fashi, I’ve made a decision. Can I meet with Shifu about becoming a monk?” “Sure,” he said, and we arranged a time to meet. A couple of days later Shifu called me to his study, along with the other CMC monastics and his attendant. I was thoroughly and visibly nervous.

When we had all sat down, Shifu said in English, “Relax... relax.” “I’m trying,” I said. Shifu said, “When I get tense, I just relax.” I asked, “Shifu gets tense?” He was silent for a moment, smiled and asked, “Do you think that Shifu has no vexations?” I didn’t answer but thought, “Of course Shifu has no vexations; he’s enlightened, right?” He then said, “Actually, I still have vexations. I’m just an ordinary person. But when I have vexations, I’m able to see them, and make an adjustment to my mental state right away. But I still have them, you know.”

I was somewhat surprised—as I naively believed that Shifu was without any suffering at all—yet I felt very relieved by his statement. He then explained my situation to everyone, what he observed of me at the Center, and asked me to share my thoughts. I spoke of my hopes and expectations of becoming a monk, and I shared my intentions. I felt very self-conscious yet much supported by everyone. It felt as if this was the moment that would solidify my decision to change my life for sure.

After a few minutes, Shifu asked everyone’s opinion, and they all agreed that I could first become a volunteer at the Center, adjust to the lifestyle, and be of service to the sangha. Afterwards, if all went well, then we would discuss if I was suitable to be ordained as a novice monk. We finished the meeting, and I was overjoyed, relieved, and ready to prepare for my new future.

A short time after that, I gave two weeks notice to my employer, gave my personal belongings away to my friends and family, threw away all the unusable personal memorabilia that I had collected over 23 years, packed my things, and drove to the Center to join the sangha as a resident volunteer. It was mid-June of 2003.

## **Nine Months in the Dharma Womb: Postulant Life**

It was liberating in itself, to leave my house and move into the Chan Meditation Center, even though I was leaving the openness, fresh air, and green of the Long Island suburbs, and entering into the Center’s cramped and stuffy three-floor apartment-style building. There wasn’t much space, and where I slept wasn’t much more than an oversized storage closet. There was just enough space to lay out a sleeping bag next to the small desk. Yet I felt that I was entering a vast ocean. I was overjoyed to be at the home of Chan Dharma, and even closer to Shifu and the sangha. I had brought some baggage with me, materially speaking—some books, my guitar and quite a few clothes. (The monastics got a laugh out of my garbage-bag full of socks.) I had also brought a lot of mental baggage, which would only unfold after some time.

At that time, the sangha at CMC was continuing to grow. Changwu Fashi had just returned from Taiwan, after having taken the full ordination and gone through monastic training. Also, Changji Fashi (Shifu's secretary), and Guo Yao Fashi (his attendant), were there when Shifu was in New York. There was also another postulant there at the time, a woman born in Mainland China who'd lived in Florida. Each person had a unique cultural and educational background. This mix of monastics and postulants, male and female, all living under the same small roof, made for an interesting international/interpersonal chemistry. It was a small Dharma "family," and my first experience living with a group of people all dedicated to Chan practice.

This is quite different from an average family, in which people behave according to their emotional relationships. With a practice community, a sangha (literally, "community of harmony"), we are together to resolve these emotional reactions to people, and interact in a pure manner—helping each other out of compassion, and working together at resolving problems through practice.

But this is no easy task, and having people living together in such close quarters makes for a potentially difficult situation. If one person is unhappy and not in harmony with the sangha, it can very easily disturb the harmony of all the others.

Shifu must have seen this potential, and so called a meeting. This first meeting with Shifu and the others was very meaningful to me. Shifu gave us some special "medicine" to help us have the right attitude towards

sangha living. These lessons stayed with me for years to come, and I kept the notes from the meeting, as a reference.

For example, Shifu spoke of "being in harmony with the group, rather than requesting the group be in harmony with you." Often, if a person has a strong opinion or particular habit, he or she wants to make others conform to it. If we were to take this approach in a community of practice—everyone adhering to their own opinions—there would be no coherency, and there would be chaos. Regardless of whether one has a great idea, or a special knowledge or skill in something, if it doesn't correspond with the direction of the community, one should not insist. One should be flexible in one's attitude, and be able to put aside one's view for the sake of the community. This is not a practice of blind conformity, but of non-attachment and harmonization with the group. One seeks to understand and assimilate the view of the sangha, and "follow the assembly" [隨眾] in each activity. Naturally, over time, one's self-centeredness and attachment to views lessens, and one experiences joy and ease adapting to whatever conditions arise.

Shifu also talked about being, "like a bottomless garbage can." When dealing with people, we often encounter conflicts. We are the object of another's complaint, or are asked to listen to a friend's vexations—we are in one way or another the recipient of the vexations of others. Someone gets upset and yells at us, and even if they are right, we often focus on the emotion, feel hurt, and carry those thoughts around with us. So our minds are like an overflowing garbage can.

If we practice being like a bottomless garbage can, then whatever we experience is not kept in our minds. It doesn't mean that we don't remember; of course we remember, but it doesn't collect and ferment, stink, and cause problems. We can take a good scolding, and learn from it. We can listen to another's problems, yet not dwell on them. In this way, we'll have a clear mind—like an empty garbage can—and will possibly then see how to help others.

As for our own vexations, Shifu taught that we should not look for someone on whom to pour out our mind's contents. Rather than complaining about a situation, we should “dissolve the vexations within our own minds” [將煩惱消歸自心] and not let them manifest into harmful speech or action. If we feel unable to find a solution, and feel helpless, we look for a Dharma friend, but to seek advice, not to complain or vent. In this way, we rely on the sangha for support, but we discipline ourselves and deal with our own vexations.

