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CHAN MAGAZINE

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“SEEING ONE’S NATURE, becoming enlightened, and attaining buddhahood are open to everyone. Believe it or not, you have come here to listen to a Dharma talk, so you will eventually attain buddhahood. This is worth being happy about. It’s not just I who is saying this: this is what the Buddhist scriptures tell us. Some might say, ‘But I haven’t taken refuge in the Three Jewels, so I’m not even a Buddhist. I just came to listen a little bit, and you say that I’ll attain buddhahood. I don’t believe it!’ But this is exactly what the sutras tell us.

Fascicle 36 of the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra* says, ‘All sentient beings, without exception, have buddha-nature. *Ichchantikas* [the most base and spiritually deluded of all beings], who defame the Mahayana teachings, commit the five heinous crimes, and violate the four grave prohibitions, will also certainly achieve the bodhi path.’ All sentient beings have buddha-nature, even if they don’t believe in the Buddha’s teachings, even if they defame the Buddhist sutras and perpetrate evils such as patricide, matricide, killing an arhat, disrupting the harmony of a monastic sangha, causing a buddha to bleed, killing people, sexual misconduct, theft and robbery, and telling serious lies, as long as they have heard the Buddha’s teaching of the Dharma, they will definitely become enlightened and attain buddhahood.”

— Chan Master Sheng Yen
excerpt from *Key to Chan*,
1995

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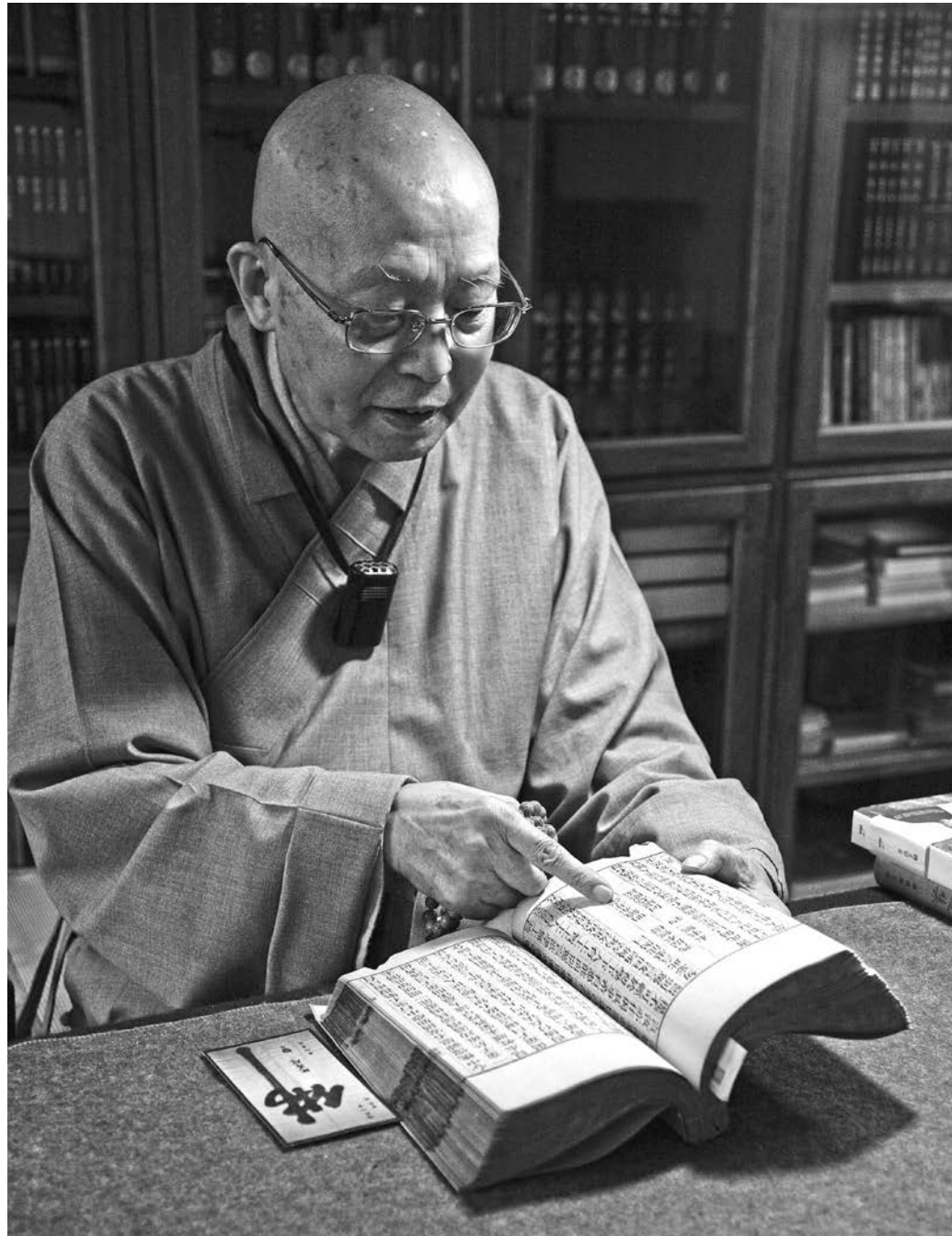
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Reading Sutras as a Spiritual Practice

by

Chan Master Sheng Yen

This article is excerpted from Master Sheng Yen's book, *The Gate of Chan*, published in 1995 as “禪門”. It is one of a selected number of books which have been translated into English for eventual publication. Unfortunately, the translator of the article is not known to Chan Magazine. Bilingual editing by Chiacheng Chang, English editing by Ernest Heau. The article is based on a talk given at Tibet House, New York City, on November 5, 1994.

Reading Sutras to Benefit Ourselves and Others

Greetings, ladies and gentlemen of Tibet House. It's been two years since we last met. I am very pleased to see you here again. Today, I am going to talk about the relationship between sutra reading and Buddhist practice. Just now you were chanting the *Heart Sutra* together, and that is of course a form of sutra reading. Buddhist sutras are about the Dharma as spoken by the Buddha. Among the Buddhist Tripitaka—the vinaya, the sutras, and the shastras—the vinaya are the precepts stipulated by the Buddha, the moral code regarding our bodily, verbal, and mental actions. The shastras are philosophical commentaries on the Buddha's teachings as developed by his disciples. The sutras are the direct teachings of the Buddha that help us cultivate concentration and develop wisdom. Therefore Chinese Buddhists are expected to read sutras, regardless of which school or sect they

belong to. The Chan School of Buddhism, which I learned and practice myself, is no exception.

You may have heard that Chan is a “transmission outside the teachings, not founded on words and language.” Chan masters of the past would often come up with astonishing remarks regarding the sutras. An ancient Chan master once said, “Buddhist sutras are nothing but pieces of paper for wiping us!” Chan master Yaoshan Weiyao (751–834) had a disciple who asked him, “Chan is not established on words and language, so why are you reading the sutras?” Weiyao replied, “I see them as something to cover my eyes.” These subtle remarks actually mean something beyond the mere words. On the surface, these two stories may suggest that the Chan School tends to ignore Buddhist texts, but this is not the case. Indeed, the Chan School places great emphasis on sutras, especially the *Lankavatara Sutra* and the *Diamond Sutra*. In addition, the *Heart Sutra*, the one you were reciting just now, is part of the daily practice in Chan

monasteries. The Sixth Patriarch Huineng became enlightened after overhearing a phrase from the *Diamond Sutra*. So, just reciting the sutra may not make us become immediately enlightened, but it is definitely useful one way or another. Chances are that your reciting the sutra can inspire and trigger someone else's enlightenment!

