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CHAN MAGAZINE

SPRING 2013



My own experience in practice was that it was really difficult. When I went into solitary retreat, there was nobody to instruct me, and I was not clear about how to use the methods. I was only able to work hard in repentance practice. Initially, I did Pure Land recitation and the Great Compassion Repentance chanting, and then I added the prostrations to the *Lotus Sutra*. Therefore, in the morning I did Pure Land, in the afternoon, Great Compassion Repentance, and at night prostrating to the *Lotus Sutra*. What was the result from doing all this? I only obtained peace and stability of the body and the mind.

It was probably after more than six months after starting solitary retreat that I had some effects of the body and mind because there was nobody there to instruct me! During that period, someone wanted me to emulate Grandmaster Xuyun. I thought, What kind of person was Grandmaster Xuyun? He already passed away, so how do I emulate him? Someone else said I should emulate Master Yinguang, but he was already reborn in the Pure Land, and I could not be in contact with him, so how do I emulate him? Someone advised me to emulate Precepts Master Hongyi. I also wished to learn from him, but I did not know how. And there was also someone who wanted me to emulate Master Taixu. At the time, I felt much pain; just thinking of the names of these four great masters burdened me, and made it hard for me to breathe. What should I do? Which road should I take? [...]

After much consideration I suddenly gained some insight. Whom did Master Yinguang try to emulate? Wasn't it Master Yinguang himself? Whom did Master Taixu emulate? Wasn't it Master Taixu himself? Whom did Precepts Master Hongyi emulate? Isn't it himself? So they didn't emulate anyone, and the same is true for Grandmaster Xuyun. Due to this insight, I decided not to emulate anyone. I would only try to emulate Shakyamuni Buddha, and if I didn't do well, that is fine, because I would still be Sheng Yen, and wouldn't end up not being like someone else. The path that I am taking today is still as such.

— Chan Master Sheng Yen



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From the Editor

When Harry Miller submitted his commentary on the “Water Buffalo’s Tail,” I wasn’t sure how to relate to it. I foolishly thought that our Chan school had little to do with *gong’ans* (koans). But on further research I learned that our founder Chan Master Sheng Yen (Shifu) wrote two books on the subject (not yet translated into English.) I also found that some of our western teachers have very definite ideas on the subject, and our advisor Guogu has himself written many commentaries on koans. So, welcome to a special “themed” issue on the topic of *gong’ans*.

I think I tended to disregard *gong’ans* because our school does not have a formal structure for assigning them to students in a series, to be passed one after the other. I never understood that process. I thought “passing” a koan meant that the student discovered the answer to a riddle (I also heard there were cheat books that gave the answers.) But I was simply being ignorant, as I discovered when I questioned some of my American Zen friends. For one thing, though there may be “answer” books, there is no single “correct” answer to any koan. The teacher is not looking for particular content in a presentation, but rather for the clarity of the student’s understanding .

There are probably as many different approaches as there are schools, but all seem to be the same at heart; one does not sit mulling over the words of the koan story and plan a presentation to the teacher. Rather, the koan is run through at the start of the sitting and then the student holds it in awareness (like the *huatou* method) or does *shikantaza* (like silent illumination). If these methods bring the mind to a clarified state, true self will express itself when the teacher asks for a demonstration, and the

student will pass the koan. Of course the student carries the koan with them throughout their day, not just when sitting on the cushion. The riddle-like nature of the koan story can help to set up an artificial difficulty (like great doubt) and the student discovers how to release from that. Some of which sounds very similar to what Simon and Gilbert talk about in their articles.

Putting this issue together has been an education for me and I hope it may be useful to you as well. By far my favorite take-away from all this is the concept of the “live” *gong’an*. I’ve enjoyed hearing these anecdotes for years; only now can I see them clearly as training devices. I will share one from my own training:

Snatching the Toast

I was the head cook on the first retreat Shifu led in America, which was a *Huatou* retreat, although we didn’t know that word yet. Towards the end we ran out of bread. Someone brought more bread, however not the wholesome natural loaves we had started out with but instead spongy, gummy, factory-produced white bread. I myself never eat that kind of bread and I fretted about serving it. I thought it would be more palatable as toast; there was a toaster in our dining room but we had not yet used it. Rikki, my assistant cook and I discussed the issue as best we could with hand-written notes and brief whispers. We didn’t want to toast the bread ahead of time because it would get cold, and we didn’t know how many people would want a slice. I thought each person could toast their own; we would communicate this by demonstration. I don’t know why I didn’t just inform Shifu and let him make an announcement; this was many days into

an intense retreat, so I suspect I wasn't thinking all that clearly.

There were only about eight of us on that retreat, and we all sat around the same table, serving ourselves from platters set in the middle. Shifu sat at the head, as cook I sat around the corner from him on his left side. At breakfast when everyone was seated and loading their plates, I stepped over to the toaster (on a sideboard very nearby), and toasted my slice of bread. When it popped up I sat back down, expecting Rikki to get up next and toast her slice—that way everyone else would know that they could do the same. Wisely, Rikki refrained.

I was aware of Shifu staring at me while I buttered my toast; when I set it on my plate he immediately snatched it up, took a fierce bite out of it, and chewed it meaningfully, glaring at me the whole time. In a flash I saw how *STUPID* my plan had been, useless and disturbing to the practice of my fellows. Seeming to give myself special

privileges, I was humiliated in front of everyone. I knew this shame would burn in my belly for months. But I also knew it would be just one more in the long chain of toxic humiliations that made up my life, and that didn't really interest me at the moment. I picked up my oatmeal spoon and kept asking "What is Wu?"

Shifu's expression changed to one of surprised approval. He set the toast down on his own plate, and with a smile and a flourish presented me with a fresh slice of bread. His gesture made it clear that I was being rewarded, and in that moment I understood why—I recognized that I was in the state of Great Doubt, that I was doing my method correctly. I took the bread from him. I didn't want to eat a slice of untoasted white bread. But there was nothing else to do except butter it and keep chewing on Wu.

Bufe Maggie Laffey
Editor, Chan Magazine



Photo by Bufe Maggie Laffey 1977

On Gong'ans

by

Chan Master Sheng Yen

In the books of Master Sheng Yen that have been translated into English we have extensive writing on the topic of huatou practice—most notably *Shattering the Great Doubt*—but not so much about gong'ans. Our Dharma Drum Lineage does not have a formal structure for assigning students to work through a series of gong-ans; using them as a structured and progressive “curriculum” of practice can only be dated to 17-18th century Japanese Zen. As methods of practice, Master Sheng Yen preferred the more succinct huatous rather than the longer stories of the gong'ans. As a teaching tool, however, he did comment on the classic stories in his Dharma talks to illustrate different points, and he wrote at least two books on this topic in Chinese. He favored present life situations as “live gong'ans” over past, old stories.

Not Limited to Words

A *gong'an* (popularly known as a *koan*, as it is pronounced in Japanese) refers to the exchanges, teachings, and famous sayings that were communicated between master and disciple and later written down as cases (a metaphoric reference to a case in the legal system). These famous sayings are not limited to words and language, but include silent interactions. Chan is “not established on words and language,” therefore gong'ans can include a variety of communication styles and content. The exchanges in gong'ans are only pointers to the question of life—they do not directly answer anything.

To investigate a gong'an is to investigate the entirety of the story in order to advance realization. One story is the case of Chan Master Nanquan (748-835) cutting a cat in two. One day two groups

of monks were quarreling about the ownership of a cat. When Nanquan returned to the temple he witnessed this argument, so he picked up the cat and said, “Say something about it! If anyone can make a correct statement, this cat's life will be spared.” No one dared to say anything. Nanquan cut the cat in two. That evening, his longtime disciple Zhaozhou (778-897) returned to the monastery. When he heard about this incident, he took off his sandals and placed them on top of his head and walked away. Nanquan said, “If you had been there that cat need not have died.” Someone who takes up this whole gong'an as a method of practice investigates the whole process underlying the story.

To someone who is unfamiliar or not experienced enough with the distinct features of Chan, gong'ans may appear to be senseless interactions between crazy people. Generally speaking, those gong'ans whose meanings are more

obvious are typically shallower than those whose meanings are completely irrational. Likewise, there are different levels of enlightenment, and this is often reflected in the interaction between master and disciple. The deeply enlightened can discern which gong'an belong to what level, or discern multiple levels of enlightenment even within the same gong'an.

A student once asked me, "Can a disciple discern different levels of enlightenment? Can his or her master discern whether or not the disciple has progressed?" I said, "If a disciple does not work hard, he will not have any feelings one way or another. However, if he has progressed, then he will be able to clarify the different states he may have reached. It is like understanding the difference between the life of a bachelor and the life of a married man. A disciple should be able to

discern whether or not he or she has progressed. Of course, the master is able to tell. If he cannot discern the disciple's experiences, then that's not much of a master!"

Live Gong'ans

In intense retreats I often say that "a practitioner who is working hard on the method but has not entered the gate of Chan will not know what he is eating or drinking, not feel the need to sleep, and not see nor hear anything. Even so, he still has not entered the gate of Chan. I call this state "oblivious to reality." After he enters, he will regain the normal state of mind, but his sense of self, insecurities, etc. will be reduced.

One gong'an poses this question: "What is a nun?" The answer given is "A woman." This



Photo by Lan Xu

seems like a very ordinary answer. If an ordinary person replied this way, it would be of no great consequence. However, if the answer emerges from someone who has deeply meditated on the gong'an, it demonstrates his enlightenment—even though this particular enlightenment is not so deep.