## Learning Through Challenges

I was very excited to be a part of the community and very enthusiastic about serving the sangha. So when work was given to me, I gladly accepted it. I felt that I was making a positive contribution, and so felt useful and appreciated. Whether it was cleaning the bathrooms, sweeping the sidewalk outside the Center, moving boxes, or helping to write articles and do transcribing, I joyfully put all of my heart into the work. However, over time this very enthusiasm made it hard for me to pace myself. The more work I was given, the more it seemed I was unable to finish, and so I didn't stop working from morning until

night. I wasn't good at taking time for a break, nor at doing one thing at a time. The more work I had, the more I tried to multitask, and I quickly began to “fill up the garbage can.” I started to feel pressure; I had too many things to do. Guoyuan Fashi reminded me of his “Fifth Great Vow”—“I vow to undertake endless affairs” [無量事情誓願做]—that our work really is endless, so we shouldn't seek to be finished with anything. It didn't help.

I became physically exhausted, and my enthusiasm started to wane. It was quite difficult to roll out of bed (or roll from my sleeping bag to the floor) and get up in the morning. My head was a fog, and my body was sore. Often I didn't hear the morning boards, so Guoyuan Fashi had to knock on my door, very compassionately, until I'd come to my senses. Morning exercise was a blur, sitting meditation was like being in a dark cave, and morning service was training in how to sleep standing up as well as kneeling down. I began to feel irritable, and didn't want to have to see people, or do any more work. But I had to keep going.

One day, my irritability came to a peak, and I actually felt resentful towards Shifu. As I watched on closed-circuit TV in the basement while he was giving his Dharma talk on the first floor, I thought: “Why are you making us all so busy? And why do you keep saying the same thing in your Dharma talks? It's all a bunch of garbage. I'm tired of hearing it.” At that moment, I heard my own inner discontentment, and noticed that I had a problem.

Even if we are fully enthusiastic about the work that we do, we must still strike a balance between work and rest, service to





others and time for oneself. I began to make time to rest, time to exercise, and time to be alone—reading or meditating apart from group practice. I also came to see that one’s work really is endless, so there is no need to worry about when we’ll finish. Shifu saw me once and said, “You look very busy.” I replied, “Well, I’m just taking it one thing at a time.” And I felt happier to be busy but able to pace myself better.

After about 5 months as a resident volunteer, I officially became a “postulant” by receiving precepts of “one practicing as a Shramanera,” or novice monk. It was a joyous occasion to have received the precepts from Shifu, and I was filled with a greater sense of responsibility for my behavior. I also felt a greater sense of energy and enthusiasm, progressing along the path towards monasticism, yet I wasn’t concerned about what would happen next or when I would be ordained.

One day after dinner, in his usual relaxed manner, Shifu was showing concern for

people, talking in a very lighthearted and informal way, and he came to me and said, “If you want to have monastic training, you’ll have to go to Taiwan. There’s no kind of training here at CMC.” “I see... OK,” I said, with no second thought, trusting completely Shifu’s guidance. That was it. We didn’t discuss anything more.

A short while later, after Shifu had already returned to Taiwan, I received a phone call early in the morning. Shifu wanted to speak with me. “Are you ready?” he asked. “Yes,” I replied. And after a few words, his secretary briefly described the details and the time I would be ordained, and that I should start making arrangements to go to Dharma Drum Mountain, Taiwan. That was it. I was really going. I felt very happy, and supported by Shifu and the sangha. I would be the first Westerner in a long time to be ordained under Shifu, and would be one of the youngest in the sangha. I had only a few weeks to acquire a visa, pass all my work assignments to others, and pack up, so it was quite a rush, but I was able to get everything taken care of, and acquired my passport with just a couple of days to spare.

Then I was off to another land. Taiwan was the farthest I had ventured from the U.S., and I wasn’t sure what awaited me there. But I was very happy to know that I’d be a monk soon. I felt that my life had finally taken the direction that I yearned for—towards the goal of liberation.

### **The First Year as a Novice Monk**

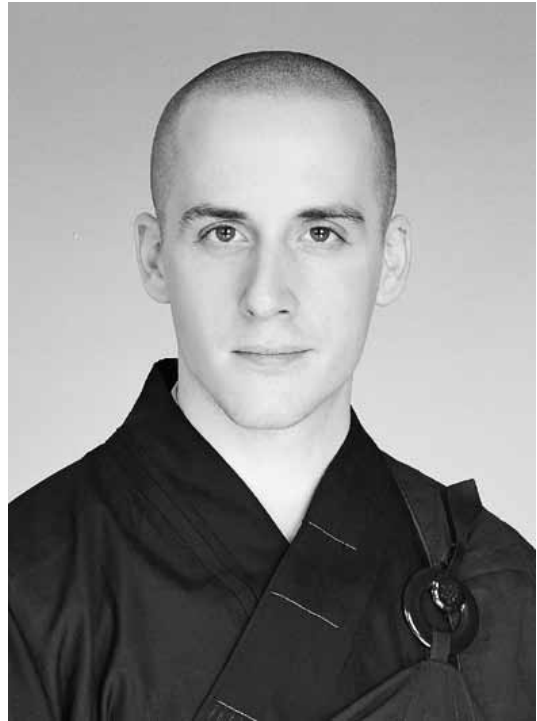
I left New York for Taiwan in early March of 2004. As I sat on the plane—my first excursion outside of North America—my mind shifted

from ease to anxiety. On one hand, I was very happy to be on my way to being ordained as a monk and felt liberated leaving everything behind. On the other hand, I was quite anxious about the future—entering a whole new environment, adapting to a new culture, and learning a new language. I also had a cold and was exhausted—I truly appreciated having nothing to do for that 18-hour plane ride.

(Before I left the Chan Center, Shifu had even given me his old suitcase which he used for about 20 years when he traveled alone all over the world. I felt very privileged to have it, even though it wasn't the most convenient travel bag, as it wouldn't stay shut without locking, didn't roll very well, and had to be wrapped in bungee cords to stay closed. Whether or not it was practical I was happy to have it, and saw it as a sign of Shifu's support and encouragement

As the plane descended towards the airport in Taoyuan, the first thing I noticed was all the small cement houses in the nearby area, a mix of farmland and urban sprawl. I had never seen such buildings, all shaped like little square boxes and grey, yet surrounded by lush green potted plants and fields. It looked like a different world. Even the tall office buildings and roads looked Foreign. I was very curious to get close to what I viewed from above.