There are generally speaking four ways to "read" a sutra: silently, out loud, chanting it, and upholding it. For most people, reading the sutras means to finish reading one and then go on to another. Upholding the sutra is different in that one is required to read or recite a specific sutra over and over again, with patience and perseverance for a prolonged period of time.

Reasons Based on What the Buddha Taught

What are the reasons for reading and upholding the sutras according to what the Buddha taught? Maybe you have this question. Let's analyze this issue from an academic perspective. From the Theravada sutras, the vinaya, and early Buddhist texts, we can see that reading, upholding, and chanting Buddhist sutras are a form of group practice. The 52nd fascicle of the *Majjhima Nikaya*, twice mentions encouraging the upholding of the sutras, the vinaya, and the *abhidharma*. The 4th fascicle of the *Ten Recitations Vinaya* says, "Those practicing asceticism stay together with those practicing asceticism, those upholding the vinaya stay together with those upholding the vinaya, those preaching the Dharma stay together with those preaching the Dharma, and those reading the sutra stay together with those reading the sutra." The third fascicle of the *Mahisasakavinaya* says, "Those contented with few desires stay together with those contented with few desires, those happy in stillness stay with those happy in stillness, those reciting the sutra

stay together with those reciting the sutra, those upholding the precepts stay together with those upholding the precepts, Dharma teachers stay with Dharma teachers...Those practicing meditation stay with those practicing meditation." This shows that monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen alike were all required to recite the sutras or the vinaya. Moreover, reading and reciting sutras is one of the three major practices.

Many Mahayana sutras further expound and advocate the merit and function of reading and reciting sutras. For example, the *Lotus Sutra* speaks of many different methods of practice, but 18 out of its 28 chapters are in praise of the merit of sutra recitation. For example, the chapter on "Merits Obtained by Teachers of the Dharma," says, "If virtuous men and women can accept and uphold this sutra, read it, recite it, explain and preach it, or transcribe it ... with these merits they will be able to adorn their six sense organs, making all of them pure." By reading sutras we can purify our six sense organs—eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind, and this is stated in the *Lotus Sutra*. Also, the chapter on "Saraswati," fascicle seven of the *Golden Light Sutra* (Sanskrit *Suvarṇaprabhāsottamasūtreन्द्रarājāḥ Sūtra*; Chinese *Jin guangming zuisheng wang jing*) says, "If there are monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen who can accept and uphold, read and recite, transcribe and spread this wonderful sutra and practice accordingly...they will be able to soon go beyond the ocean of suffering and attain non-regression of bodhi-mind." With a bodhi-mind that does not regress, one will thus be able to attain the fruit of bodhi that will not regress.

Two sutras promoting Amitabha Buddha's Pure Land also mention the merit of upholding sutras. For example, the *Amitabha Sutra* says, "If virtuous men and virtuous women can hear the sutra, accept and uphold the sutra, as well as hear the names of various Buddhas...they can all attain the state of

non-regression in *anuttara-samyak-sambodhi*." Also, the *Sutra of Immeasurable Life* says, "One should imagine the great *chilicocosm* to be engulfed by a huge fire, which one should transcend by hearing this sutra and its teachings, joyfully believing in it, accepting and upholding it, and practicing accordingly...one will never regress in the quest of the unsurpassed path. Therefore one should single-mindedly believe in it and accept it, as well as uphold it, recite it, share it, and practice it."

Some Mahayana sutras also clearly point out that one can recite or chant Mahayana sutras or the vinaya for the purpose of remembering or delivering the dead. For example, the *Brahma Net Sutra* says, "On the day one's parent, sibling, spiritual advisor, or Dharma teacher dies, and during 21 to 49 days of

their passing away, one should read, recite, explain, and preach Mahayana sutras and precepts, as well as organize vegetarian meal gatherings to transfer the merit to them."

At that time in India, reading or reciting Buddhist sutras was meant to help one understand their meaning and practice. However, after it spread to China, the practice of reading sutras gradually degenerated into a service for praying or merit transfer, or even worse, a service to pray for rain, ward off disaster, increase the well-being for the country and the people, or eliminate sickness and misfortune. As a result, from the Yuan Dynasty on there have been Buddhist monks making a living solely by chanting the sutras, which is absolutely against the original intention of the Buddha.



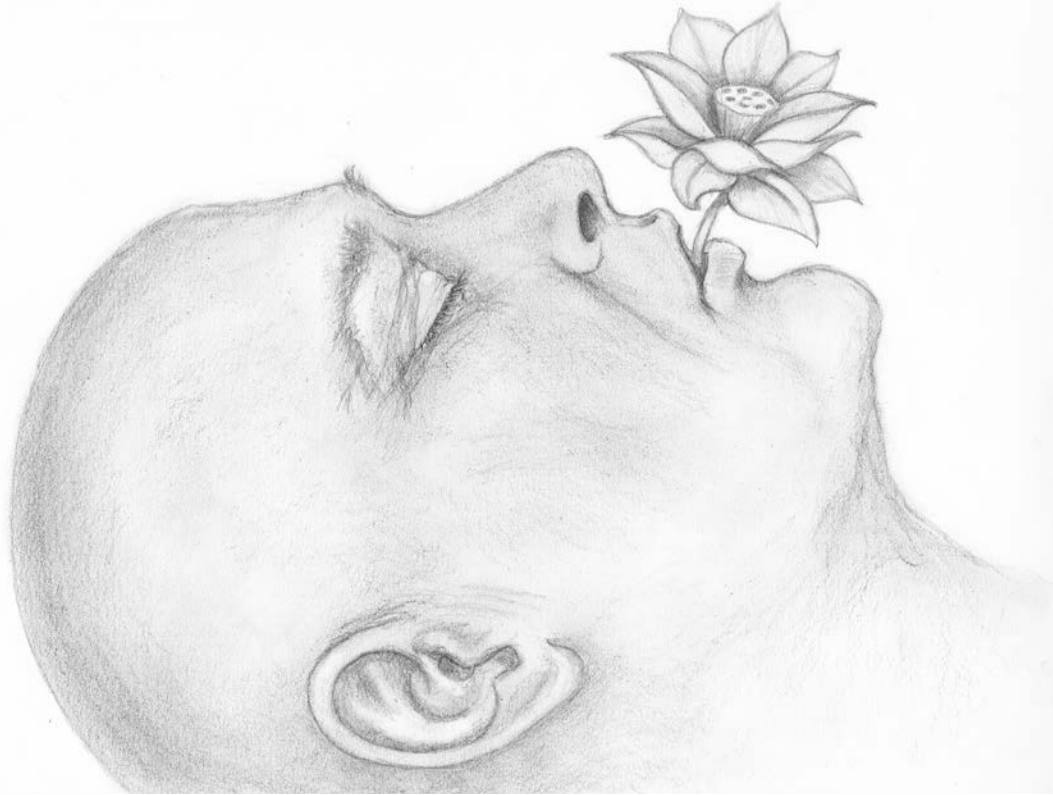
Climate-controlled sutra room in the library at Dharma Drum Mountain, Taiwan

Why Read the Sutras?

What is the function of reading, reciting sutras? In this regard Master Shandao (613–681) compared sutras to a bright mirror we can use to reflect on our own mind. In his *Commentary on the Sutra of Contemplation on the Buddha of Infinite Life*, Shandao said, “To read or recite a Mahayana sutra is to use the sutra as a bright mirror for reflection, and through repetitive reading and searching, one is able to develop wisdom. By opening one’s wisdom eye, one will loathe suffering and long for true happiness, or nirvana.” So while reading a sutra, we should reflect on our speech, action, and mind, to check if they go against the Buddha’s teachings. If yes, then we

should mend our ways soon and cultivate ourselves according to what the sutra teaches.