Sometimes a teacher or life itself can present a situation to help or test a student. This would be considered a live gong'an. Here is a gong'an between a student and myself. One time after a period of great perseverance at an intense retreat, a student penetrated the gate of Chan. I asked her, "Where are you?" She retorted, "Here!" "Where are you sitting?" I said to her. "I'm sitting on a chair." Even though her enlightenment wasn't deep, at least she entered the door and returned to a normal state of mind.

A huatou, different from a gong'an, is a short sentence, phrase, or even a word, that one uses as a method of practice to question oneself in order to reach enlightenment. A huatou is sometimes connected to a gong'an, but it doesn't need to be. "Hua" means spoken word; "tou" means source. When one uses a huatou, essentially what the practitioner is meditating on is "what is it?" that lies before the spoken word. In the beginning of practice, there is no doubt sensation, or sense of wonderment. If the practitioner diligently attends to the huatou method, the sense of wonderment and questioning will arise. When the practice is strong, this doubt sensation becomes a great mass of doubt. When this happens, nothing exists—not the body, world, or anything. Only one thing will

be there—your questioning, your great doubt. If someone experiences this great doubt and his or her spiritual capacity is sharp, it doesn't matter if there is a master present—they will be able to burst into enlightenment. However, one with dull spiritual capacities will always need a clear-eyed master to help him. Otherwise, he may inadvertently fall into a deviant state.

As long as the question is of great importance to the practitioner and he practices hard, great doubt will arise. However, those with little commitment to practice and little curiosity about the question of life and death and the existential dilemma will not be able to give rise to doubt or the questioning mind, no matter what question they use.

TO SOMEONE
UNFAMILIAR WITH CHAN,
GONG'ANS MAY APPEAR
TO BE SENSELESS
INTERACTIONS BETWEEN
CRAZY PEOPLE.

The ancients said, "Great doubt, great enlightenment, small doubt small enlightenment, no doubt no enlightenment." Therefore, before enlightenment you must put down all attachments to the point where "there is not a single strand of thread on you—you are naked and clear." Even if a person can reach this mental state of nakedness, there may still be something on his mind that has not been put down. Only when there is absolutely nothing on one's mind, except the huatou itself, will one truly derive great power from the huatou.

[Excerpted from Chan De Tiyan, Chan De Kaishi (Chan Experience, Chan Discourse), 201-202; 139-140, 143-144, translated by Guo Gu]

[Master Sheng Yen gives two examples of live gong'ans from his own training under Master Dongchu at the Chung-Hwa Institute of Buddhist Studies]

Endlessly Switching Rooms

I moved into the smallest of the institute's three rooms. After several days, as I was settling in, Dongchu told me to move into the large room. "You are a writer and like to read," he said. "You should have more space to read and write." I happily moved all my possessions into the big room. The next day he told me: "Your karmic obstruction is heavy. I'm afraid that you may not have enough virtuous karma to stay in the big room. I think it's better you move back to the small room."

I was peeved—I had just moved in. But because it was his request, I complied. A few days later, he came to me and said, "You know what? You should move to the big room. You are right, you really need it for your books and to have enough space to write."

"Master, don't worry," I said. "I can stay in the small room. There is no need to move."

"It's my order. You should move to the big room." He looked at me with his big square face and grave demeanor, turned on his heels, and walked away with his general's walk, leaving wind in his wake. I moved. I wasn't even there for even half a day when Dongchu appeared at my door. "You are right," he said. "It's better for you to live in the small room. You don't need to move your stuff in there. Just move there to sleep."

Another couple of days passed, and he told me to move all my things to the small room. There was a lot to move, and it took a long time. A few days later, we received a guest. Late that night, Dongchu knocked on my door. "It's better for our guest to

sleep in the small room. Why don't you move to the big room for tonight?" he said.

Later he told me it would be better to keep the small room open for guests, so I should move to the big room. At this point, I lost my temper. "Why do you keep asking me to move from one room to the other?" I whined. "I have already moved five times! I'm not going to move anymore!"

"This is my order!" he bellowed, a mountain of a man who had been one of the most famous abbots on the mainland. "I asked you to move, so you must move!" I skulked off and started the onerous process of transferring my possessions yet again. I had no choice: This is the way it is in the master-disciple relationship—the disciple must do whatever the master asks.

Dongchu kept asking me to move, and eventually I got it through my thick head that this was part of my training, so I stopped protesting and just moved. Once I just acted, without hesitation, protest, or resentment, Dongchu let me stay put.

Searching for Kitchen Tiles

Perhaps because I had demonstrated patience, Dongchu let me live in peace for a few months. But then one day he pointed at a spot in the kitchen where the ceramic tiles had fallen off. "Sheng Yen, you have to fix this," he commanded. "Go to the construction material company and buy exactly the same tiles and replace the ones that are missing."

Well and good. This didn't seem to be such a difficult task. I was always being sent on these types of minor errands. Little did I know the ordeal in store for me. I went into town and bought what I thought were the same tiles. When I returned, my master said, "Come and look. These are

not quite the same. You must return them and buy identical ones." I looked closely at the tiles. Indeed, although the new ones I had bought were very close in appearance to the old tiles, they were not identical. However, you only noticed this upon extremely close inspection. What possible difference could it make? I was about to protest, but one look at Dongchu's face told me to shut my trap.

Off I went to the tile shop again. They were not pleased to see me. I had bought only three tiles and now I was returning them! They refused to help me find the right tiles. This, I knew, was not a good result, but what could I do? I went back to Dongchu.

"Master," I said, "I couldn't find the same tiles."

"Why not?" he asked.

"The people in the tile shop refused to look for just three tiles."

"And this means you are giving up? You are an imbecile. Go find out which kiln made the tiles."

I went to construction material companies all over town, asking the absurd question about which kiln had made these three obscure and completely unremarkable tiles. No one was the least bit interested. Predictably, I got nowhere and began to feel frustrated and full of resentment and self-pity.

Finally, by a stroke of luck, I ran into a kiln worker, and he told me where the kiln was for which he worked, although he was not sure if it was the one that had fired my tiles. I went to the kiln. Mounted on the wall were rows of tiles, but I couldn't find an exact match.

I asked the clerk at the kiln if he could make the tiles for me. He asked me how many I needed and I

told him three. "We are wholesale," he said. "I can't sell you only three pieces."

"Please help me," I begged. "Dongchu insisted that I get three pieces of the same tiles as those we have on the wall of our kitchen."

"Every batch of tiles is slightly different in color," he explained. "There is no way you can get three tiles of identical color." The clerk told me about another kiln, far away.

"Could I find the same tiles there?" I asked. "How would I know?"

I felt utterly hopeless. I went back to my master, telling him that the task was impossible. "Each batch of tiles is slightly different in color," I explained, without hope that this would be the end of it.

"Yesterday," he said, "I found out where the tiles came from."

"How do I get there?"

"You are really a moron! You can ask for directions on the way to the shop."

The place was very remote and quite far away. It took me most of one day, begging my bus fare and wandering around on foot to finally find it. I asked about the tiles. "We make lots of tiles," the man in charge said. "How are we supposed to know whether we made these tiles? How many do you want?"

"Three pieces," I said. They looked at me as if I had lost my mind. "You came all the way here for three pieces of tile? We're too busy to sell you three pieces. You should go to a construction material company." I left without any tiles. They must think I'm crazy, I thought on my way home, when it

was really my master who was crazy, making such unreasonable requests. “They wouldn’t sell me three pieces,” I told Dongchu. “You are a dolt! All you have to do is ask which construction material company buys their products and get the tiles from that company. You should have asked while you were there and gone and done it. Wouldn’t that have been easy? And then we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

“It’s just a few pieces of tile,” I groaned, too tired and frustrated to keep my feelings bottled up any longer. I felt like a thirty-year-old child. I was an officer in the army, for goodness’ sake, a published author, and here I was scouring Taiwan for tiles. “Why can’t we just buy three pieces that are close in color? It’s just kitchen tile.”

“Excuse me,” he said. “If I put these two bandages on your face and leave them there forever, is that okay?” I glared at him and said nothing. Dongchu ordered me to go out to look for the tiles. I wandered around, not going anywhere in particular, brooding on Dongchu’s unreasonable requests. I made up my mind to leave the monastery.

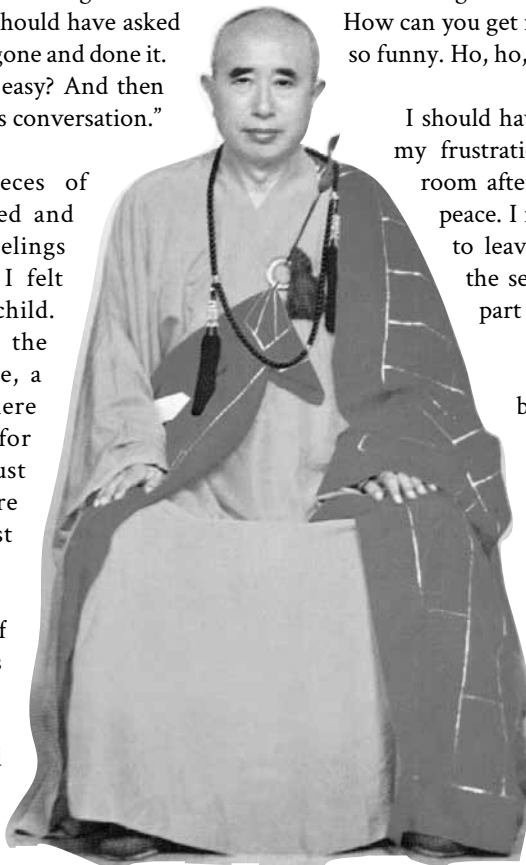
When I returned, I went straight to my room; I was frustrated to the point of being numb. Dongchu popped his head in. “Where have you been all day?” he asked. I refused to talk to him. He left my room, and came back with three tiles. “We

are so lucky!” he exclaimed. “I found three tiles left over from the last kitchen renovation. They were stuck in a crack in the wall.” He looked at me and laughed. “Ho, ho, ho.” It was a ghostly sound. “You are tricked again!” he said. “You are a monk. How can you get mad? I got you again. That’s so funny. Ho, ho, ho.” And he left the room.