The people who greeted me at the arrival gate made me feel very much at home. I was received by Guojian Fashi, an elder monk, who was accompanied by a long-time disciple of Shifu's who spoke some English, so we talked in the car about my history and interest in



Chan, and had fun trying to communicate in Chinese, with my few words and phrases.

It was raining, there was fog everywhere, and the land looked green and saturated with water. Small waterfalls plumed towards the road over the steep grassy cliffs. I gazed at the scenery with eyes wide, the sub-tropical trees and shrubs, the mold covering the sides of buildings. It was the most humid climate I had ever been in. The buildings and neighborhoods along the road seemed not so well-kept or clean, and looked dreary. The people also seemed to have long, unhappy faces. Maybe my discriminating mind was coloring my perceptions—the view there was so different from the crisp, clean scenery I was used to in upstate New York.

However, upon arriving at DDM, everything seemed to change. The roads were clean, the environment was beautiful, and all of a sudden it felt as if we were in the Pure Land. We drove directly to the monk's quarters, where I was warmly greeted in Chinese and English by my new Dharma brothers, Changdu and Changying [那時還是在家菩薩].

## Novice Ordination

In the days that followed, we practiced for the ordination ceremony, only a few days away. We learned how to wear our robes, and how to prostrate, kneel, bow, and walk in them; how to chant, how to reply when answering to the "inquiry," and when receiving the precepts. It was very intense, with the rehearsal conducted in Mandarin and a little Taiwanese. I struggled to understand and mostly just observed and mimicked everyone else. Thankfully, one of the nuns responsible, Guoguang Fashi, spoke English, and I got lots of help from Changdu, who had basic English skills. Before and after each practice session, he would give me a summary of what was going on.

Even so, it was hard to respond correctly when I couldn't understand the classical Chinese used in the ceremony. I was slow, and my movements clumsy. They tried to help me with a wireless earphone that transmitted an English translation, but hearing two voices at once, and the time lag, made it all the more awkward. "Monkey see, monkey do" turned out to be the best method.

Ordination day was quite a scene, with many hundreds of people present, as well as TV crews everywhere. Even during the ceremony people were taking lots of pictures, running

back and forth. I guess everyone had heard that this young Western guy was going to be ordained under Chan Master Sheng Yen. I was interviewed, there were pictures and video taken—it was a bit overwhelming. But as the ceremony got underway, I got focused on being present and receiving the precepts. Everything faded into the background except the voices of Shifu and the other presiding monastics. Throughout the ceremony I felt calm and at ease, as if all the Buddhas and bodhisattvas were there to watch over and support us. There were 18 of us taking the novice precepts, six men and 12 women.

During the ceremony, parents traditionally sit at the side and observe, showing their support, or reluctantly saying goodbye forever to their children, as some may think. At one point, the postulants walk in front of their parents and prostrate in gratitude one last time before being ordained. As Shifu explained, being ordained did not mean that parents and children would be separated forever, only that their relationship was changing, that parents should now see their children as monastics, rather than as "their" kids. My own parents were in New York, so some other Dharma brother's family member was sitting in the seat assigned for my parents. I prostrated to her anyway, which made her think she was in the wrong seat, so she jumped up and stood to the side. But I was happy to prostrate to anyone—I was grateful for the loving care my parents had given me, and I was ready to cut the emotional ties to them. I wanted now to serve my greater family, all sentient beings.

## Learning to Walk Again

After this period in which our schedule revolved around preparing for the ordination,

a new period of regular daily life began. Dharma Drum Mountain in Jinshan was not yet fully constructed, so I spent almost all my time at the monks' quarters, followed the daily routine and began my studies. I was enrolled in the two-year Monastic Development Program at the Sangha University, but because of my poor Chinese, I wasn't able to participate in all the classes with my Dharma brothers. At Shifu's direction, for those next two years I merely needed to learn two things: Chinese, and most importantly, how to be a monk. There was nothing else to do. In this sense, Shifu "protected" me from being occupied by other obligations, and gave me the time and space to feel very relaxed and comfortable while learning. I was thus able to focus and absorb as much as possible in the short time that I would spend in Taiwan—a mere four years. Shifu told me that for me to share Chan with the West, I would have to develop my practice within a Chinese-speaking monastery environment, and eventually be able to read the Chinese scriptures. "It's very difficult," he said. But that made me more determined to learn.

With this arrangement I felt freer than ever. Of course I was obliged to attend daily group practice activities—early morning sitting, morning service, meals, evening sitting, etc.—yet no one demanded much of me. They just looked at me like, "Well, Changwen Shi doesn't understand, anyway. So he's exempt." And they were partly right. I didn't understand the language or culture, so I wasn't able to do any complicated tasks that involved speaking or writing. My daily tasks consisted of manual labor—cleaning windows, sweeping floors, and other such chores. I truly enjoyed it, as doing simple physical work is a great way to practice Chan—just wholeheartedly

putting the mind on the task at hand. And I still had plenty of time for studying Chinese and reading Dharma.

I was enrolled in the Chinese-Tibetan Buddhist Exchange Program's Chinese language class. There were about a dozen Tibetan lamas residing at DDM, learning about Chinese Buddhism and sharing their own teachings and practices. Many of them could speak Chinese but some were just learning. I was in the beginner's class with about eight other monks. We began learning the basics: "Hello, my name is... I am from... I like..." etc. The Tibetan monks were very playful, which made me feel like I was back in elementary school. They were very intelligent and outspoken, especially quick to tease each other, and make jokes using their new Chinese vocabulary. And the more we got to know each other, the more I became part of the jokes. One remarked that I had a very big nose, just like him.