For reading or reciting as an individual practice, most people prefer upholding a particular sutra. Some uphold the *Flower Ornament Scripture*, while some the *Lotus Sutra*. Both sutras can evoke extraordinary spiritual responses. Once, a practitioner upholding and reciting solely the *Flower Ornament Scripture* evoked a spiritual response of causing a heavenly deity to provide him with offerings, and thus he didn’t need to make alms rounds anymore from then on. Another practitioner, having recited the *Lotus Sutra* more than a couple thousand times in his life, had a lotus flower form in his mouth when he died.



Drawing by Reene Laffey

People may wonder, is it just a form of tongue tumor? Aren’t lotus flowers supposed to grow in water? How can it possibly appear in a dead person’s mouth? As much as people may doubt it, this is exactly what is recorded and stated in the biography.

It is a practice for Chinese Buddhists to recite the Mantra of Purifying the Speech and the Sutra Opening Gatha, prior to chanting a sutra. After finishing the recitation of a sutra, you then recite the Mantra to Atone For Mistakes and the Gatha for Merit Transfer. Some people may have wandering thoughts more frequently while reciting the sutra, and so they may want to recite the Mantra to Atone For Mistakes for a few more times. In Tibet they have similar mantras to make up for the faults of not being able to concentrate their mind while reciting.

Before reciting the sutra, you must first wash your hands, rinse your mouth, wear clean and tidy clothing, and maintain decorum. And then prepare an altar with a Buddha image, and make offerings to the Buddha with fresh flowers, light, food, and so on. This is to help you recite with utmost sincerity. As to the posture in reciting sutras, it depends on how long it will take. For shorter time of recitation, you may kneel or stand. In Chinese monasteries the morning and evening services, which can last two hours, are done standing up. Longer recitation is mostly done sitting, either in a lotus posture or on a chair. In Southern and Tibetan traditions, as well as in Japan, it is mostly done in the cross-legged or sitting-kneeling posture.

There is a way of practice which requires the practitioner to prostrate while reciting. Some Chinese practitioners recite the *Lotus Sutra*, the *Flower Ornament Scripture*, or the Diamond Sutra in this way. You must be thoroughly familiar with the sutra before engaging in this practice. You recite the sutra word by word, sentence by

sentence, paragraph by paragraph, and page by page, and after each word you prostrate and recite a phrase of homage to the bodhisattvas who were in the assembly when the sutra was spoken. Take for example, the phrase “Thus have I heard.” As you say “Thus,” you make a prostration and at the same time, chant “Hail (Skt. *namo*), the Lotus Sutra; hail, buddhas and bodhisattvas of the Lotus Sutra assembly.” If it is the *Flower Ornament Scripture* you are reciting, then you chant “Hail, the Flower Ornament Scripture; hail, buddhas and bodhisattvas of the Flower Ornament Scripture assembly.” I have done this practice myself.

The Japanese Nichiren School bases their teachings solely on two chapters of the *Lotus Sutra*: “Expedient Means” and “Life-Span of the Tathagata.” They chant and recite the title of the sutra without doing word by word prostration. When prostrating, you must not do it quickly, but with reverence and ease. If using the Chinese text, it takes more than 80 thousand prostrations to finish the *Lotus Sutra*. One of the four preliminary practices in the Tibetan esoteric Buddhism requires practitioners to do 100,000 prostrations. So in a way, prostrating to the *Lotus Sutra* word by word also serves as a preliminary practice.

Functions of Reading Sutras

There are generally speaking six functions in reading sutras. Nevertheless, the Dharma is not fixed, so if any of you here know about another function or other functions, please let us know for discussion.

Sutra reading helps us illuminate our mind

Reading sutras regularly can be likened to using a bright mirror to reflect, and to illuminate our mind at all times, thereby reducing our affliction and ignorance.

Sutra reading helps us realize its meaning

Every time you read a sutra, you will gain more understanding about the subtle meaning behind the seemingly mysterious language. In the Chinese tradition, the teacher normally just asks you to simply read it without explaining the text to you. When I was a novice I asked my master, “What are those sutras saying?” All he said was, “Just keep reading! By reading them more often you’ll understand. What other people tell you is always limited, but by familiarizing yourself with the sutra text, you will gain much more understanding.” At that time I wasn’t quite sure about that, but now I have to say I cannot agree with him more. Now I tell my disciples the same thing, though they may not agree with the idea. Sometimes they will even protest and say, “Why don’t you explain the sutra first? How can it be of any use if we just read it without understanding the meaning?”



The Diamond Sutra

Sutra reading helps us cultivate concentration

I teach my disciples to rein in their six sense organs, and concentrate their mind on chanting and reciting the sutra, while using their ears to listen attentively without thinking about the meaning. When you are alone you have to listen to your own voice, but in group practice it’s better to listen to other people’s recitation, either to the group chanting in harmony, or to a specific person whose chanting is stable and smooth. In this case, it’s not very likely to attain concentration by listening to your own voice, since ordinary people are often attached to their own voice; so it’s better to recite the sutra with a group. I ask you, while chanting the *Heart Sutra*, were you listening to your own voice, or were you listening to other people’s? Probably both, I guess.

Sutra reading helps us spread the Dharma

As I mentioned in the beginning, the Sixth Patriarch Master Huineng became enlightened on hearing a lay practitioner recite a phrase from the *Diamond Sutra*: “Abiding nowhere, give rise to mind.” So, it doesn’t really matter if you yourself are not enlightened, since it would be a nice thing if somebody became enlightened by hearing you recite a sutra. So chances are your recitation will help someone who happens to hear it by eliciting their virtuous karmic roots. A friend told me that once while sitting in the cabin during a boat ride, feeling extremely bored and agitated, he heard a lady sitting next to him reciting the sutra, and was thus able to feel calm and settled eventually. So he thought to himself, “I can already benefit so much just by overhearing someone reciting the sutra. Wouldn’t it be more beneficial if I recite the sutra myself?” Thanks to this chance, he started to read sutras, and finally decided to become a Buddhist.

Sutra reading helps us safeguard the Dharma

In many of the Mahayana Buddhist texts it says that when and wherever a person recites and upholds the sutras, it can be regarded as a manifestation of the Buddha in the world, and therefore, buddhas and the Dharma-protecting deities from the ten directions will protect the person and the surrounding area. If we really want to safeguard Buddhadharma, then we should also uphold the sutras; it’s not enough to just have Buddhist sutras lay there.

Sutra reading to deliver the dead and pray for blessings

Buddhists in the Mahayana and the Theravada traditions believe that when people die, their family and friends can help deliver them through the merit of conducting Buddhist ceremonies and rituals, usually by chanting sutras. A Western practitioner at our Chan Meditation Center used to only know about investigating Chan and sitting in meditation. When his friend died he came to ask me, “Shifu, my friend has passed away. What should I do to help him? Can I help by sitting in meditation?” I told him, “You should chant sutras instead!” At that critical moment chanting sutras is a more direct and beneficial way to help, instead of sitting in meditation.

What is the use of chanting sutras for the sake of the deceased? Simply stated, it is to use the Buddha’s power to call back the deceased so that they can listen to the sutras, hear the Dharma, and thus gain liberation. If the deceased have been reborn in a Buddha Land or some other realm, it doesn’t really matter, because by chanting sutras we are actually engaged in practice ourselves, and thus will earn merit; moreover, there will be numerous invisible sentient beings around to listen to our chanting and so they can benefit as a result. Because they benefit,

the one who passed away also benefits; after all we chant sutras for their sake. The *Brahmajala Sutra* says that bodhisattvas should explain the Mahayana sutras and vinaya for the sake of sentient beings. Beginning on the day when one’s parent, sibling, spiritual advisor, or Dharma teacher passes away, one should for the following three to seven weeks, read, recite, and expound the Mahayana sutras and vinaya for their sake. This will benefit the deceased and the invisible sentient beings in terms of the Dharma, enabling them to generate bodhi-mind and achieve buddhahood in the future.