I should have been furious, but, oddly, my frustration dissolved. I sat in my room after he had left, empty and at peace. I realized that I had no desire to leave Dongchu. I realized that the search for the tiles had been part of the training.

Dongchu read me like a book. He responded to my internal change and the next day was really nice to me. Some visitors brought us fabric from the Philippines.

“Sheng Yen,” he said. “You have been a monk for a while, and I haven’t given you much. Here is a gift of fabric to make you a robe.” He had one of the visitors take my measurements. I felt the warmth of his love deeply. How could I have thought of leaving? Why had I become so frustrated and full of resentment? I still have this piece of clothing after forty-five years.



Grandmaster Dongchu

[Excerpted from Footprints in the Snow, Doubleday, 101-102; 108-111]

When A Beautiful Woman's Spirit Departs

Comments on a Case from The Gateless Barrier

By Guo Gu

Guo Gu (Jimmy Yu) began his training with Chan Master Sheng Yen while still quite young. In 1995, he was given permission by the Master to teach (inka) Chan. In 2008 he received his doctorate in Buddhist Studies from Princeton University. Currently he is an Assistant Professor at Florida State University, and the guiding teacher of the Tallahassee Chan Group.



Painting by Vera Galyaeva

Case 35

Wuzu asked a monk [at a funeral], “This beautiful woman has died and her spirit has departed. Which is the real person?”

Women’s Commentary

If you can awaken to the real person here, then you realize that both leaving and entering the shell of worldly existence is like sojourning in a traveler’s inn.

If you cannot awaken to the real person here, don’t go running around in confusion. When the physical elements that comprise your body suddenly disperse, you will be flailing around miserably like a crab dropped into boiling water. When that time comes, don’t say I didn’t warn you.

Women’s Verse

*Clouds and moon are the same,
Streams and mountains are different.
Myriad blessings, myriad blessings!
Are we, and they, one or two?*

Guo Gu’s Comment

Before we go into this case, I should mention that I got an email from a long-time practitioner who started to practice with us. She made a very perplexing and troublesome discovery: she did not know who she was. Was she the person the world saw, living for other people, or was she her own person, living a life engaged in practice? Whatever she did seemed to be done for others. Was it “me” or was it “them?” If it was me, then where is this me? If it is them, then how can I live my life for other people? She eventually overcame her fear, but she did give up practicing for a certain period of

time. Finally, she let go of the perplexing questions of who she was and her mind began to settle down.

I replied to her that in practice it is normal to experience a rollercoaster of big waves, small waves, ups and downs, but it is important not to get caught up in the scenery along the way. When we drive from A to B, we just drive; we use the momentum and energy from these experiences to return to the method. I suggested that she do prostrations and deeply investigate why she practiced so she could rekindle her commitment.

This gong'an derives from a famous 10th century Tang Dynasty fictional novel, *Lihun ji*, or *Record of the Departed Soul*, a best-seller of its time. The story involves two lovers, one of whom is the "beautiful woman" in the case. Wuzu here refers to Chan Master Wuzu Fayan (Jp. Goso Hoen, 1024-1104), one of the great Chan masters. He used this story to present the real crisis of identity that we have and the way to resolve it.

Zhang Qing, the heroine of the story, was very beautiful from an early age. She had a very handsome playmate, her cousin, whose name was Wang Zhou. Zhang Qing had an older sister who had died at a young age, so the father invested all of his love in the younger daughter. Wang Zhou and Zhang Qing lived close to each other and always played together. The father once commented, "You two are such soul mates; when you grow up and get married, that would be a real blessing." The youngsters regarded these words as a kind of engagement, as was often customary in pre-modern China. They developed a great love for one another and believed they would be married one day. But the father had said what he said in passing, without any serious reflection. When it came time for the young girl to be wed, the father arranged for her to marry another young man, someone who had already established himself socially as a wealthy member of the literati. The children were extremely sad. They had grown up with the false assumption that they would be married one day. Their dream was completely crushed.

Zhang Qing locked herself up and Wang Zhou decided to go to another city to take the civil service examination in order to establish himself. Entering officialdom and joining the literati was a way to success in pre-modern China. Telling no one, alone and completely heartbroken, Wang Zhou traveled by boat to another province. In the darkness of night, by the bank of the river, he suddenly heard

someone calling his name. It sounded like Zhang Qing. He docked his boat. Sure enough, he saw her waving him down, running along the riverbank. She jumped into the boat. They embraced, in tears. He said, "Let's run away; I will study hard and I'll take the civil service examination. We'll start a family." So off they went. Within five years, he established himself as a local official, and she gave birth to two children. Although they lived happily, they began to miss their parents. In that society, it was important to have the blessing of one's parents in marriage as in other aspects of life such as employment and determining where to live. They were both good and filial. Zhang Qing said, "Surely my parents will understand. You have a good job now and we have two beautiful children. It's time to go back."

And so they did. The custom was for the man to first talk to the woman's father to receive blessings and forgiveness, so Zhang Qing remained in the boat. Wang Zhou went to his uncle, Zhang Qing's father, who was delighted to see him. He exclaimed, "Wang Zhou, where have you been all these years? I've been worried sick about you and so have your parents. Come in, come in. I'm so delighted to see you!" Wang Zhou felt guilty because the uncle did not know that his daughter had run away with him. But his uncle was very happy and kept questioning Wang Zhou.

Finally, Wang Zhou couldn't contain himself: "Actually, I'm here to apologize in the hopes of getting your permission and blessing to marry Qing. We have two children now and are living very happily. I have a very good job."

Qing's father was completely dumbfounded. He said, "What are you talking about? Which Qing?" Wang Zhou said, "Qing, your daughter!" Her father replied, "My daughter! Are you kidding? Is this a joke? My daughter has been in bed in a coma

for five years..." Wang Zhou quickly replied, "No, no, it's impossible. I'm married to her, we have two children. She is right at the harbor."

The father became very angry, "Get out of here! And don't come back; I don't find this funny at all!" The young man pleaded, "No, you have to believe me." The father said, "All right. Bring my daughter here; I want to see her." So Wang Zhou returned to the boat, fetched his wife and brought her to the house. At that very moment, Zhang Qing got up from the bed and went to the door with her father. As soon as the two women faced each other—Qing, the wife with the two children and Qing, the one who'd been in a coma—joined and became one! Then the sickly Qing awoke from her coma. She asked—the same way we do when we sit in meditation—"Who am I?"

The father said, "You're my daughter; I'm so happy you finally woke up!"

The husband said, "I'm so happy that you're here with me as my wife!"

But all Qing could remember was that Zhang Zhou had gone away. She said, "Out of such sadness I locked myself in. I dreamed that I was at the river

bank, hollering at you, calling your name; and I left with you. I couldn't remember anything after that.

This is not a ghost story and Chan Master Fayan is really not interested in popular novels. This story actually touches something deep within us. In a way, all of us are living like that girl. To one person, we are a son; to another we are a father, or a daughter, a mother, a friend, an enemy. We may be someone entirely different to someone else. We may wish to reconcile all of these roles, but we can't

do it. Even within ourselves we feel conflicted; we recognize different facets of ourselves. For example, we know that we shouldn't do negative, harmful things, but we keep doing them.

The multiple selves we feel within us seem irreconcilable.

Who are we really? Your parents may relate to you as they did when you were young.



We think: "I'm grown up; I'm no longer three years old!" But to your parents, you will always be their little daughter or son. We constantly find ourselves in situations where we construct a narrative about ourselves and others seem to construct an image of us that often conflicts with who we think we are. This happens with close friends, family members, even to people we don't know.

To take up this gong'an is to take up the question: Which is your real self?

Women's Commentary:

"If you can awaken to the real person here, then you realize that both leaving and entering the shell is like sojourning in a travelers' inn.

"If you can not awaken to the real person here, don't go running around in confusion. When the physical elements that comprise your body suddenly disperse, when your physical body is falling apart, you will be flailing around miserably like a crab dropped into boiling water. Don't say I didn't warn you."

You may have studied Buddhadharmā and have already concluded that there is "no-self," even though when you see a pretty girl or a handsome man you look twice, or when you see something you desire, you cannot distinguish your wants from your needs. Some may even, in their conceit, believe that they are already enlightened. What I say is: don't be easily satisfied with any answer that you come up with or any meager realization you think you may have acquired in practice. You must continue to ask, "Which is the real self?" You must personally shed all concepts and experiences, and come to know the answer. Otherwise, you will only suffer when your body becomes weak, when your limbs don't listen to you. What will happen if Alzheimer's sets in, and you can't even remember your family, and yet you have those moments of clarity where you realize that you're losing your memory? Just the other day I was having dinner with a 90-year old friend at his house. He was just sitting there in a complete stupor. He used to be a professor with a very sharp mind. Now he needs a cane; he has trouble talking; he can't remember things. If you have not solved this existential dilemma of who we are, then what happens?

This "real person" that Women is talking about is something for you to discover. Yes, Buddhism does talk about no-self. Yet Women here is talking about a real self. No-self, real self, one or two, which one is you? Is it the one who has continuity or is it all of the fragmented images? Talking about either is foolish, but in meditating on this gong'an, it is important to discover the answer personally. This discovery is not conceptual, nor intellectual, nor experiential. This may sound strange as we often hear that Chan is about experience. I am telling you right now that Chan enlightenment is *not* an experience. It is *not* about feelings, it is *not* thinking, nor is it some kind of clarity from discovering that there's no self! Then what is it?