During summer break our Chinese instructor, Mrs. Zhang, [張春芬老師] was gracious enough to travel to DDM twice a week to tutor me. She was an excellent teacher, experienced in teaching Mandarin to foreigners, and I was able to progress quite rapidly. In two years she was able to move me from the basics to Confucius and Zhuangzi, giving me a foundation in classical Chinese that allowed me to approach studying Buddhist sutras. She also helped me to get a better understanding of Taiwanese culture, and of how people in her culture think about Buddhism.

Shifu himself taught the classes in precepts and monastic deportment to the whole Sangha student body. Twice a week he lectured on "The Mind and Practice of a Home-leaver" and "Biographies of Eminent Monastics."



During these classes I was often given attention and encouragement from Shifu and fellow classmates. Shifu would often ask me, “Changwen, do you understand?” Mostly, the answer was no, but my mentor, Changkuan Fashi, patiently sat and translated, or helped me to understand after class. In addition, he met with me numerous times each week, to study Chinese and Chan practice together by reading Shifu’s book, “Chan Master Sheng Yen Teaches Silent Illumination” 《聖嚴法師教默照禪》.

Changkuan Fashi also taught me the Guidelines and Department of a Shramanera, which are the extended rules and practice guidelines that every monastic must learn and recite. Previously, I hadn’t really thought about deportment—I thought one could naturally be a good monk just by practicing meditation and Chan in daily life.

Unfortunately, we are often unaware of our harmful behavior and poor demeanor, so we need the help of guidelines for monastic discipline. Being mindful of deportment helps to cultivate self-awareness, and also helps to attract others to the practice. I only began to understand this after reading the rules for novices and hearing Shifu reinforce this concept repeatedly.

At the time I didn’t realize how much care and concern Shifu and the sangha had for me and how considerate they were on my behalf. I was like a toddler, barely able to speak and walk. It was probably a burden for them, yet they gave me only encouragement and care. Because of their kind care and support, I was able to fully plunge into studying Chinese and adapting to monastic life. But despite all the help I received, those two years were not without their challenges.



## **Another Mystery, Unknown History**

On brink of the lake  
Strappy high heel standing poised  
Colours of mallard  
No sign of the other shoe  
Nor body beneath slow waves

Cantillation behind trees

—**Frank Charlton**



## “CSA Eggplant”

Rikki Asher

# Seeing the Mountain

## A Retreat Report

*The following is a practitioner's report of a silent illumination retreat led by Simon Child from November 20-27, 2010. As is the custom, the retreatant's name is not being published. The report was edited for the magazine by Simon Child.*

The first day and a half of the retreat was strangely tumultuous. I have been to retreat many times but this was only the second time this decade that I could attend a retreat without any non-retreatant responsibilities. Also, I had wanted to attend a silent illumination retreat with Simon (Child) and/or John (Crook) for a long time and I had had to make a number of special arrangements at work to make it to this one. I guess deep down I wanted desperately to protect this retreat. Yet a number of relatively minor things bothered me greatly during the first day of retreat. It was probably not so much that I was more upset than usual, but that I had allowed myself to see my emotional and mental responses loudly and clearly. But I was so upset that I actually considered leaving the retreat that night. This came as a shock; I had never thought of leaving a retreat. The fact that I was entertaining such drastic action over such minor irritations was baffling. The inconsistency between the magnitude of the situation and my emotional and mental responses did not escape my attention. Simon started the retreat by instructing us to open our awareness and investigate. "What is going on?" I asked. As I penetrated the mind, I noticed a silence in between these very loud thoughts. I shifted my attention away from the silly obsessive thoughts to the silence.

In this silence, everything arises and perishes, nothing lasts. This silence is just there, within which phenomena come and go. In my first interview, Simon told me that this was the silence of my mind. I told him that rather than "Silent Illumination," now I understood why John used the phrase "Illuminating Silence" for his book. It is the silence of the mind that is being illuminated. Simon agreed. Simon told me to poke around in this silence a little bit, to check if there was any limit or any obstructions and to check to see if I believed it. He told me to use the opportunity of seeing this silence to explore and investigate the mind instead of seeing it as a destination or achievement.

I left the interview and spent the day following Simon's instruction, as I have in past retreats. I trusted him and so I looked around in my mind for things that might have been hidden deep down in my consciousness. I watched out for thoughts or emotions that were met with resistance when they arose. I watched out for habitual tendencies of the mind that drove my actions. I spotted one.

I continued to hear the silence and maintain an open awareness of body, mind and environment. I found them to be arbitrary categories, none carrying more weight than the others. They arose like bubbles or ripples

in a body of water and disappeared without a trace, leaving the mind back to silence. Yet I noticed a thought that arose rather consistently: "I can report this to Simon." After a while, I realized that I had this tendency of doing things to please others. Underlying these thoughts was the belief and feeling that I would be happy if I could bring the news and make the teacher happy. This childish reliance on others' affirmation was laid bare in my mind. "Why couldn't I stand on my own and take responsibility for my practice and my life?" I asked myself. It was clear that it was the main source of suffering in my life. This subtle samskara had caused me to doubt myself at a deeper level even when I was convinced that I was doing the right thing by my rationality and intellect. I needed to resolve this riddle, "Why can't I grow up to be a truly independent person?" I continued to watch the mind with everything arising and perishing, with this question gnawing at me in the background.



On the next day, after the morning meditation, the mind was very calm, clear and spacious. When the bell rang, the stillness continued and I could have continued sitting. Then the mind stirred as others prepared for morning service. I watched the mind giving rise to thoughts of giving up and allowing leg discomfort as excuse. I sensed resistance of some sort in the mind and I investigated further. I found the answer to my question. I discovered a knot in the heart hidden deep down; I realized I did not believe that I too could go all the way in the practice. That's why I allowed myself to give up rather than pushing on in the practice. As I shared this revelation with Simon, it was extremely emotional. It was a huge lump of sorrow wanting to be pulled out, displayed in the open and let go. After the tearful recounting of the story, the sorrow was nowhere to be found. The belief about my inability to amount to anything in the practice that seemed to have defined my being at the deepest level showed itself as nothing more than another thought. It has been heard, and now liberated, no longer having anything to do with me. I shared this revelation in the interview with Simon. He said, "The mind is empty," and I responded, "Indeed."