By chanting sutras, we can help deliver the newly deceased, as well as those who passed away long ago. However, the effect is less significant if they have already been reborn somewhere else and cannot hear the sutra. Nevertheless, by chanting sutras and conducting Buddhist rituals for the sake of the deceased, we can help them form good karmic affinities with other sentient beings, which is always beneficial. In addition, I would like you to bear two things in mind: first of all, we should listen to sutras and hear the Dharma ourselves on a regular basis, seeking blessings for ourselves instead of waiting for someone else to do this for us after we die. Secondly, as often stated in Buddhist sutras, for 21 to 49 days after someone’s death, we should practice generosity, make offerings, chant sutras, and recite the Buddha’s name for their sake, beginning as soon as possible. All in all by chanting sutras we can benefit both the living and the deceased. All sentient beings, whether heavenly beings, humans, spirits, deities, or even animals, are actually still wandering in the three realms of samsara, and therefore need to read sutras and practice; this is the intention and purpose of my talk today.

The Arising of Conditioned Appearance from the True Mind

Part 6

by

Abbot Venerable Guo Xing

This is the sixth in a series of articles taken from Dharma talks given by Abbot Venerable Guo Xing at the Shurangama Sutra Retreat in August 2012. The talks focus on the first four chapters of the *Shurangama Sutra*, and include the discussion of Chan theory and practice, stories of the Chan Masters, and how to apply Chan methods in daily life. Translations in this article are taken directly from *The Surangama Sutra* by The Buddhist Text Translation Society, 2009.

We now discuss the ninth characteristic of the true mind – “Visual Awareness Arises Neither on Its Own nor from Causes.” “Visual Awareness” refers to the empty nature, which is also called the Buddha Nature or the true mind. The Chinese character “qing” refers to the differentiating mind. “Arising neither on its own nor from causes” means to transcend the differentiating mind. The phrase “Visual Awareness Arises Neither on Its Own nor from Causes” is mainly saying that the true mind (a.k.a. Buddha Mind) is neither dependent on cause and condition nor arises on its own.

“... Our enlightened nature can be involved with things throughout all ten directions... how does what the Buddha has said in this regard differ from the ‘truth of the unmanifested nature’ as taught by the Brahmin Kapila...?” (translation from *The*

Shurangama Sutra by The Buddhist Text Translation Society, 2009)

Hinduism talks about “True-Self Encompasses Ten Directions,” while Buddhism talks about “Dharma-Body Encompasses Ten Directions.” Buddhism also discusses the notion of True-Self and Dharma-Body. These notions may appear to be quite similar, but they are distinctive in places, namely, the notion of “Dharma-body is formless.” Dharma-body manifests the phenomenon, but the phenomenon is still Dharma-body. The true mind can give rise to all sorts of illusory phenomena, yet the illusory phenomena are the true mind. Hinduism talks about the True-Self giving rise to all phenomena, and then one needs to return to the True-Self, as if there is a phenomenon that needs to return to the True-self. Shifu once gave an

example to illustrate this point. For instance, you become enlightened today. The Buddha is not going to think, “Another sentient being has become a buddha! A new buddha has joined our rank!” Since the Buddha became enlightened, he realized that all sentient beings are already buddhas. To put it more plainly, the Buddha is not going to think, “You are not enlightened yet, so you are a sentient being. But I am already a buddha.”

Ananda further asked, “Since the true mind does not exist in and of itself, then it must have arisen out of causes and conditions. Right?” Usually, when we discuss the concept of “causes and conditions” and “cause and effect,” we are referring to the

inter-relationship between phenomena. The spatial relationships between phenomena are called “causes and conditions,” while temporal relationships are called “cause and effect.” “Visual Awareness Arises Neither on Its Own nor from Causes” means that the true mind is able to perceive all phenomena and manifest all phenomena. But it is not the result of causes and conditions. The True Nature is originally just like so. In fact, “causes and conditions” is the function of Buddha Nature. When we try to discern “this is the cause” and “that is the condition,” aren’t we indeed using the Mind to make the distinctions? We say that the Buddha Nature “transcends causes and conditions, and surpasses the dualistic mind (subject and object).” This



Photo by Ernie Heau

refers to the fact that Buddha Nature transcends causes and conditions, and also transcends the dualistic mind.

Buddha Nature cannot be the result of causes and conditions. Its existence does not depend on certain causes or conditions. The Buddha explained it this way: We are able to see light, darkness, solid objects, and space. Is the mind able to see due to light? Or is it due to darkness that we are able to see? Or are we intrinsically able to see? If we see due to light, then we won't see darkness. If we see due to darkness, then we won't see light. These are all one of the functions of the mind. The nature of the mind is "not any dharma yet it is precisely all dharmas." It transcends light and darkness, but does not depart from light and darkness.

In the quote immediately above, the character "not" is followed by "is." The phrase, "Visual Awareness is not a perceived object," explains that Visual Awareness is not objects. It transcends all objects. At the same time, Visual Awareness is not other than objects. This is what it means by "it is precisely all objects."

If the true mind does not arise from causes and conditions, then can we bring forth this true mind by affecting some sort of causes and conditions? There is a Chan story to illustrate this point: Master Mazu Daoyi was working hard to practice sitting meditation. His master, Huairang sat on the side, polishing a block of brick.

Mazu was very curious and asked, "What are you doing, polishing that brick?"

Huairang replied, "I want to polish it to make it into a mirror."

Mazu thought it was hilarious and said, "How can a brick ever become a mirror?"



Huairang then said, "Bricks can never become a mirror through polishing. Then, do you think you can become a buddha through sitting meditation?"

Mazu then asked, "Then what do I do?"

Huairang asked, "When you drive an ox-carriage, what do you do if the carriage won't go? Do you hit the carriage or do you hit the ox?"

Similarly, you can try to practice meditation. But is the meditative samadhi the Mind itself? No, it is not. It would be easier to become enlightened when you practice meditation. But practicing meditation will not lead to enlightenment.

You may work really hard and exert a lot of effort in practicing. Then one day, you become enlightened. Is your enlightenment the result of your practice? If enlightenment is indeed the result of practice, then when you stop practicing, you might become deluded again because your enlightenment is attained through practicing. In truth, enlightenment does not result from practicing. Had it been a result of practice, then it would indicate that we do not have the Buddha Nature to begin with, that it was only through

practice that we have obtained this Buddha Nature. But that is not so — Buddha Nature has existed originally and all this time.

As I just said, enlightenment is not the result of practice. However, Shifu had said too that, "Without practicing, we wouldn't know that enlightenment is not a result of practicing." Is this clear? If you don't practice, you wouldn't know that there is no relationship between enlightenment and practice. In other words, if you do not practice, you will not become enlightened. But once you've started practicing, you will realize that there is no relationship between enlightenment and practicing. Having said that, you still need to practice hard. Then one day when you become enlightened, you will see that, after all, there is no relationship between practicing and enlightenment.

The guiding principle for practice is to let go of the differentiating mind. Let go of the differentiating mind in entirety. Only then will the true mind, which transcends all distinctions, reveals itself. Letting go means to stop grasping onto partial phenomenon and to stop paying attention to specific phenomenon. The essence of Chan is not to grasp onto anything. Let things go, one by one, until you let go of everything. Silent Illumination captures this as "illuminating without contacting any conditions/phenomena." The focus is not to contact. As for Huatou, you ask directly, "What is it that does not contact?"

Shifu said, "Enlightened people are constantly in the state of unification. At the same time, they do not dwell in such a state." Therefore, even if today you have entered the state of unification, you still have to let go of the state. Only then can you become enlightened. What if your mind is scattered? Can you still enter the state that is simultaneously unification-while-not-dwelling-in-unification? Yes, you can.