Wuzu Fayān himself found out. He studied very hard. He left home to become a monk at age 35, which was very old in the pre-modern age when life expectancy was only 60. In those days, one married at 16 or 17, and became an official—a local magistrate or a mayor—in one's 20's. Therefore, by the time Fayān became a monk, he already had a lot of worldly experience. What did he do? He studied the Buddhist doctrine of the Yogācāra School, or Consciousness-only school, which is a very complex philosophical system. At one time, he was reading the work of master Xuanzang (602-664), the great Chinese pilgrim who went to India, translated numerous sutras and brought them back to China. He came across these words: "Awakening is something that can only be known by someone, personally, like drinking water."

When we hear this, we think Xuanzang is talking about personal experience, about clarity, about personally understanding and experiencing enlightenment. Fayān didn't take it that way. That would be a very superficial, intellectual understanding. He understood it as, "I have lived as a lay person for 35 years; I have studied all these years as a monk. Who am I?" This was indeed

someone with good karmic potential. He took it to heart and asked his teacher, "Why is it that I personally don't know the taste of water? Who is it that tastes this water?" His teacher replied, "You'd better go down south, and ask a Chan master." So Fayan went to his first master and had some insight. When he met his second teacher, Baiyun Shouduan (Jp. Hakuun Shutan, 1025-1072), he experienced his initial enlightenment.

Some people were jealous of Fayan because he had been in charge of the monastery's storehouse where all the goods were kept. He managed it so well that he opened an exchange shop on the grounds and made a profit for the monastery. He was a real entrepreneur with a good business mind: people would donate rice, grains, and money which he would then loan out with interest. But all of his accounting books were clear: the monastery was in need, so he did what he had to do. At the same time, he had a great practice that other monks and lay people envied. They went to his teacher and said, "Fayan is always drinking alcohol in that storehouse; he feeds a host of women there; it's like a brothel in that quarter of the monastery." His teacher Baiyun immediately called Fayan, "I've heard all of these things about you. Tell me what is going on there?" Fayan did not try to explain, so his master believed that the monks were telling the truth and slapped him across the face and said, "Get out of the storehouse. Leave this monastery!"

Now put yourselves in his shoes. When someone blames you, what would you do? Maybe

defend yourself, clear your name, seek justice? You want to explain yourself, especially when the accusations are false. Fayan said, "Before I go, I will show you the accounting books." So he showed the books to his master. Baiyun saw how clearly every item had been entered, and realized that it would be impossible for anyone who could produce such a fine ledger not only to misappropriate funds, but also to do those things he was accused of doing. Baiyun personally went to the storehouse and was very pleased. He reinstated him in his old job. No one maligned Fayan after that. Because of his enlightenment experience, in the face of criticism, blame, and false accusations, Fayan maintained stability. However, this was not his full enlightenment.

HOW CAN WE LIVE AS
HUMANS, WITHOUT KNOWING
WHO WE ARE? THE WAY TO
DISCOVER THIS IS NOT TO
LOCK OURSELVES IN A ROOM
AND MEDITATE ALL DAY.
RATHER, IT IS THROUGH OUR
INTERACTIONS IN DAILY LIFE.

Some time later, his teacher said, "Fayan, today we are going to have many visitors whom I've met before. All of them are enlightened. When I asked them a question, raised a particular gong'an to them, they responded without hesitation! When I asked them about a passage from the scriptures, they explained it thoroughly, without any flaws. When I observed their behavior to see if there was congruence between what they knew and what they experienced, all of them passed the test. But none of them got it!"

A Chan Master works in a special way. He is constantly testing his students, gauging them, helping them. At these words, Fayan gave rise to a great doubt. He thought, "All these monks are enlightened; they have passed all the gong'an. They have the experience; they have knowledge of



Painting by Ven. Chi Chern

scripture, and they follow the precepts perfectly. So what is it that they haven't got? Is there something more? Is there something more after enlightenment or awakening?" Baiyun had him! He had set up a trap and Fayan fell right into it. For three days Fayan was in a conundrum, unable to eat, sleep, or rest. He was in what we call the "great doubt sensation," or the great mass of doubt. Fayan finally went to his teacher, "What is it that they don't have? What is it that they haven't got?!" What Master Baiyun actually answered is not so important, but as soon as he spoke, Fayan attained complete, thorough enlightenment. Fayan had brought the great doubt to a crescendo where all that existed was the doubt, and when this doubt shattered, all of his attachments also shattered. For the first time he was completely free.

Wumen here is just presenting us with a dilemma—creating waves where there's no wave! He states:

Clouds and moon are the same,

Streams and mountains are different.

Myriad blessings, myriad blessings!

Are we, and they, one or two?

Why is it that clouds and moon are the same and streams and mountains are not? Why is he prompting all of us to discover a self when Buddhadharma says there is no-self? He is not saying that there is a real self, a real person, nor is he saying that we should be satisfied with the Buddhist teaching of no-self and be satisfied—that is not our own wisdom. We should be satisfied neither with the self, nor with no-self. We must clarify this for ourselves.

In the story that Fayan cites, which one was Zhang Qing? Was it the girl who was bed-ridden or the girl who got married and had children? And

the woman who emailed me? Which self is really her? The self that she projects and that other people see or the self she has known for thirty, forty years? Which is it? Is it one or is it two? In your own life, who are you? Are you the self that is here before me, looking at me, or is it another self, the one at home, in front of friends, or the one that your parents see? Maybe it is the image that we carry around with us that makes us believe that we are this or that type of a person? Or are you the person that others perceive you to be? This is the fundamental question. This is something that we have to know personally, like drinking water. We use this gong'an, "Which is the real self?" to know ourselves, to accept ourselves, to question ourselves, and finally to let go of ourselves.

This is our primary task—our whole practice, up to that point, centers on this fundamental question. If you discover who you are, come and see me, we'll verify what this self is. And if you haven't discovered it, come and see me, so we can examine your practice. After all, how can we live as humans, without knowing who we are? But the way to discover this is not to lock ourselves in a room and meditate all day. Rather, it is through our interactions in daily life, amidst all the selves that we present ourselves to others and all the selves that are projected onto us by others. The course of practice takes great courage but we are in good company with our fellow practitioners.

The Water Buffalo's Tail

Comments on a Case from The Gateless Barrier

By Harry Miller

Harry Miller studied with Chan Master Sheng Yen for over 30 years. He holds a B.A. in French and English literature from Sarah Lawrence, and an M.A. in Chinese Literature and M.Phil. in Comparative Literature from Columbia University. He was editor of the Chan Newsletter for more than 10 years. He teaches the Beginner's Meditation Class, leads One-Day retreats, and gives Dharma Talks at the Chan Meditation Center.



Case 38

Wuzu said, “It is like a water buffalo that passes through a lattice window. His head, horns, and four hooves all go past. The tail can’t pass through. Why?”

Women’s Commentary

If in regard to this you are able to turn yourself upside down, attain one single eye, and utter a turning word, you will be able to repay the four obligations above and help the living beings of the three realms below. If you are still unable to do this, reflect again on the tail; then you will be able to grasp it for the first time.

Women’s Verse

If it passes through, it will fall into a ditch;

If it turns back, it will be destroyed.

This tiny little tail —

What a strange and marvelous thing it is!

Harry’s Comment

Big Matters. Small Matters. What is big? What is small? And what is the matter? There is something keeping us from seeing the world clearly, as it is? What is it? When Wuzu Fayan posed his question about a water buffalo’s attempt to pass through a window, what was he asking?

Dealing with a gong’an can be like throwing a rock into water and then all of a sudden watching as it grows arms and legs and swims away. Not at all what you thought.

We sometimes speak about “the 500 pound gorilla in the room.” This points to some vitally important, but unacknowledged problem. It could

be a difficulty in a relationship, a family, or a job. Everybody knows about it, but no one wants to talk about it.

A gong’an is a kind of 500 million pound gorilla in the room—or in the universe, or in one’s life. It points to the great matter of life and death that we sentient beings barely acknowledge.

However, this gong’an hardly seems to be appropriate to such a weighty matter. A water buffalo’s whole body fits through a window, but the tail doesn’t? At first view, this situation is absurd. It defies everything we know about physics, anatomy, architecture, common sense. Things should be just the opposite. What would make sense is if the water buffalo’s tail DID fit through a small hole,

but the rest of the body did not. That would make sense, but it wouldn't make much of a gong'an.

So the first take on the gong'an is how wrong it is. It brings up feelings of frustration. If the largest part of the water buffalo can go through the window, there is no way that the tail can't—but the tail cannot—this is a given. Taking this on is like swallowing the hot iron ball that Wumen speaks about in the "wu" koan. That is, we accept something that is unacceptable—logically—and we don't let anything shake us. We read and ponder the gong'an multiple times—thinking that there must be something we missed, but what is it?

If we let this situation dwell in our minds a moment—how absurd is it really? Sometimes something that should be easy, turns out to be impossible. It is like the story of the hare and the tortoise. The hare runs much faster than the

tortoise—how can the tortoise win the race? But the tortoise does win. The hare is defeated by pride and arrogance. Can this be the tail?

Or simply take an example from everyday life like hiring a contractor to put up a wall or to install shelves and appliances. Ninety-five percent is done in a few weeks. The last part drags on and on and on. Is the tail an expectation, a take on reality that only exists in the mind?