I told Simon that this silence had a sound. He said that it did. I said, "It is really loud and very different from other sound." Simon said that he believed Shifu called it "infinite sound." I shared with Simon that I didn't hear this silence sometimes, but it always came back. I found that I didn't need to worry about losing it. I discovered that this silence was always there, even though I could not hear it sometimes.

I told Simon that I noticed thoughts of being excited about this discovery arising and

perishing in the mind from time to time. I said, "Instead of being excited as if this is something special, I asked myself why I didn't see it sooner. It is right here all the time, right in front of my face. I just had to pay attention. Stupid."

I shared some more experiences with Simon. During a meal, applying the practice, I was clearly aware of the texture of the food being chewed, and the sound of the chewing. This was followed by the awareness of the subtle taste of the food. The sensation perishes. The perception of pleasant sensation arises, and perishes. The thought of wanting more arises and perishes. The thought, accompanied with a subtle fear, that "I should not give rise to desire" arises and perishes. The self arises and perishes moment to moment. The "me" of the last moment is dead, gone forever. A new "me" arises every moment, before it perishes, leaving no trace whatsoever. I told Simon that this was liberating.

Simon told me to keep investigating the silence, although I might not want to do too much so as to avoid striving.

In Wednesday's interview there was a long gaze into each others' eyes again. Simon told me that my mind was still very still. He asked, "Have you discovered the emptiness of yourself?" I opened my mouth to answer. For a long time, thoughts formed in the mind and they perished. Thought after thought, arising and perishing, none stayed long enough to materialize into speech. My mouth was open, about to utter something, but nothing could come out. When Simon finally asked if I could talk, I told him I forgot why I had asked for an interview.

I told Simon that I couldn't believe all the books that have been written about this. It is just right here, in front of our face. We both burst into laughter. Simon said that's why the Buddha would not teach at first. I said, "What would he talk about?" Simon then said that people practiced for years, going through lots of difficulties, to find this, the ordinary mind. I said, "I still can't get over all those books written about this." We burst into laughter again and we laughed so hard that Simon had to wipe off some tears. He asked, "Who is enjoying the joke?" The laughter is now gone. There is silence. I responded, "No more joke." Simon then asked me why I could not speak when he asked me the question. I told him what had happened and that anything that would make it into speech would be about the past already and thus not the correct answer. Simon said that it was Vimalakirti's problem. He then said, "You still have not answered my question. Have you discovered the emptiness of yourself?" I told him yes, with a smile.

I told Simon, "This silence is really loud. How can we not hear it? Our mind must have been really noisy!" We both had a good laugh.

I told Simon that thoughts and sensations arise and perish moment to moment. Nothing matters. Yet, this "nothing matters" is not nihilistic. Even though everything is impermanent, it does not mean that it is meaningless. When they arise, they serve their functions. Then they perish. Everything is fine, perfect as it is.

I continued with the practice sitting, walking, eating, resting, working, using the washroom, showering. The silence of the mind stayed with me. The wood-creaking sound of the Chan Hall comes and goes. The sound of

someone coughing comes and goes. Cool air touching my body when I walk by a window. Sensation of the knees from the bending and buttock from the pressure on the cushion, while crystal clear as I sit, disappears as the legs are released. Not a trace of the idea of the pain remains. Thoughts arise and go away. None of these stick to the silence, like birds leaving no trace whatsoever after flying across the sky. This reminds me of what Shifu wrote in one of his books, that the Buddha mind is like an empty wall on which we hang all sorts of objects that are our sensory experiences and thoughts. Whatever objects we hang on the wall, these objects do not change the nature of the wall, and these objects are there temporarily anyway. As long as we identify ourselves with the objects on the wall, our illusory mind, instead of the wall, the Buddha mind, we get confused and cannot see our true nature. Yet the true nature is always there. We just need to let go of the belief that the Buddha mind can be found in the objects hanging on the wall which keeps us from seeing the wall itself.

During the Thursday interview I told Simon that I discovered that my father loves me. In fact, what happened was I allowed myself to believe that my father truly loves me. In the previous evening, a strong emotion arose as the thoughts of my father reminding me of my Chinese birthday came through my mind. The feeling hidden beneath this memory that had been obscured by other notions about my father revealed itself. I was not paying attention. Sitting on my cushion, with a clear mind, his deep affection for me was clear. Related to this, I also discovered how truly deeply I love my husband. The fear of emotional attachment was not there. It is okay to love and to accept love and to want to be



with my loved ones. Everything is fine. Words cannot describe the fundamental importance of this discovery, that love is perfectly fine. It makes me human.

When standing in the breakfast line on the Friday, something happened that made it appear as if someone was going to skip in front of me in line. The thought that consists of my belief about how the line was supposed to work arose and perished. It was followed immediately by a more "Dharma" thought, telling myself that it is okay and it is all causes and conditions. This thought too arose and perished. I discovered that they were both thoughts. The so-called "Dharma" thought was not more real or inherently true than the so-called "self-centered" thought. They are both empty. Then I realized that the Dharma-self has been bullying the non-Dharma-self because of the erroneous belief that the former is more true, thus sometimes depriving the chance of the latter to be given a fair hearing. It became clear where the

resistance that manifested in the form of resentment, guilt and rebellion that arose from time to time came from. This is another thing that had apparently been bothering me in the deeper corner of my consciousness. The discovery freed me.

During the morning service, thoughts about the past arose while the chanting was going on. I realized that thoughts about the past are as much a part of the present as everything else, the chanting, the sound of the Dharma instruments, the sound of the room, etc., happening in the present. A thought is no different from a sound, both arise and perish and thus empty; the latter no more real nor pure than the former. These so-called “wandering thoughts” or “illusory thoughts” are not a problem and there is no need to fear them. Some of my “Dharma-related” views are slowly being illuminated.