Our true mind is, in and of itself, enlightened. When Shifu met Grand Master Lingyuan, they stayed in the same dormitory. When it was about time to sleep, Grand Master Lingyuan sat down to meditate. Shifu followed suit and meditated as well. Then, Shifu asked Grand Master Lingyuan if he could ask some questions. Grand Master Lingyuan said, "You may."

Shifu started asking many questions, such as, "What should I do after I enter the monastic life?" and "Am I really suitable to be a monastic?"

Grand Master Lingyuan kept asking, "Do you have more questions? Is there more?" At last, Grand Master Lingyuan smacked the table, "BAM!" and said, "Let it go. I'm going to sleep now."

Shifu said that, as a result, he entered a state where his entire body and mind had fallen away. Well, in the very beginning of this story, hadn't his mind been quite scattered?

Therefore, the true key is to let go of your differentiating mind, as well as the seeking mind.

(To be continued)

Start With a Firm Foundation

by

Venerable Chi Chern

This article is taken from two Dharma talks given by Chi-Chern Fashi during an Intensive Chan Retreat held at the Dharma Drum Retreat Center in July 2014. The talks were translated by Chang Wen Fashi. Transcription was done by Liz Phang and Mimi Yu. Mimi Yu also provided bilingual editing, English editing by Buffe Laffey and Xueshan.



Photo by Venerable Chang Wen

Silence and Illumination

Good evening, fellow practitioners. Up to this point of the retreat, we have introduced various methods which emphasize approaches to calming the mind. And within these methods, regardless of which one we are using, we know that the principle is to develop and balance concentration and awareness. We talked a lot about the need to use a method of calming, a concrete object for us to put our attention on. It is important to use that to establish a foundation of calm and clarity.

We also mentioned that if the condition of your body and mind is quite relaxed and stable, you can use silent illumination. You can even use the approach of just sitting there, not doing anything. Not using any method, allow the mind to settle and become more calm and clear. As the mind settles, one can balance the calmness and clarity to the point that silence and illumination become simultaneous. One unifies the mind. Once the body and mind are unified, one may even experience unification of inner and outer, or the unification of self with the environment.

However, at this point, it is important to know that this is not yet enlightenment. Although, in that experience of unification, the mind is not at all disturbed, this is merely just being clearly aware of phenomena. In order to go deeper, one continues in this way, just sitting. With the deepening silence of the mind, one finds that illumination becomes thorough and penetrating to the point that you directly perceive the nature of phenomena. Not only seeing the surface of things themselves, but seeing that their nature is empty, without self. At this point, this would be the experience of enlightenment through the practice of silent illumination. Regardless of whether one gets this far, this in principle is just returning to the basic nature of the mind. The basic quality of the mind is

silence and illumination. All the different methods that we introduced are based on developing silence and illumination, balancing calmness and clarity.

Knowing Your Present Condition

Although essentially the practice can be that simple, whether or not you can use this very direct approach of silent illumination really depends on where you are at. What is the condition right now of your body and mind? Do you have the prerequisites to use such a method-less approach? If not, that's fine. It doesn't matter if you are there or not. What matters is that you are aware of your condition. You are aware of the state of your body and mind, and you use the appropriate method. If you need a more concrete method to feel grounded and to be able to develop that calmness and clarity, then use a more concrete method. It is not important how fast you go with it or how soon you can become method-less, the most important thing is that you are practicing. The most important thing is that you're using the method.

As soon as you start to use a method, as soon as you start to cross your legs, you are developing an awareness of where you are at. You start to know where the problems are, what the physical and mental obstructions are. Becoming aware of this is most important to the whole process. As soon as you are using your method and become aware of doing these things, you are already doing what has to be done. There is no need to rush. You become aware of your condition. And through the process of becoming aware of your physical and mental states, you are actually learning to become not so bothered by them. You are developing stability. While you are aware of these things, you are not so distracted or disturbed by them. Through this process you are harmonizing your condition, balancing the state of body and mind.

This is the most important thing, really, that you are practicing. You are using the appropriate method for your condition. You'll find that if you just keep at it, very naturally results come. Very naturally, at some point, you can experience this emptiness of things. However, there is no need to focus so much on the results; just work on your practice. We shouldn't compare ourselves to others or think that we are going too slowly. There are some people who can start off with a methodless approach, and it seems like they are special or something, they don't have to work hard, it just goes easy for them. But actually they have already been through the difficult part of the process; it's just that they started a bit earlier. Our ancestor masters of the Chan lineage, and also the Buddha himself – they all went through these difficulties and obstructions and just practiced. Through their practice, they harmonized their state of mind and then, with that stability, they were able to have thorough insight.

So we need to remember that we are all at different places, but we are all on the same path. There is no need to think about how fast others are going, or who is awakening first. Basically, the people who started earlier, have insight earlier. As for ourselves, if we feel that we are going slowly, it is just that we started off later. But we are all going on the same path in the same direction. The most important thing really is knowing which method to use, and using it; naturally, results will come.

Misconceptions

With silent illumination, we mention again and again that you need to have certain prerequisites to be able to use the very direct and sudden approach. So we talk about the other expedient ways of entering into it. But actually silent illumination is only one of the sudden methods. There is also

another sudden method of Chan called huatou. The huatou method is also very simple. Just take this huatou, this critical phrase, and ask it, and you develop the doubt sensation. This questioning develops into a vast mass of doubt, until you eventually break through this doubt and see your original face. That's it, we have just introduced and explained the method of huatou.

This sudden method of huatou really is so simple – just pick up the critical phrase and bring it into the mind. But it seems that although we should be investigating the huatou, we pick it up. We know that there should be a sense of doubt, or a sense of questioning, but nothing happens. So then we think, maybe try harder. Try to force the sense of doubt to come out. We hear that this method is a really powerful method, so we guess we should use a lot of power then, to try and force the sense of doubt to come out. The more we force it, the more tense we get. And possibly at the same time the leader of this huatou retreat may be pushing and pressing the disciples, shouting, hitting them with the incense board. The incense board is flying all over the Chan hall. People are getting beaten left and right, people are shouting, people are screaming, people are crying and falling on the ground; all this stuff is happening. The teacher may have already broken 10 or 12 incense boards, and uses all of his energy. People are passing out. And what happens? Well – still no sense of doubt, still no sense of questioning.

There seems to be a misconception about huatou that, with this method, all this stuff should happen within the Chan hall – that the teachers should push the disciples, and the disciples should have all these reactions and be crying, that this is real huatou practice. If a person has no stable state of body and mind, then they are forcing it, their teacher is forcing it. Everybody is exhausting themselves. And what happens in the end? Actually, nothing happens. There may be all these fireworks

in the Chan hall – of course, if the teacher is really pushing you so that you are feeling pressure, at some point there is going to be an explosion. But what's really happening with this explosive reaction is just an outburst of emotions, a release of pent-up energy. Most of the time, that's all that's really happening.

Riddles and Explosions

On top of that, people don't know how to generate the sense of questioning. They think that huatou is like solving a riddle, almost like a guessing game. What is wu? What could wu really be? I was reading a book the other day, it seems like wu is emptiness, wu is self-nature. Especially people who read a lot of Buddhist literature, read the stories of the masters – they pull out all these phrases: "Wu is my original face." They try to think of all the different things that they read to solve this riddle, like a crossword puzzle or something. It becomes more like a game than an actual practice. And after a person solves the riddle, gets the answer, what happens? Again, nothing really happens. They just have this answer that they come up with, and nothing has really changed about their condition.