The simple password that you need to enter a computer program—but the cap lock is on—you type it again and again—your logon is never accepted. The smallest thing, something which ought to be no problem at all, is the thing that completely fouls up the situation.

Or you use your meditation method perfectly and you experience a serene mind—no thoughts. Could you be close to enlightenment? Perhaps you should shout it to the world. But in so doing the tail gets caught once again, seduced by sound and form, seduced by a sense of self. The next thing you know, your mind has wandered off to Never Never Land.

If the water buffalo dwelled nowhere—in the sense given in the *Diamond Sutra*—would there be a tail at all? Would there be a window? What would constitute a water buffalo in the first place?

Is it the extra few dollars that you spent for the fancy dessert, so that now you don't have enough money for the train? The tail trails behind—an afterthought, but critically important. The faint scratch or hair that bespeaks a great struggle.

So small and yet so powerful.

Can you imagine this scene: the water buffalo unable to pass through a window because of the



little tail? A cartoonist might draw it with no problem. After the water buffalo's body passes through, the window shrinks to nothing. Easily accomplished with the imagination.

Can you actually see the water buffalo at this moment? What are we actually thinking about right at this moment? What constitutes our reality?

We hold on to ideas even if they are absurd. Even fiction seems very real to us. Let's say I'm walking in Central Park and I encounter Superman. I blow a small puff of air at him and knock him cold. Ridiculous, you might say. That's Superman, the Man of Steel. But is Superman real? Just a story, an icon. You can turn Superman into a little kitten with your imagination. What's stopping you?

Is Paris the capital of France or Germany. An unlikely question, but the capital of a country, too, is a concept. Even if you're walking around in Paris, are you aware that you are walking in the capital of France? Probably not, unless you have some administrative business.

Master Sheng Yen once asked if there was a time when you experienced neither daytime nor nighttime—and not dusk or dawn either. The question seems crazy, but if you look into where your mind is actually dwelling, what is in your mind at any given time, then daytime or nighttime are seldom present. A given preoccupation in your mind will totally rewrite the reality of the present moment—you can send a text message and walk into a wall or worse.

What is this window and why is the water buffalo passing through it? Is it a particular frame of reference? Whose is it? Where did it come from? Why did the buffalo even try to pass through? Is there some frame of reference, some prejudice, some construct that colors and shrinks your world?

Is this window your life and all of your pursuits? Are you passing through something mindlessly, unmindfully? Is it because you saw something or you didn't see something? Because there was another water buffalo that passed this way before you? Why are you doing what you're doing? In any given situation? At this very moment?

We don't know where or when this happened. We know that it is not speaking about an actual event, yet it has the power to transfix the mind. Fayon tells us this story and we are locked within the confines of it. Why?

If we open the story up—let it breathe into our life, we might imagine a time factor. Will the water buffalo be stuck for all eternity. How can we release it? Do we force the window wider? Do we accept the story, yet tweak it so the water buffalo can escape?

The water buffalo is free, why did it plunge into this terrible predicament? Is this a metaphor of our original nature, our buddha-nature? There is nowhere to dwell, but we have gotten sidetracked, caught by our own delusions—so that something very small, insignificant like a tiny tail, has the power to utterly stop the great body of a water buffalo. We get cut off from our natural habitat when we define the world filtered by our discriminating, storytelling, illusion-filled mind. We get caught by sounds and forms, the objects of our senses, and are thus seduced by the creations of the mind.

Is this water buffalo really stuck? No. Why do we believe it? Should we go visit the water buffalo, take him to a water buffalo psychiatrist so we can determine the source of his blockage? The water buffalo is not stuck—we let him be stuck. Why do we feel there is something wrong with this story? Could we be looking at samsara, the conventional,

illusory world as entrapment, as the place to escape from? We take our present situation as unacceptable. We either wish to have more of what we have, or get rid of and avoid what we wish we didn't have.

How indeed do we react to our present situation and circumstances? What themes, coloration, philosophies, nuances do we adopt? We can be deeply dissatisfied: I don't have enough money, enough status, I'm not strong enough, handsome or beautiful enough, I'm not allotted enough years to live, all my friends are more successful than I am. Or we can be utterly filled with ourselves—proud as punch: no one is as clever as I am. We move from one delusion to another, on and on and on.

What if this water buffalo is us? He looks carefully at the situation that he is in. No, it is not what he hoped, but there he is, seemingly stuck. Is he really stuck? Perhaps, this is his fate, this is where he should be—but his mind isn't trapped. Where then are the window, his horns, head, hooves, and little tail? Where is his self? What is the trap and what is being trapped?

Once on a camping trip, on the Snake River in Wyoming, my friends and I walked on rocks on the rapids. One of my friends disappeared. He later told us what happened. He had fallen between the rocks. Torrents of water prevented him from getting out. He was starting to drown. With no hope left, he swam down in a direction that would seem to be towards doom, but he managed to swim below the rocks and come out on the other side. He turned the situation upside down and survived.

The water buffalo caught in the window by his tail is not an abstract idea—not an absurdity—if we investigate this gong'an intensely and see where it leads. We are the water buffalo, stuck in each and every moment, any moment of our lives. We first

take a first sense impression—embellish, attach to it, and get caught in an endless cycle. As Guoxing Fashi teaches—our first thought becomes the object of our second thought which is in turn the object of the next thought, and this continues ad infinitum. We get ensnared in an endless loop of our own thinking.

This circle of attachment—pushing away, grasping, over and over—ignorant of the real situation—this is the root of suffering, unease, dissatisfaction. As we struggle with the gong'an, our reactions illustrate the First Noble Truth, the Truth of Suffering. But as a gong'an, it is not a truth, it is a vehicle, it is what we make of it.

The following three Noble Truths—the cause of suffering, the truth of release from suffering, and the path toward that release—become evident in the engagement with the gong'an. One Buddhist scholar calls the Four Noble Truths the Four Pre-eminent Realities. In investigating the gong'an, we may let go of self-concern and see the world as it really is.

Women's Commentary:

"If in regard to this you are able to turn yourself upside down, attain one single eye, and utter a turning word, you will be able to repay the four obligations above and help the living beings of the three realms below. If you are still unable to do this, reflect again on the tail; then you will be able to grasp it for the first time."

What is to turn yourself upside down? You don't want to get trapped in the gong'an. What makes you think that you are right side up now? If buddha-nature is your nature, what kind of a shift do you have to make to realize this? In the *Surangama Sutra*, the Buddha placed his hand down, and asked Ananda whether his hand was right side

up or upside down. Ananda replied that it would be commonly held that the hand was in an inverted position, but he did not know whether the position was correct or inverted. The Buddha explained that since we were born with our hands hanging down at our sides, perhaps the hand pointed up is really in an inverted position. Ananda knew what the view of a common man might be, but he also knew that this was not the Buddha's view.

The Buddha used this analogy to show that the average person has a mind that creates discriminations, and that what he believes to be true, may in fact be false. In this gong'an—turning yourself upside means abandoning the discriminating mind (not necessarily the intellectual mind).

The single eye is that which is not subject to distortion, the turning word will be setting yourself free. It signifies a moment of awakening.

Why would breaking through this gong'an repay the four obligations?:

Gratitude to one's parents.
Gratitude to all sentient beings.
Gratitude to the ruler.
Gratitude to the Three Treasures
(Buddha, Dharma, Sangha)

And help the sentient beings in the three realms (desire, form and formlessness—the realms of all conventional sentient existence)?

Because once there is insight and no discrimination concerning the head, horns, hooves and tail, and there is no restrictive window, and no coming and no going, no dwelling—at this time the seeds of Buddha-nature start to reach fruition and then one has the ability to see the interconnectedness of all beings in all times. There is nothing left of

self and only gratitude and compassion remain. There is receiving and passing on—just the process with no one in the process. This is a point where everything that needed to be done has been done, and there is no preoccupation with yourself—the self that you coveted and protected for so long, a self you believed would never die.

With this gratitude and compassion and understanding, there is nothing left but the fulfillment of the bodhisattva vow to save all beings, to help sentient beings find what they already have, as you have already found it. It is like retaining, reciting, and teaching the sutras. It is to be able to convey a most precious gift beyond calculation.

How easy is this? To find out, you keep asking this gong'an, using whatever method of deep investigation that you choose until you firmly grasp the tail and find out what it is that you are really grasping.

Wumen points to the need for practice and the path that needs to be taken. There is caution and encouragement in his final poem.

Wumen's Verse:

*If it passes through, it will fall into a ditch;
If it turns back, it will be destroyed.
This tiny little tail –
What a strange and marvelous thing it is!*

This final verse shows the seriousness of this great matter—the matter of life and death, the matter of practice, and investigating the gong'an. The practitioner, once on the path, must leave all reference points behind. The water buffalo can't turn back, it will fall into a ditch. If it moves forward, it will just be a water buffalo and it will be slaughtered. If it doesn't move at all, it will be stuck forever.

These verses caution against extremes. These extremes can be described in many ways, but they are often characterized as the two opposing views of externalism and nihilism. Eternalism is the view that there is an eternal self, a soul. Thus the world and universe is permanent and everlasting. Nihilism is the view that nothing exists at all, the world is nothing more than an illusion. Buddhism accepts neither view. The tail, then, can be the Middle Way out of this dilemma.

From the *Samyutta Nikaya* (I.1) 62:

A deva:

Tell me dear sir, how you crossed the flood.

The Buddha:

I crossed over the flood without pushing forward and without staying in place.

The deva:

But how did you cross over the flood without pushing forward, without staying in place?

The Buddha:

When I pushed forward, I was whirled about. When I stayed in place, I sank. And so I crossed over the flood without pushing forward, without staying place.