After a sitting, I folded the towel the way I usually folded it at home, out of habit, instead of how Chang Wen Fashi had instructed. When I was almost done, I noticed that the towel was not folded as instructed. The towel was refolded as instructed, without the usual fuss of being embarrassed, resentful and trying to find excuses in the mind whatsoever. I realized that the mind can spot error and make correction by itself. The mind can function perfectly fine without my being involved.

I continued to practice no-method. When sitting, I did not meditate, but just sat. When I got up for the standing exercises, I let go of the method. Everything was crystal clear, perfectly fine. The mind does not need any method. The mind is pure, immaculate, perfect in itself. I realized that I had been reluctant to

let go of the method. When I reported this to Simon, I provided this metaphor. It was like I had been told to find my way to a place where I could see the mountain in order to climb to the mountaintop by using a compass. I had been diligently following the instruction, taking care not to let my eyes stray from the compass so as not to go the wrong way. Now that I could see the mountain, I was told I no longer needed the compass. Yet, I was reluctant to let go of the compass and kept referring back to it even though the mountain was right in front of me! Simon said, “It’s like not letting go of the raft.” It then became clear to me that, over the past day, I had slowly learned to let go of the Dharma, as instructed by the Diamond Sutra. It was not easy and I could see why the Buddha found it necessary to give this instruction. The Dharma, with its method and views, had served its purpose. The mind is naturally bright and clear. It does not need these words.

One last thing to report—when I was sitting on the toilet, the body was doing its thing. Sound of the fan came on. Footsteps on the floor. Water running from the faucets. Faucets turned off. Sound of lever of paper towel dispenser being pushed. No need for me to be here. Simon asked if I came back. I said, “Yes, I needed to leave the toilet.” He asked if this happened before. I told him, “a number of times, while eating, walking, sitting, when the self was not needed. Self comes and goes. It’s okay.”

Simon then told me, “It is clear that you have seen the nature. Congratulations.” I thanked Simon. Although one may think that this ought to be a moment of great excitement or joy, it was really quite an ordinary moment. It reminded me of the teaching in the

Tathagathagarbha Sutra where a man who had a precious pearl sewn inside his coat lived in abject poverty because he never realized that he had this tremendous wealth with him all that time. This mind is right here with us all the time. If we pay attention, we can see it in an instant. This is why the Buddha warned us not to search for the Buddha outside of ourselves in the Diamond Sutra. Simon reminded me of Faith in Mind. Indeed. It is clear that everyone has this Buddha mind and one does not need to wait for it to reveal itself. We just need to see it.

I used the opportunity to ask Simon some questions about seeing the nature and living an ethical life. I remember Shifu saying that one still will have vexations after seeing the nature, but one will know how to handle them. I interpreted it as meaning that even though one is not perfect, the practice will help one rectify mistakes as one moves along. That's what the lifetime cultivation is about. I asked Simon about why some people who have supposedly seen the nature would do gravely unethical things and cause harm to others. Simon told me that seeing the nature is not protection against making mistakes. We still need to practice. If one thinks that seeing the nature makes one special and thus invincible to mistakes, and especially if others around them treat them as if they could not be wrong, one can go down the path of thinking that s/he can do whatever s/he wants. The practice will help one see one's mistakes and rectify them, but one may slack off in the practice and thus allow things to slide. That is why Shifu said that one needs to practice more diligently after seeing the nature. Now I can understand what he meant. That evening after everyone retired, I paid my gratitude to Shifu by doing some

prostrations. No word would be sufficient in describing my gratitude. My deep gratitude also goes to John Crook and Simon Child who gave me personal guidance over the years in Western Zen Retreats and Koan Retreats. The discoveries made in those retreats were invaluable for preparing me for this retreat. I cannot help but feel that I have to be one of the most blessed people in the world, having encountered not one but three great masters to help me with my practice.

I remember Shifu's teachings that this is the beginning of practice. Now I can see the mountain, I need to start climbing it. It is only just the beginning.





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**Dluzew, Poland, March 02-09, 2012**

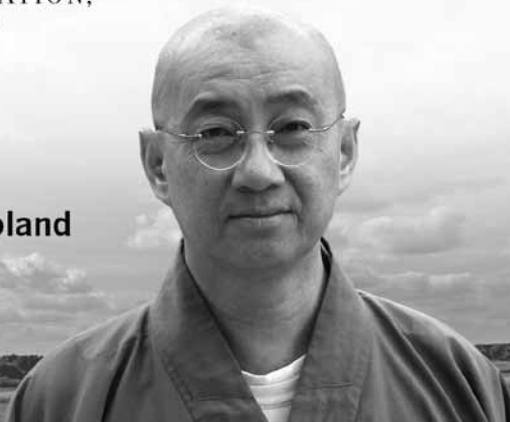
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Led by: **Chi Chern Fashi**  
(Master **Sheng Yen's** Dharma heir)

Date: **July 31- August 10, 2012**  
Location: **Dluzew near Warsaw, Poland**



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# The Past

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

### 2011 DDMBA North America Annual Meeting

The North American chapters of the Dharma Drum Mountain Buddhist Association held their annual meeting from October 28-30, 2011 at the Dharma Drum Retreat Center in Pine Bush, NY. The theme of the meeting was “Learning and Sharing Among DDM Members.”

Abbot President Venerable Guo Dong gave the opening address. He said that Master Sheng Yen had been inspired by Grand Master Tai Xu, who understood the needs of modern people. Master Sheng Yen devoted his life to sangha education. Now the sangha needs the support of the lay followers, working together as two parts of the same organism. Their shared mission is to make the Dharma available to everyone.

For a day and a half the members brainstormed in various discussion groups, in both Chinese and English. The topics included: Education about Birth, Aging and Illness, Caring for the Terminally Ill, Youth Program Development, and Designing Chan Programs for Westerners. There was also a two-day cooking workshop in which members learned how to prepare some of the delicious gourmet vegetarian dishes DDM is famous for.