In this case, a person is using a forceful approach and adding all kinds of imagination into that experience. Because they have invested so much expectation in getting an answer, they generate all kind of experiences for themselves, based mostly on imagination and knowledge. They try to get some feeling from their practice. This is why we have a lot of these emotional outbursts. With the combination of imagination, expectation, and pressure, people create these illusory experiences. It is really generating nothing but wandering thoughts and emotional outbursts. In this way, huatou practice becomes nothing but a game. It doesn't really help that person.

It is important to know that the huatou method is very simple and easy. It only requires that you pick up a huatou and look into it. The problem is not the method, but the state of mind of the practitioner. Does that person have the prerequisites to be able to use such a method? If the body and mind aren't stable and clear enough, nothing else happens except tension, delusion and wandering thoughts. Only when the person's state is very stable and they have those prerequisites, is the practice so very simple and straightforward. It is important to have this background knowledge to use the huatou method. When we have the proper understanding of how to go about using this method, and how not to go about using this method, will we know how to apply it.

Generating the State of Doubt

With this huatou method, the key element that is needed to bring forth the result is what is called the state of doubt, otherwise translated as questioning or wonderment. We will call it doubt from now on. This powerful sense of doubt doesn't come from outside. It doesn't come from someone else pressuring it out of us; it doesn't come from using force from the body to push it out. The sense of questioning comes from within. The powerful aspect of doubt is generated within the mind by questioning, not through force. This doubt comes from wanting to know what life is all about. What is this nature's existence? You know that we are alive, but really how does it all work? How has all this happened? We look at this physical body of ours; it is something incredible and miraculous, with all its integrated networks, structures and systems. The way it works and functions as a human being, this in itself is a mystery, we only know a little bit about it.

All the unknowns of existence are where the sense of doubt comes from. In relation to ourselves, we know that we are a person but every person has

a different body, character and personality. Even within the same family, every child is something unique. When we look at our own body and mind, we ask, where do I come from? And I say you came from your mom's tummy, right? Well, that is part of the process of being born, the process of maturing in the mother's womb. But that is only a part of it. There are countless other conditions and unknown things that go into bringing it together. In this sense of mystery, the basic nature, the so-called "original face" of our existence is unknown to us. We are not really clear about it. This sense of questioning is what we are developing with the huatou method. The method is there to bring forth the sense of doubt. The huatou "before my parents gave birth to me, what was my original face?" looks into the question of life before we were even born – what is existence then? This question probes deep into the unknowable because, no matter what answer we have, that is not it. This is looking internally, looking into the mind. Not for an answer, but seeking to realize this original face.

So, the huatou method generating its doubt is bringing forth the sense of questioning from within, not from the external force of pressure. Within the process of the huatou method, this building sense of doubt is clearing away all of the obscurities that come from our wandering thoughts and confused mind. This questioning, maturing from the sense of doubt into a mass of doubt, eventually breaks. And when it breaks, we say one sees one's original face directly. Here, the word seeing means, seeing it right in front of your eyes. This is different from knowing something intellectually; it is not like you

finally know the answer to a riddle and then that mass of doubt is broken. There is no answer. It is not that you get an answer; you just experience for yourself the very nature of existence.

Start With the Prerequisites

This is the function of the huatou method. It is important to know the strength of huatou, this power that comes from the sense of doubt and the sense of questioning, is in the wonderment about existence. The method itself is to bring about that questioning. If we know that this is the principle of the method, then we know which direction we are going. We have to be careful investigating the huatou; we don't want to get caught in imagination, or try to create the sense of doubt through our thinking process or envisioning. If we do so, we are going in the wrong direction, and will have no power in the method. It is important to know that this huatou method is a sudden method. It is very powerful. But we need that prerequisite, a stable and clear body and mind. If we don't have that requirement filled, how can we generate the powerful sense of questioning? As soon as we generate something, it disappears. Why? Because our scattered mind and wandering thoughts just wash it away. If we do fulfill that prerequisite, the huatou method is simple, very direct, and easily becomes powerful.

When the mind is very stable, as soon as the method is used, the sense of doubt is easily generated and developed, and the method just takes its course. The really difficult part of the process

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of practice is not unification and afterward. That part is pretty much easy; it's a smooth trip from then onwards. The hard part is the process of working with obstructions and going through a lot of difficulty in first harmonizing to be able to have a stable and lucid state of mind. When we know this, we have a clear direction of the principle of the huatou method.

Methods of Calming

We have to recognize whether we are ready to use this method, and how to go about fulfilling the prerequisites. For the actual application of the huatou method, it is important that we have the foundation of unification of mind. Once there is unification of mind, then the huatou method can truly generate the power and the effects it is supposed to. How do we establish this foundation? As we have been saying throughout this retreat, you can use the method of reciting the Buddha's name. When using this method as a precursor or a foundation to huatou, you first recite the Buddha's name continuously. Recite it until one's mind is single-pointed; single-mindedly recite the Buddha's name with no scatteredness. After that, you can change reciting the Buddha's name into a huatou. There is a well-known and well-used huatou: "Who is reciting the Buddha's name?" Before, you were just reciting the Buddha's name, but once you have unification, then you can change to questioning, or starting to investigate. In the state of no scatteredness, or single-pointedness, who is it that is reciting the Buddha's name? With that, you begin to generate this doubt, this questioning about who is this person, really, who is reciting the Buddha's name? What is the deeper level of mind that is actually doing the reciting?

This is one approach, using the Buddha's name first, and changing it into a huatou after

the unification of mind. It is also possible to use the method of breathing until the mind becomes very still. Within that stillness of mind, maybe it is natural that some people in that deep stillness start to wonder or have this question, "Who am I?" We all have the sense of self, but the sense of self is kind of broken. It is not very clear, not very complete. At that point of stillness, a person may start to look inward. The direction of asking or investigating with huatou is looking inward. You start to look deeper into the layers of mind, deeper below the layers of the broken sense of self, to look beneath "Who am I?" This is one way huatou can progress with the method of breathing.

Common Huatou Phrases

There are also other huatou, or phrases of huatou, to use as a method, such as "Before my parents gave birth to me, what was my original face?" Another one is "Before a single thought arises, what is my original face?" This "original face" is pointing at, what is the mind that is beneath all these thoughts? What are these wandering, illusory thoughts? All these mental activities that are happening, what is beneath them? What is the deepest level of mind? This huatou is investigating inward to the deepest aspect of what is mind itself.

There is another phrase that can be used, regarding the relationship of mind and body. For example, we have this body which is an incredibly complex tool, but how does this body move and function? Does the body by itself have the function? If it was just the body, it would be nothing but a corpse, right? This question may arise; the phrase that is often used is "Who is dragging this corpse around?" The body is referred to as a corpse. The body itself has no function, but there is this energy or power or mind that is moving or using this body. But what is that? Who is dragging this corpse around?

These few phrases mentioned, and all these various huatou, are all pointing inwards. They are looking inward at the deepest aspect of What is mind? What is the self?, constantly going deeper, layer by layer. In this way the questioning really develops power and strength and can become a mass of questioning doubt which at some point would shatter, and then one would clearly experience one's original face. These are the different phrases that can be used, and that is the process of how it works.

Establishing Unification

But again, what about establishing the unification of mind? You can start by using these other methods first; reciting the Buddha's name or using the breath method. You can also use huatou directly, but knowing you need to use it to establish unification first. To do this, what you do is recite it, much like you would do with the Buddha's name. You are not asking it yet, you are just picking it up to bring it into the mind. You continuously recite this phrase until the mind is completely unified with huatou. When there is nothing else in the mind other than that phrase, very stable and clear, at that point one can change and develop it to become asking or investigating. There are a few phrases that can be used in applying the huatou method. But it is really important to know that before we start to use it or investigate, the foundation of unification must be established, so you can choose any of these approaches in establishing that foundation.