The flood is the illusionary world of suffering—crossing over, liberation. In light of these verses, we can see that not going forward (or backward) and not staying in place are more than just cautionary lines about philosophical extremes. They point to the experience of great doubt, where logic and description are left behind. At this point the discriminating mind is abandoned and one dwells nowhere.

Of course it is tempting to relate this to the *Ten Ox Herding Pictures*, the Sung Dynasty illustrations of the path to enlightenment. In the seventh

illustration there is an empty circle where there had once been an ox and rider. Every part of the water buffalo and the window as well are null. It is a tempting view, but a view after all. To hold on to it would be to be to get caught by the tail, and to take advantage of the pun, to get caught by the tale—we are swayed, seduced and trapped by our narratives and views.

Investigating the seeming mystery of the water buffalo's tail can shake us out of the ordinary dream that we live in. But we must use the gong'an, but not be trapped by it. It is a vehicle, not an answer.

Try to catch the tail. Strange and marvelous it is. Perhaps you already have it in your grasp.

Investigate!



Working with Gong'ans

by

Simon Child

Simon Child received Dharma Transmission from Chan Master Sheng Yen in 2000. His teaching approach uses the orthodox methods of Master Sheng Yen and also some adaptations to help the Western personality engage with traditional practice. Chan Magazine asked Simon Child, how does working with a gong'an differ from working with a huatou?

This is a very interesting and tricky question! It is one that I have been exploring quite a bit over the last year or so. To me the main difference between a gong'an and a huatou seems to be how the practitioner enters the practice. Once they enter the doubt then their practice is focused on the doubt and it doesn't matter so much how they got there. But there do seem to be different routes to getting to the doubt.

The longer gong'an has more words, paints more images, and hence has more content to catch and engage the attention of the practitioner, compared to the huatou, but perhaps it also has more potential for distraction since it offers several possible points of focus.

The huatou is simpler, easier to memorize, but unless the phrasing intrigues the practitioner then it can seem to slip away from them and be hard to engage with.

So each can have advantages and disadvantages, depending on the characteristics of the practitioner and how they relate to the story and the image painted by the gong'an or huatou.

Neither are to be answered by wordy analysis. Following this line Shifu (Chan Master Sheng Yen) says not to engage the huatou intellectually, just recite, question, and investigate it. He even says to treat it as meaningless words, but this is an idealistic description given that the words do have meaning, so naturally and inevitably those meanings will come to mind and the practitioner will engage with the words at least to some extent—telling someone who is practicing with Wu not to think about a dog is a good way to get the thought of a dog stuck in the mind!

As Shifu taught, we are not seeking words as the resolution of the huatou. But I find that it can be helpful to practitioners to acknowledge the words that naturally do arise in the mind so as to facilitate discharge of them and then go beyond words, rather than suppress them and leave them rattling in the mind. In this way some may find an easier entrance to the doubt, as there is puzzlement about the meaning of the gong'an and the actions and words of the characters in the story, and this can transform into great doubt if something in the words or imagery of the gong'an touches a life issue for the participant. For many there is a less ready

engagement with an abstract huatou (e.g. Wu), unless for some reason they make a connection with it. But there may be an engagement if the huatou is more accessible, such as “Who is dragging this corpse around?” The longer gong’an offers an advantage here—given that it contains more material it is less confining and less directive as to the thinking that arises. This may allow for a looser exploration, which may more readily touch a significant personal doubt.

Shifu describes how the huatou links to the doubt about where we come from and where we go. If someone is already aware of such a question in their mind, and is carrying a sense of not knowing how to resolve it, then this can “link” to their sense of not understanding the gong’an/huatou and then they feel even more “unknowing” and enter that. But not all are carrying such a doubt about where we come from and where we go, at least not near the surface of the

mind, perhaps especially so in a modern Western world where birth and death are medicalised and sanitized experiences that happen out of sight, and so they may struggle to make any use of the huatou beyond recitation and a rather mechanical questioning. My experience is that for people who avoid engagement with the meaning of the words

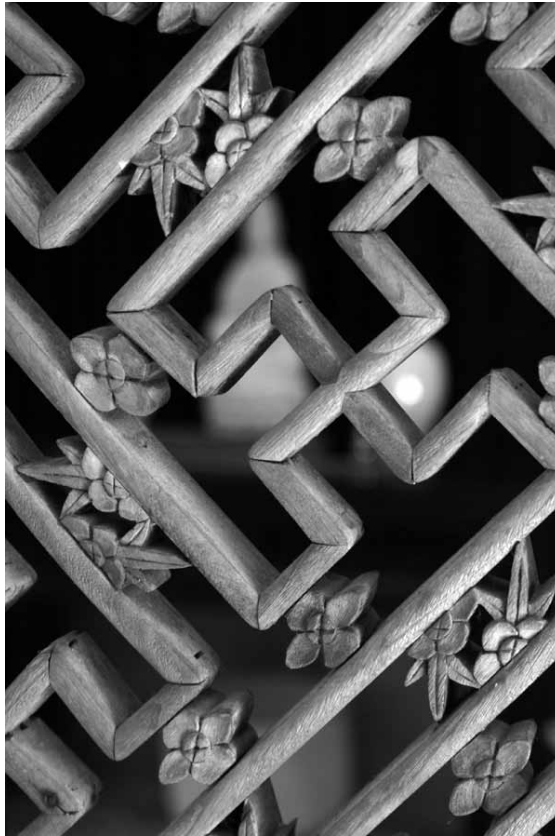
it can be difficult for doubt to arise, whereas an initial looser exploration can uncover and touch deep issues which question our being in the world and which can have a great power to generate a strong doubt sensation.

The other aspect to consider is that most often over a period of practice the gong’an condenses to

a huatou as the practitioner focuses on a word or phrase that intrigues them. This does not necessarily mean that they have wasted time dealing with a longer gong’an when they could have started more quickly with a shorter huatou—it may well be that they enter doubt earlier by being caught personally by a phrase from a gong’an than by working with a slippery huatou which does not connect to them.

Huatou being shorter are easier to carry around in daily life, but then a gong’an which has “condensed” can be

carried in the same way as a huatou. So overall I see only minor differences between gong’an and huatou. The approach that I describe seems to provide an accessible entrance to the practice, to take the practitioner beyond words and into doubt. There is probably more that can be said here, but as I say it is something which I am still exploring.



Master and Student

by

Gilbert Gutierrez

Gilbert Gutierrez is a Dharma Heir of Chan Master Sheng Yen with over thirty-nine years of experience in meditation, various martial arts, and Chi Gong. He lectures regularly at DDMBA centers throughout the United States and gives weekly classes at his own group in Riverside, California. His Riverside Chan Meditation Group makes excellent use of web technology (www.riversidechan.org), with a lively “meet up” site and a weekly Dharma Talk podcast, and written transcripts of his lectures, allowing Gilbert to support long-distance students.

As formal practice I do not assign my students koans. But I do believe that the exchange between master and student in the appropriate moment of giving a question or a double or triple entendre response is very useful. Koans point directly at mind in which the student must ultimately abandon cogitative thinking. For instance:

Student: But Master I don't understand.

Master: You will never understand.

But the timing and the student must be right for the master to use this response. The process goes from a student believing he has been insulted to pondering further, with trust in the master, that the master is pointing to something beyond what the student initially comprehended (that being an insult to the self). This goes to abandoning discriminatory thought and using Right View to process what the master has said. A ripe student in an instant may grasp the direct truth of emptiness and realize “who indeed can understand, just a bubble

in a stream.” Some students grasp the conceptual Right View and do not have a profound realization (not bad but in need of further contemplation rather than cogitation). Others penetrate deeply where discussion and conception ceases and get a glimpse of mind as it is without conception (this is Right View realized or perfected Right View). I have used a simple koan example so that it would be easy to follow. When used in a class many will see at least conceptual Right View.

In our Chan school it is not about “passing” a koan. Where would one pass to? Koans are not about intellectual understanding. There are no levels in sudden enlightenment. The beauty and simplicity of the Chan school is that it points directly to the mind, be it the Buddha twirling a flower to Mahakasyapa or Hui Neng asking “Without discrimination what mind is this?”

In this manner koans are very useful. The master through his own cultivation and contemplation develops an “intuitive sense” of when to use a koan.

The koan may be a series of questions and responses to a student, or in some cases a group of students. The students ask questions and the master responds in sometimes apparently nonsensical responses, which on further reflection by the student point to the substance of mind.

This method tests students and keeps them honest in their practice. It also keeps the student from sticking to a conceptual cogitation. Thus it is useful to the cultivation of Right View and is essential to the proper utilization of meditation. It facilitates the eradication of reliance on consciousness and its “polishing” when one is in meditation. Consciousness is returned to mind as sages do rather than mind turning into consciousness as fools do.

This is the purpose of koans as I utilize them. I often respond to a student’s email in this manner. In this way technology is very useful because it requires that a student ponder the master’s response before responding. Little by little the useful intellectual banter must be discarded in attempting to respond to the master.

Koan practice leads to cutting off conceptualization and having the student practice contemplation. This is a major key to Chan meditation practice—to return consciousness to its source, resting the mind where thoughts arise. As the student learns it is contemplation and not cultivation that must be practiced, then the student truly has entered the practice of Chan. Initially this may be overwhelming for the student as they ponder this endlessly quizzical practice.

Koans can be used to initially confuse the student and then allow the student to realize that circuitous “reasoning” is ineffective to solve the puzzle. It may be different than a huatou which can bring an immediate cease to the search—as in

realizing there is no puzzle at all. Koans are likened to following a maze puzzle until one realizes that there is no exit in following the pathways in the puzzle. The only answer is to not play the game. This is proper conceptual Right View. Once the student has a better grasp of Right View the student’s practice will be more seasoned, the difference being that the student’s investigation will be on mind. In Master Hsu Yun’s *Prerequisites of the Chan Training*, He first states “The object of Chan training is to realize mind for the perception of self nature (true nature, not ego).”