The meeting ended with the various teams reporting on their findings and action plans. Venerable Chang Hwa, Director of CMC and the organizer of the event, gave a progress report on the team that was formed at the 2010 meeting to design a training program for timekeepers and instructors of beginner’s meditation. Training guides should be available in June of 2012. The chapters were also given DVD sets of lectures by Master Sheng Yen to use during one-day retreats.

As usual, there was a lively celebration on Saturday night, which included a musical variety show. The members enjoyed the magic of a surprise early snowfall; nearly 10 inches of snow weighed down trees still covered with leaves. The power went out in Pine Bush for three days, but DDRC’s new emergency backup generators kept everyone comfortable. By the end of the weekend the sun was shining warmly once again and the roads were clear for the journey home.

### DDHSIF Wins Civic Service Award

The Dharma Drum Humanities and Social Improvement Foundation (DDHSIF) has won the 9<sup>th</sup> National Civic Service Award for its long term dedication and contributions to charities. This award is given every second year by the Executive Yuan to recognize non-profit or-

ganizations for their outstanding efforts and contributions to charities.

Venerable Guo Dong, Abbot President of Dharma Drum Mountain, attended the 9<sup>th</sup> National Civic Service Award ceremony on November 2, 2011 at Taipei's Grand Hotel and was presented the award by the Premier of the Executive Yuan, Dun-Yi Wu with honor. Venerable Guo Dong said that this honor is for all followers of DDM and Sangha, and more importantly, it is very encouraging and reassuring that the idea of "Protecting the Spiritual Environment," as advocated by the late Venerable Master Sheng Yen, has been highly recognized by government and the public.

### **Celebrating the New Chan Hall of Zhaiming Monastery**

The inauguration of the new Chan Hall of Zhaiming Monastery was celebrated on the morning of October 15, 2011.

The Abbot President of Dharma Drum Mountain Venerable Guo Dong and Magistrate of Taoyuan County Chi-Yung Wu joyfully attended to offer their blessings and to jointly pull the red ribbon.

In his speech, Venerable Guo Dong expressed his deepest appreciation to those who had contributed to the completion of the new Chan Hall. He remarked that simplicity is the main design focus of the new Chan Hall and that it would inspire more people in Taoyuan's districts to be introduced to the Dharma in the future.

Following the inauguration, Venerable Guo Dong presided over a Refuge-Taking Ceremo-

ny for hundreds of participants who took refuge in the Three Jewels.

### **Two Hundred Take Refuge at Xinxing Monastery, Taitung**

On the morning of October 16, 2011, 200 people from the areas of Hualien and Taitung gathered at the Grand Buddha Hall of Xinxing Monastery in Taitung to take refuge in the Three Jewels and make their vow to observe the Five Precepts in order to build a strong Buddhist practice.

Abbot President of Dharma Drum Mountain Venerable Guo Dong travelled in person from Taipei to host the Refuge-Taking Ceremony and to offer his warmest blessings to the newly committed believers. He encouraged them to faithfully observe the Five Precepts\* to attain wisdom, happiness and inner peace at all times, and also to care for others in "uplifting the character of humanity."

The ceremony ended with each new believer receiving a Buddhist necklace from Xinxing monastery's sangha as a blessing.

\* The Five Precepts: no killing, no stealing, no sexual misconduct, no verbal misconduct, and no use of intoxicants.

### **Cleaning Pebble Stones for a Pure Heart and Mind**

The Dharma Drum Mountain World Centre for Buddhist Education organized an interesting volunteer event on the morning of October 2, 2011, and despite there being some rain, 150 volunteers gathered at the Wish-Fulfilling

Guanyin Hall to help clean the pebble stones from the Wish-Fulfilling Pool. The exercise was also an opportunity for some reflection and a way of helping to cleanse and purify the heart and mind.

Nothing could dampen the spirit of the volunteers that day and in spite of having to put on hats, raincoats and boots, the beautiful smiles on their faces expressed the enjoyment they experienced participating in this activity. They felt gratitude in their hearts to be able to work cleaning the lichen-covered pebbles and stones from the pool.

“This is fun, actually! Cleaning these pebble stones is also a Dharma exercise that has helped us to clean the vexations of the mind,” a volunteer said. “This is a rare opportunity. I will come when the cleaning exercise is offered again,” said Mrs. Huang, another volunteer, from Hong Kong.

### **DDM Malaysia Joins Sixth Chinese Book Festival in Kuala Lumpur**

The Sixth Chinese Book Festival was jointly held by Popular Book Company and Sin Chew Daily at the Kuala Lumpur City Center from 27 August to 4 September and Dharma Drum Mountain in Malaysia (DDM Malaysia) expressed their thanks for the opportunity to be part of this event.

DDM Malaysia attended the festival with the slogan, “The New Good Life,” wishing to promote the idea of happiness and returning to a simple life.

Dharma Drum Publishing Company, which published thirty books by the late Venerable

Master Sheng Yen, have earned the award for “Best Publication of Happiness” in 2011 from Sin Chew Daily.

The Principal of Sin Nan Primary School from the Ilan County of Taiwan, Chi-Sheng Lin, visited the festival in the last two day of the event and delivered a speech encouraging parents to read good books with children for the cultivation of good character.

DDM Malaysia was grateful for the selfless and long-term contributions from volunteers who made this book festival possible.

### **Tainan Branch Monastery Volunteers Visit Jianshen’s Elderly**

Forty volunteers from the Tainan Branch of the Monastery of Dharma Drum Mountain visited the elderly residents of Jianshen Nursing Home on the morning of September 10, 2011, bringing warm wishes of happiness and health.

Guided by Venerable Chang Feng, the morning’s activities began with all participants joining palms and chanting the holy Buddhist mantras. Following prayers for peace and health, young volunteers from the DDM Youth Society guided the elderly through a short exercise, and also jointly led them in singing a few tunes together.

Before bidding a farewell, Venerable Chang Feng offered his blessings with a gift of a Buddhist rosary for each resident at the nursing home.