If you are interested in this huatou method, or if you possibly already have the sense of questioning about existence, you choose one of these phrases and work on it. It is very important to know that when using the huatou method, establishing the foundation of mental stillness is essential. Reciting the huatou, or using the breath or the Buddha's

name, really corresponds to stilling the mind. After unifying the mind, then we change the approach to investigating or asking, which really corresponds to contemplation. It is very similar to silent illumination, in that first we establish the foundation of stillness. With that stillness, we then move on to emphasizing contemplation or penetrating illumination. Whether it is huatou or silent illumination, these sudden approaches of Chan require a solid foundation of mental stillness, calmness, and clarity of mind.

This is really how these methods came to be in the first place. We see in the history of the Chan school, that such methods arose within the conditions of calmness when Buddhism in China had already established itself to a certain point, where the practitioners had fulfilled the prerequisites necessary to move on to this very sudden approach, gaining strength with its very direct practices. It is important to know that, and if you are clear about that, then you know what you have to do. For our practice, it really takes a long time to establish the foundation, and we just work on that. When the time comes, we'll know that the condition is ready to change the method more towards contemplation. Otherwise, if we don't understand this, we spend most of our time going in the wrong direction, and of course, the methods won't be able to effect the results they were designed for. So if you understand this, you know the approach and the proper way to make use of these methods. In time, when the situation is right, we will just naturally reach the goal.

Mountain Hike

I would like to conclude with a story about hiking up a mountain. I don't know if you have hiked or climbed a mountain before? I have, back in Malaysia, done a long mountain hike with a group

of people, and it was quite an experience. The students that took me along were well prepared, so they had an easier time with the hike. Myself, I wasn't well prepared, so I had a difficult time. You need to be well prepared for these intense mountain hikes. You need to know what equipment to bring, and of course you need to bring along some kind of trail food. You also need to train your body, build your strength, to be able to go the whole distance of the hike. Some people read a lot of books about the mountain that they are going on. They get maps and find all the trails, and look into the actual geography of that area, so that they have a really good understanding about the whole environment they are getting into.

Of course, once you get there, some work is may yet be needed. When you get to the foot of the mountain, you may still need to get some last-minute things. You likely will need to find a guide who is familiar with the mountain and has hiked it before. During the hike you may encounter all kinds of difficulties: your equipment might not be appropriate, the food is not enough, there may be obstacles along the way. But eventually, you make your way through it. You get to the top, and the landscape itself is so beautiful – impermanence, selflessness, emptiness – the view at the top of the mountain. This is a common approach when people go for a mountain hike. They cherish that experience of being at the top of the mountain.

The last time we went hiking was about 25 years ago. It was really quite a memorable experience. The people that took me were really well prepared. But it wasn't so easy to find vegetarian canned food, so we just brought instant noodles; we thought that would save the day. I was probably the most under-prepared person. I had my clothes, which were pretty light, and one can of Chinese vegetarian barbecue sauce. They took all the heavy stuff, and I took the light stuff, plus the can. This was really

under-preparation. They were used to doing a little bit of hiking. They were training their bodies, and were used to carrying 20 kilos of stuff. They were in really good shape, and I wasn't.

Altogether it took a few days. By the end of it, I was suffering. I really wasn't ready for it. The first night, I was completely wiped out. My knees hurt so much that I couldn't even bend my legs to put on my socks. I was in bed and I left my feet sticking out and the mosquitoes started to bite them. But I was so exhausted that I couldn't even scratch my feet. The first night, I was really suffering. All through the rest of the hike, my knees were giving me trouble. I have had knee problems ever since. It was really hard for me, but eventually we finished the hike and got the top.

This is quite similar to the whole process of practice. Maybe some of you can relate to this. You came to a retreat and pretty much came unprepared. You are sitting there, your whole body is aching and suffering, and your knees are killing you. This is a torturous experience, because you haven't done the preparation. You haven't fulfilled the requirements to go through the process in a smoother or better-prepared way. The approach I used when I went hiking that time, you can say this is one way of doing it. It is probably the way that most people go about a mountain hike. What I would like to do now is to compare this approach to another kind of approach.

Another Approach

There is a second kind of approach to hiking a mountain. Some people are more adventurous. Rather than take the way people usually go, they like to take their own routes. So the way they go about it may be a bit different. They may know a few things about hiking and have some basic knowledge of the

mountain where they are going. They need to have some basic sense of direction; that is essential. For example, if they start at the foot of the mountain in the east, then they have to go west to get to the top. But they are not concerned about the details, about the path that people usually take. They just know the direction they are heading, and they take their own way. You can say it is an approach that is more independent.

This mindset may be not just adventurous, but a way of exploring. They are intrigued to experience it on their own. They might even hike all by themselves. When they get to the top, what do they see? What they see could be described as their own personal native scenery, because at the very moment, at that very place, they see it for themselves. They experience this vast and spacious scenery, so beautiful and clear. This is nothing that

someone else can describe for them. They are not even interested in others' descriptions. They have done it and seen it themselves. It is nothing that can be expressed in words. It is not something learned from knowledge. That personal native scenery is impermanence, selflessness, emptiness. That vast, open, vivid landscape is just their individual experience, reached through their own exploration and adventure up the mountain. This is another approach that one may use to hike a mountain. A little different from the traditional approach, but it is another way to make it to the top.

Analogy to Practice

These two approaches to mountain climbing can be analogies for practice. The first approach could be compared to contemplation, where



Photo by Peter Lin

practitioners really need to have a firm foundation and knowledge of the Sutras and Shastras. They need to have an understanding of the Dharma as well as a clear, detailed understanding of how to use the method. They need to have close guidance from the instructor every step of the way. This is the more traditional approach, and it is more like the first kind of mountain hiking.

The second kind of hike is analogous to practicing huatou. This is really an individual path. The preparation is more of a personal determination. You have to have the basic direction, but then you need an incredibly strong will and determination. When you take this path, it is really your own experience. No one can take you through this method of using huatou – developing the sense of doubt, and walking the path of practice. It oftentimes requires a lot of energy. A person who uses the huatou method may inherently possess a very strong will power and have energy and endurance within. When they take this path, they can't rely on the teacher. The teacher may give a little bit of instruction and encouragement, but student has to walk the rest of the path on their own.

There is a story, or a gong-an, where a Chan master's teacher posed a question: "Before your parents gave birth to you, what was your original face?" This Chan master at the time was perplexed. He tried to find an answer in all these Sutras and Shastras at his disposal, but he couldn't. He went back to his teacher and asked, "Master, what is this? I can't find the answer myself. Can you tell me?" His master said, "I can't tell you. If I tell you, that would be mine, not yours. You have to find it yourself." Afterwards, that student gave up on the traditional path of the Sutras. He just investigated this question deeply and nourished that doubt. One day, when he was cleaning up, he happened to hit a tile against a piece of bamboo.

And suddenly, he had a breakthrough. He knew that he experienced his own native scenery for himself. It wasn't something his teacher gave him or took him along the way.

The second kind of hike is very similar to that. The teacher may be off to the side. In the beginning the teacher may just give some basic directions but the practitioners really have to rely on themselves. They have to nourish their own practice along the path through great energy and determination. These two ways of hiking could be analogous to those two kinds of practice. One is the more traditional path of contemplation. Two is the path of huatou. If you are using this approach of huatou, you need to ask yourself, are you prepared? In one sense you need to have even more preparation, you need that personal power in order to engage in the practice of huatou.

Is there a third kind of approach to mountain climbing? There is. This third approach is silent illumination. How would you hike with that kind of approach? This person would start at the foot of the mountain. As soon as they start off, wherever they are on that mountain path, they are unified with the mountain, completely one with it. Actually, it doesn't matter where they go. Wherever they go, there is beautiful and wonderful scenery. In that sense, everywhere they go is the top of the mountain. This approach is likened to silent illumination. It is very simple and easy.