How does this work? As the student realizes conceptualization is fundamentally as empty as “a bubble in a stream” one learns to relinquish thoughts. Master Hsu Yun asks “How can one talk about investigating Chan when one is covered up and bound by the myriad conditions and one’s thoughts are produced and extinguished without interruption?” How is this done? By thinking of not thinking? Here is another koan for you:

Student: “What do you meditate on?”

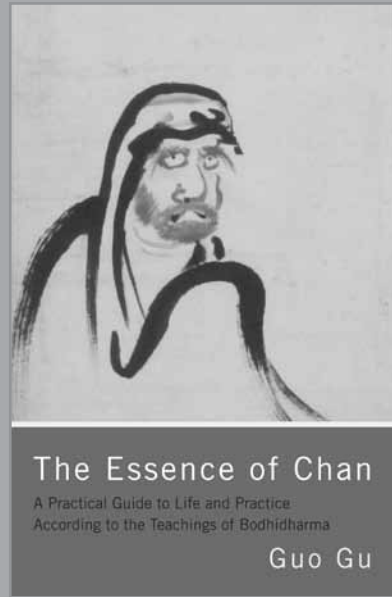
Master: “I think about not thinking.”

Student: “How do you think about not thinking?”

Master: “By not thinking”

For Chan instructors I highly recommend the book entitled *The Mind of Chinese Chan* written by Yi Wu. It is very hard to find but worth the search as it is filled with many koans appropriate for Chan practice. It is also a useful guide and study aid to any Chan instructor, and also those who aspire to be one. Our Chan school is lively and vibrant. It should be constantly engaging. Engaging what? The investigation of mind.

Bodhidharma taught that we are intrinsically free from vexations and afflictions, and our true nature is already perfect and undefiled. *Two Entries and Four Practices* is one of the few texts that Bodhidharma composed. This short scripture contains the marrow, or essence, of all his teachings. Chan teacher Guo Gu offers a translation of this significant text, as well as an elaboration on the teachings on life and practice that it presents, which reflect the essence of Chan itself.



Shambhala Publications—ISBN: 9780834828438

eBook available online: <http://www.shambhala.com/the-essence-of-chan.html#>

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Passing of the Lamp of Wisdom in Memory of Shifu

By Ernie Heau

Has it been four years already since Master Sheng Yen (Shifu) crossed over to the other shore? Yes, it has, but only if one stops to think about it, for his daily presence is still strongly felt by all those who have benefitted from his compassion and wisdom. For such people, Shifu is still with us.

On the weekend of February 2-3, the Chan Meditation Center held a commemorative Passing of the Lamp of Wisdom ceremony for Shifu. On the first day, Saturday, there was a one-day Chan Retreat led by Guo Ming Fashi. On Sunday, Abbot Guo Xing Fashi presented a Dharma talk on the Shurangama Sutra and Chan. Both events were fully attended by members and friends of the Chan Center.

The one-day retreat consisted of sitting as well as walking meditation, yoga, a wonderful video of Shifu giving a Dharma talk at a retreat in Switzerland in 2004. In this talk, Shifu eloquently explained the relationship of ignorance and enlightenment, concluding that for practitioners, both should be thought of as essentially “empty” and therefore, expressions of innate buddha-nature. After a wonderful vegetarian luncheon and more meditation, a second video showed Shifu explaining the meaning of transmission in the Chan lineage.

The day’s activities concluded with the assembly reciting bodhisattva vows, and performing the Passing of the Lamp of Wisdom ceremony, in which each participant holds a candle whose flame was kindled by another person holding a candle, and so on, till everyone holds a lit candle. Then,

each person makes an offering of the lit candle at the Buddha Shrine.

What is the meaning of this ceremony? When a lit candle is used to light another candle, it gives light to the second candle without losing any light of its own. And, in fact, because there are now two lit candles, the total light that shines is now increased, for all to enjoy and share. So, the Dharma is like this: when we share the Dharma freely with others, our own share of the Dharma is increased, and everyone benefits from the total wealth of Dharma that is thus created.

The one-day retreat was concluded by every participant receiving a gift of Volume Two of Tea Words, the second of two volumes of Shifu’s lectures from past issues of the Chan Newsletter.

Thanks to the staff of the Chan Meditation Center for making this wonderful event possible, and thanks to all the attendants for coming.



Photo by Pamela Shih

2013 New Year's Address

By Abbot Venerable Guo Xing

Dragon Fortune In the Year of the Snake

Here are some highlights from a talk our Abbot gave at CMC for the New Year Celebration on February 10, 2013, translated by Anny Sun and edited by Victor Lapuszynski. You can listen to the entire talk at the CMC website.

Yesterday ended the Year of the Dragon and today starts the Year of the Snake. The snake represents external phenomena, whereas the dragon means our true nature. Snakes also represent sentient beings, whereas the dragon represents Buddhas and bodhisattvas. A lot of people are eager to have a child born in a dragon year; but is it necessarily true that snakes are not as good as dragons?

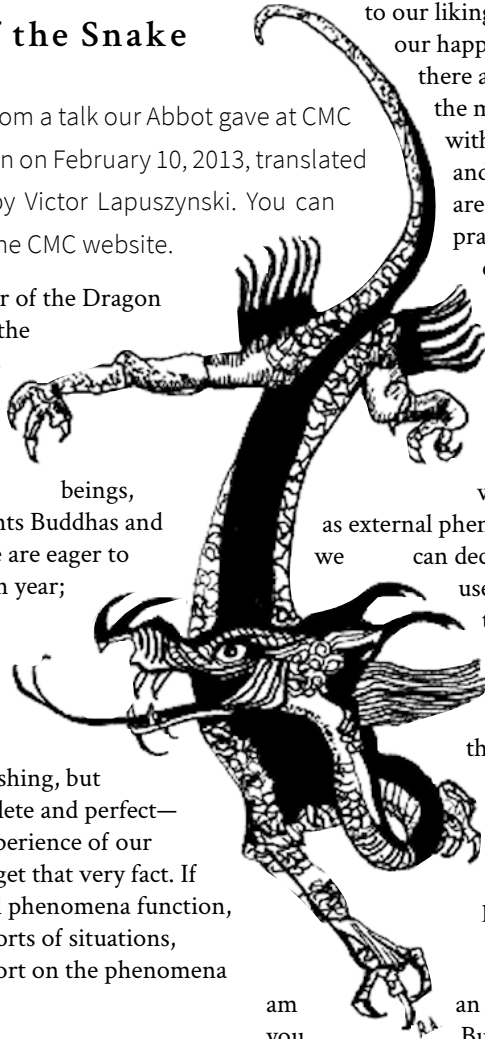
We talk about external phenomena arising and perishing, but inner nature is always complete and perfect—yet unless we have direct experience of our nature, it's easy for us to forget that very fact. If we understand how external phenomena function, we can decide, in different sorts of situations, whether it's best to exert effort on the phenomena or in our mind.

At this moment, in relation to you I am your external phenomenon. At lunch time we go downstairs and the food dishes become our external phenomena. When we see the dishes

maybe they're great, but maybe they're not to our liking and at that very moment our happiness perishes. Every day there are countless moments where the mind comes into contact with external phenomena, and each of these moments are junctures where we can practice with mind. There is the environment, there is our physical body, and there are our thoughts—all these are considered external phenomena; they are all objects of mind's awareness.

If we understand how this works, we can classify things as external phenomena, or else mind; then we can decide whether we want to use our energy to transform the external phenomena, or to use it to unhinder our mind. People mostly spend time trying to alter the external circumstances, instead tending to mind. Why is that? Perhaps we really are not clear about the division between external phenomena and mind.

As I sit here, it's clear that I am an external phenomenon to you. But if we take it a step deeper, what about the image of me in your mind? Is that a phenomenon, or is that mind? If we see someone that we don't like, to most of us they're an external phenomenon that we can run away



Drawing by Rikki Asher

from. But if, whenever we think of this person, this image arises in our mind, then where can we run to? When a husband and wife unhappy with each other try to get separated, I say to them that it's easy to leave the physical person, but how about all those decades of memories in your head? Those are really hard to get rid of, aren't they? Most people deal with that by suppressing it and trying not to think about that person. But whenever the person's name is mentioned, they go down the old path, angry and vexed at that person again.

It is actually the pivot point for us to understand the distinction between external phenomena, and mind. All the memories stored in the mind, images of particular people, are merely phenomena stored in our head. They are not the same as the actual person. Because the images are in your mind, they don't feel or perceive, and they cannot act on their own. They are merely our memories. We have to be very clear about this over time and constantly observe how our mind interacts with these external phenomena, and eventually reach a better understanding.

When you are interacting with your mom, do you feel that your mom is inside your head? Let me explain this while I'm sitting here next to a screen with my image projected onto it. If you want to talk to my actual person, do you talk to the screen? If I owe you money, you ask me, this actual person, not the person on the screen, right? If you want to praise me or slander me, then you necessarily do that to the actual physical person, not to the person projected on the screen.

But when you are interacting with your mother, your physical mother that's sitting in front of you, even though your eyes are focused on her, you are accessing memories in the back of your mind, pulling out information from all of your

past interactions with her. With whom are you really interacting? This person, or your memory of this person? Or actually a mishmash of the two? What's the ratio of you actually interacting with this physical person versus interacting with your past memories? I think perhaps the ratio is 1 to 9 or even 1 to 99—most of the time you are actually living and interacting with your own memories. If you are able to interact with everyone as if it's the first time, there will be no past griefs or hatred, no past accounts that you need to clear out. If you are able to understand this, you will see that images from your memory are external phenomena that arise in your head. The person in front of you is also an external phenomenon. Often you are interacting with your own external phenomena as well as the other person, while the other person is also interacting with the external phenomenon that you are to them! You each do your own thing.