# The Future

*Retreats, classes and other upcoming events.*

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

Phone: (845) 744-8114  
E-mail: [ddrc@dharmadrumretreat.org](mailto:ddrc@dharmadrumretreat.org)  
Website: [www.dharmadrumretreat.org](http://www.dharmadrumretreat.org)

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

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

### **Retreats**

**One-day Retreat & Children's Program**  
Led by Chang Wen Fashi  
Saturdays, Jan 7, Feb 4, Mar 3

**Three-Day Retreat**  
Led by Chang Wen Fashi  
Friday - Sunday, Feb 24 - 26

**Three-Day Beginner's Mind Retreat**  
Led by Dr. Rikki Asher & Nancy Bonardi  
Friday - Sunday, Mar 9 - 11

**Five-Day Introduction to Chan Retreat**  
Led by Chang Wen Fashi  
Saturday - Thursday, Mar 17 - 22

### **Classes**

**Beginner's Meditation**  
Led by Chang Wen Fashi  
Part One: Saturday, Jan 14  
Part Two: Saturday, Jan 21

### **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 Event**

**Passing On the Lamp Day**  
A day of gratitude towards our founder,  
Chan Master Sheng Yen  
Saturday, Jan 28

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

E-mail: [chancenter@gmail.com](mailto:chancenter@gmail.com)  
Websites: [www.chancenter.org](http://www.chancenter.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, Feb 4 & 11

9:30 am - 12 noon; Fee \$40

### **Intermediate Meditation**

Saturday, Mar 3

9:30 am - 3 pm; Fee \$40

### **Dharma 102: The Heart Sutra**

Three Saturdays, Mar 17, 24 & 31

10 am - noon; Free of charge

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

Saturdays, 6:30 - 9 pm

Led by Lindley Hanlon

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

*(Pre-registration advised for all classes.)*

## Regular Weekly Activities

### **Monday Night Chanting**

7:30 - 9:15 pm (On the last Monday of each month there is recitation of the Eighty-eight Buddhas' names and repentance.)

### **Tuesday Night Sitting Group**

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

### **Thursday Night Taijiquan**

7:30 - 9:30 pm, ongoing

Led by David Ngo

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

*First class is free for newcomers.*

### **Saturday Sitting Group**

9:00 am - 3:00 pm

Sitting, yoga exercises, walking meditation

## Sunday Open House

10 am - 11 am: Meditation

11 am - 12:30 pm: Dharma lectures

12:30 - 1 pm: Lunch offerings

1 - 2 pm: Vegetarian lunch

2 - 4 pm: Chanting and recitation

1st Sunday: Chanting Guan Yin's name

2nd Sunday: Great Compassion Repentance

3rd Sunday: Bodhisattva Earth Store Sutra

Last Sunday: Renewal of the Bodhisattva

Precept Vows

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

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

## Special Events

### **Water Repentance Ritual Ceremony**

**(In Chinese)**

Sunday, Jan 1

9:30 am - 5:30 pm

(No regular Sunday activities)

### **Chinese New Year Celebration**

Sunday, Jan 22

(No regular Sunday activities; check website for details)

## **Master Sheng Yen's Third Anniversary Memorial: One-day Retreat and Passing the Lamp**

Saturday, Jan 28

Check website for details

# Chan Center Affiliates

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

## NORTH AMERICA

### USA

#### USA Headquarters

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www.ddmba.ca

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### *Mar de Jade Oceanfront Retreat Center*

#### *Chacala, Nayarit, Mexico*

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USA tel: (800) 257-0532  
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www.mardejade.com  
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### *Dharmaaloka Buddhist Center*

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

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Email: contact@ddm.org.tw  
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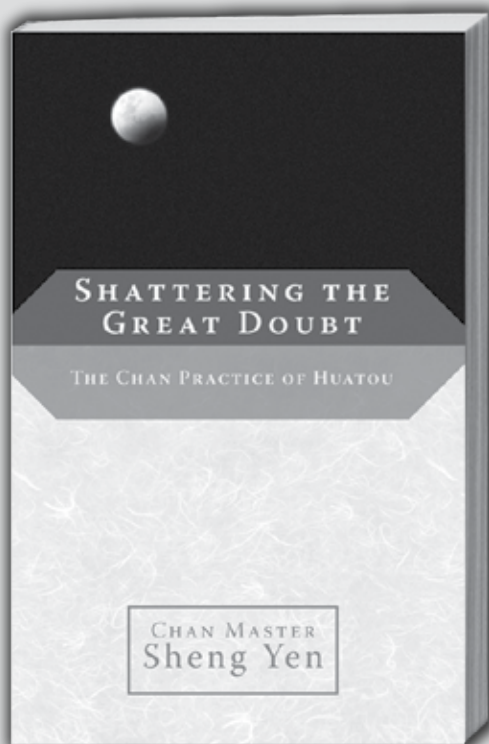
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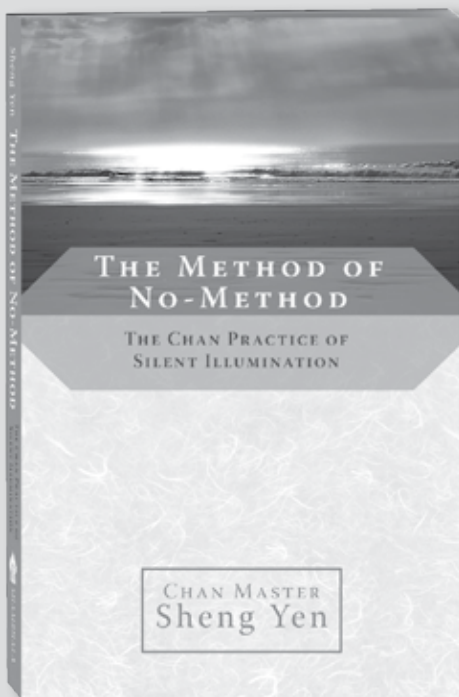
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