The bottom-line question is, are we interacting with that person's mind, or are we interacting with our own external phenomena? Truly, we are mostly interacting with our own external phenomena. More accurately, we are interacting with our prior thought, which just passed. In the flow of thoughts, the earlier thought, the prior thought, becomes the object of awareness of the latter thought. The prior thought becomes "external phenomena," whereas we feel that the latter thought is the mind. Among all these phenomena, don't we often divide them into other people versus the self? Yesterday you had a conversation with your mom, and she scolded or praised you; that is actually just an image now, right? But often you forget that it's just an image, and even within this one picture you divide it into myself scolded yesterday, and your mom. So we divide it into two even though it's one image inside your head, and there's this self right now remembering this image. A self remembering a self in memory. How many yous are out there? We seldom investigate this really tricky point.

These images are not the actual people. And then the second step is to ask ourselves, those feelings that I have associated with those people, are those feelings me? This step is more difficult because our body will give rise to pleasant or unpleasant sensations according to our situation in the environment. These pleasant or unpleasant sensations are actually just objects of our own awareness that arise and perish, but the mind that is aware is constant and it doesn't change. During meditation retreats, Shifu said legs are having pain, not *your* legs.

When Elder Master Ren Jun was ill, he said to Shifu, who was also ailing, "Oh, the machine is breaking down, that's all." Examine "the body is not feeling well" versus "my body is not feeling well"—are the two statements the same? Do they evoke the same feeling? When we see other people are having leg pains, we perceive the pain, right? Yet we are not involved in suffering the pain. If we think of the body only as an object of perception, it's not *our* body. Our experience will be altered drastically.

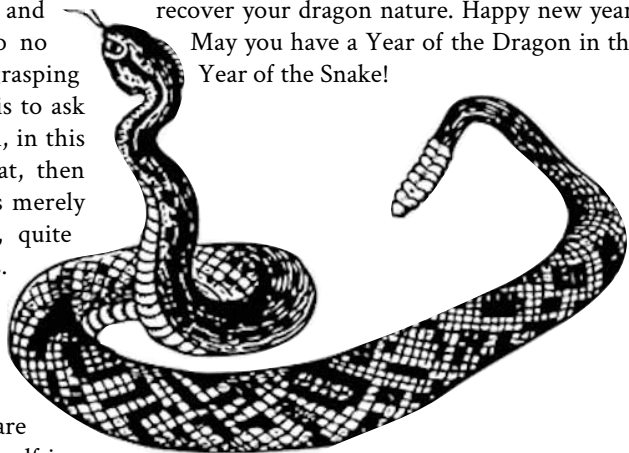
If we are able to see the self as external phenomenon, then we can move from a sense of self to giving away things. If we want to transform our mind, we can give away our greed and anger, transforming greed and anger to no greed and no anger, which is just not grasping and not pushing away. The second step is to ask ourselves, "Is there a self in this situation, in this context?" If we are able to practice that, then in time we will see that any situation is merely a manifestation of past karmic results, quite neutral and just the natural order of things.

We'll see that other people are not experiencing any real pain, either, but they perceive that they are experiencing pain and suffering. All the ups and downs are really all an illusion and there's not a real self in

the whole situation. This is "delivering all sentient beings." If we understand, in this Year of the Snake, or next year's Year of the Horse, we will be following the Path of the Dragon. There will be the difference between having the destiny of the snake versus the dragon. Whether we live the destiny of the snake or the destiny of the dragon is whether our awareness encounters external phenomena with a solid self, or we understand that it's all the functioning of mind. The pivot is to understand—mind *is* phenomena.

It's said there's a mix of dragons and snakes in society. If we are able to dissolve the distinction between mind and phenomena that is called a dragon, but if we distinguish mind versus the external phenomena, then sometimes we become the dragon, sometimes we become the snake. But no matter what kind of life we're leading, our nature is the dragon. It is my most sincere wish that you all will move toward that direction where the mind and the phenomena both dissolve and everything becomes mind itself. By doing so, every year you will be experiencing the life of dragons, no matter what the zodiac says. I wish you achieve tireless dedication to practice, undeterred by any obstacles. Continue that way and you will be able to recover your dragon nature. Happy new year!

May you have a Year of the Dragon in the Year of the Snake!



The Future Retreats, classes and other upcoming events

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

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REGULAR WEEKLY ACTIVITIES

Thursday Evening Meditation	7:00–9:00 pm	Sitting, walking, moving meditation, Dharma talk.
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RETREATS

1-Day & Children’s Program	Saturday Apr 6	9:00 am–5:00 pm Led by Ven. Chang Wen
	Saturday May 11	
	Saturday Jun 8	
Young People’s Retreat	Apr 12-14	Led by Ven. Chang Wen
10-Day Silent Illumination Retreat	May 24 - Jun 2	Led by Simon Child
10-Day Intensive Chan Retreat	Jun 21-30	Led by Ven. Guo Ru

CLASSES

Studies in Chan Theory	Jun 14-16	Led by Ven. Guo Ru
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SPECIAL EVENTS

Gardening Weekend	Apr 27-28	Check www.dharmadrumretreat.org for details.
Hiking Day	May 4	
Family Weekend	May 11-12	

Chan Meditation Center (CMC) in Elmhurst, Queens, NY

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REGULAR WEEKLY ACTIVITIES

Monday Night Chanting	7:30–9:15 pm	Last Monday of each month: Recitation of the 88 Buddhas' names and repentance.
Tuesday Night Sitting Group	7:00–9:30 pm	Sitting, yoga exercises, walking meditation, Dharma sharing, recitation of the Heart Sutra.
Friday Night Movies	6:30–9:30 pm	With Dr. Peter Lin; screenings and discussions of films. Check website for dates and film description.
Saturday Sitting Group	9:00 am–3:00 pm	Sitting, yoga exercises, video teachings by Master Sheng Yen
Dharma Drum Young People	2:30pm-5:00pm	Gathering every 3rd Saturday Buddhists and non-Buddhists ages 18-35 are welcome.
Sunday Open House	10:00 am–4:00 pm	See below

CHAN MEDITATION CENTER (CMC) SUNDAY OPEN HOUSE

Sunday Schedule	10:00 am–11:00 am	Sitting Meditation
	11:00 am–12:30 pm	Dharma Talks
	12:30 pm–1:00 pm	Food Offering and Announcements
	1:00 pm–1:45 pm	Vegetarian Lunch
Dharma Study Group	1:45 pm–3:00 pm	(Every 2nd and 4th Sunday) Led by Harry Miller and Bill Wright
Chanting and Recitation	1st Sunday 2-3:30 pm	Guan Yin Bodhisattva Chanting Service
	2nd Sunday 2-4:00 pm	Great Compassion Repentance Ceremony Dharani
	3rd Sunday 2-4:00 pm	Earth Store Bodhisattva Sutra Chanting Service
	Last Sunday 2-3:30 pm	Bodhisattva Precept Recitation Ritual
	(Please note: If there are five Sundays in the month, there will be a Guan Yin Bodhisattva Chanting Service on the 4th Sunday.)	

RETREATS (Pre-registration advised)

5-Day Chanting Retreat	Apr 1-5	9:00am-5:00pm
One-Day Retreat	Apr 27 , May 25 , Jun 29	Saturdays 9:00 am–5:00 pm

CLASSES (Pre-registration advised)

Harmonious Relationship Workshop	May 4	1:30pm-4:00pm Led by Dr. Rebecca Li
Beginner's Meditation Parts I & II	Jun 1	9:30 am–12:00 pm Led by Nancy Bonardi
	Jun 8	
Intermediate Meditation	Apr 13	9:30am–3:30pm Led by Dr. Rebecca Li
	Jun 22	9:30am–3:30pm Led by Dr. Rikki Asher
Taijiquan	Thursdays	Led by David Ngo 7:30-9:00 pm \$25 per 4-week month—\$80 for 16 classes First Thursday of the month free for newcomers

SPECIAL EVENTS

Buddha's Birthday Celebration	May 12	10:00 am–3:0 pm Special Dharma Talk by Ven. Abbot Guo Xing
Transmission of Bodhisattva Precepts (at DDRC)	May 16-19	download application at www.chancenter.org Application Deadline April 30

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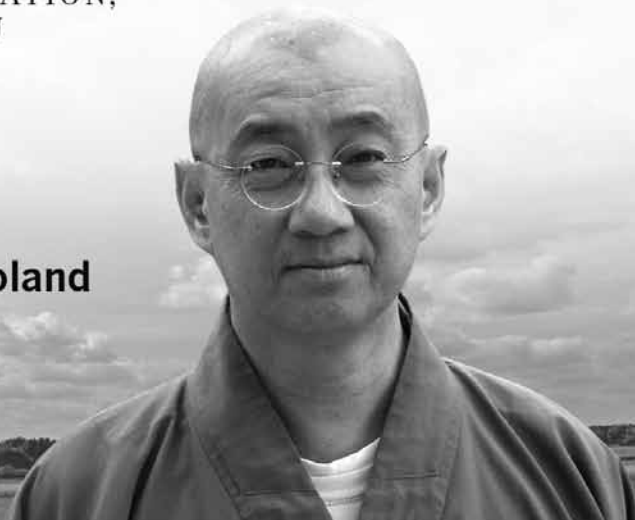
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