Choosing Your Approach

These are the three different approaches. The first: the traditional approach to contemplation practice. This person needs a very solid foundation in the Sutras and Shastras, as well as clear and detailed instruction and close guidance from the teacher. This kind of person may be

suitable to be a tour guide when they finish the hike. The tour guide is familiar with the routes and the landscape, and they are able to give clear instructions to others as to what they need to look out for on the hike. So the first kind of practitioner may be more suitable to be a teacher, with their rich knowledge and experience.

The second kind: the huatou practitioner. Because they went on the hike their own individual way, as a teacher they may instruct the disciple in a similar manner. They may just give a huatou and say, "Use it!" and let the disciple go about the practice on their own. That kind of instruction may be a bit iffy. If the disciple doesn't have strong will, determination, and powerful character, they may get lost half way on the hike. What happens if they get lost and the teacher is not around? They have to find their own way back. They may stay where they are and scream for help. The path of huatou is very individual in that sense, it is all about having that powerful character. With basic direction and knowledge, the outcome of the practice is really determined by the fortitude of the said individual. Thus, the second kind of practitioner may end up instructing their disciples that way.

The third kind: silent illumination. It is simple to the point that you wonder what instruction to follow? Silent illumination is a method-less method. When you go hiking with this mindset, the analogy goes like this: You are one with the mountain. Wherever you go is fine, whatever you see is native scenery, and there is beauty everywhere. The teacher instructs the disciple to simply go into the mountain and see for their self, just completely relax with ease of body and mind. A person who is not yet clear on silent illumination could walk on the mountain but not see anything beautiful, "just some grass, trees, and stuff," because they haven't really grasped what is essential in the method. It is possible that they start to imagine they are one with

the mountain, that they are silently illuminating. They imagine they have some experience, but it turns out to be nothing.

The differences between these approaches are quite interesting. With the more traditional contemplation the requirements are to be fulfilled with knowledge and a clear method on the path. Huatou depends on the determination, power, and strength of the individual character. Silent illumination depends on the ability to be very direct and to just be at one with the surroundings. Which of these three approaches is good for you? The choice is yours. What kind of character do you have? All three approaches get to the top of mountain. They all bring that same experience of the realization of impermanence, selflessness, and emptiness. However, for each kind of path, you can say that the experience is different. The experience of emptiness is the same. Yet the way of entering into it is quite different.

Getting to the Foot of the Mountain

These three different approaches, contemplation, huatou, or silent illumination, really correspond to the later part of the practice. You can say that doing the mountain climbing is the later stage. In the first part of the journey, what is really essential is the preparation – getting to the foot of the mountain. This is a stage that most of us are working on right now, creating a foundation of practice, establishing a stillness of mind, single-pointedness without scatteredness – this is getting to the foot of the mountain.

A lot of people are not even on the road yet. Some of you are actually still sitting at home, cozy on the couch with your computer and a couple of books.

You are only reading information about the hike; you haven't set foot on the road to the mountain. This is where a lot of people are right now. They think they are engaging with the practice, but they are just reading a lot of books, filling themselves with knowledge, just thinking about the practice. These days it is incredibly easy to get information about the Dharma. A lot of people might think they are climbing the mountain already. But they are just imagining that. In actuality, they are sitting at home curled up with their books. It is essential that you have the knowledge to prepare you, but it is also essential that you actually take off on the road and get yourself to the foot of the mountain.

Six Wondrous Gates

We can describe or categorize these approaches according to the Six Wondrous Gates of the Tiantai tradition. In the beginning, you need to make use of counting, following, and stilling the mind. That is really the foundation of the practice. Contemplation is reflecting on the Dharma to make use of the method. Huatou, categorized in the Tiantai system as returning, is looking inward directly, going deeper and deeper, peeling back the layers of one's mind. Silent illumination is classified in the Tiantai system as purity, manifesting the basic quality of our mind, which is pure.

First you must master the three approaches of counting, following, and stilling the mind. Then you need to know which path is right for you, in addition to bringing yourself to the foot of the mountain. It is also crucial that you have proper instruction and a good teacher. These days, the approach of contemplation is spread by the Theravada tradition. They have a wealth of knowledge and very clear and detailed instructions on the practice. These help to establish this solid tradition. If the practitioners have a very good teacher, they can rely

on this knowledge and information to guide them along the path.

But for huatou and silent illumination, if the teacher is really not qualified, it can be very difficult to walk this path. Why? Partly because there is not enough information about it. It is a very individual path. If you don't have a good teacher, it could be really dangerous in that you don't know where to go. Thankfully we have our founder Master Sheng Yen. He organized the practice of huatou and silent illumination into stages, a very systematic approach for these methods. He also prepared us with a lot of information and clear instructions on how to walk the path of this sudden method of Chan. Because it is sudden, there are no real set stages. However, in preparing us with information and letting us know some things we may possibly encounter, Shifu helped make these two methods more accessible to people, in the same way that contemplation has become accessible.

We can see that regardless of which of these three approaches you use, you need to have proper preparation. You need to have the basic knowledge and the guidance of a good instructor. Most importantly, you need to know that to climb the mountain you must first bring yourselves to the foot of the mountain. This analogy of the mountain climb really paints the whole picture for the practice process. You fulfill the prerequisites of the mountain climb by working on the foundation of establishing stability and stillness of mind. This prepares you for making that hike. When you climb the mountain, if you fulfill the basic requirements, and have the right direction and instructions, for sure you can get to the top and experience that native scenery of impermanence, selflessness, and emptiness.

Climbing the Mountain

by Chi Chern Fashi



禪修如登山
修正若成就
猶如處山腳
自此能登山

*Chan practice is like climbing a mountain.
When you can cultivate stillness,
That's like being at the foot.
From there, you can climb up.*

未至止一心
即是籌備時
需具各條件
調和身息心

*Without yet having reached a unified mind,
this is a time of making preparations.
One must gather many necessities,
to harmonize the body, breath, and mind.*

調和用功中
漸次循序修
已做好準備
方行至山腳

*In the effort of harmonization,
One cultivates by degrees.
Such preparation achieved,
only then can one reach the foot of the mountain.*



傳統修觀法
依古仙人道
循著前人路
有善士嚮導

*Contemplating the traditional way,
One trusts the path of the ancients.
Following those who have gone before,
One has a reliable guide.*

一步一步走
一路有順逆
終而抵山頂
見山頂風光

*Walking step by step on the path,
encountering the favorable and the adverse,
Eventually one reaches the summit,
And sees the view from the peak.*

山頂好風光
無常無我空
之前只聽聞
現親身得見

*The scene at the summit is wonderful:
Impermanence, selflessness, emptiness.
Before, one had only heard about it;
Now, one sees for oneself.*

若修話頭禪
如好探索者
喜自闢途徑
自找登山路

*The practice of Huatou Chan
Is for one fond of exploring,
Inclined to leave the well-trod path,
Looking for one's own road up the mountain.*

但把握方向
奮起勇猛心
登山之行程
倍增艱難度

*Once certain of the direction,
One summons up great ferocious power.
As one climbs on,
difficulty increases with each step.*

故之前準備
需更具功夫
能突破障礙
終而達山頂

*Thus, having already prepared,
One more so needs this skill so nurtured,
to break through all obstacles.
Finally, one reaches the summit.*

個人親自見
即本地風光
所見無遮攔
為露地風光

*One sees for oneself,
The native scenery.
What one sees is without obstruction,
This open view revealed.*



修默照禪者
身心放鬆徹
處於統一境
並放任六根

*For those who do Silent Illumination,
Relaxed thoroughly in body and mind,
In the state of unification,
they set free the six senses.*

一步入於山
與山即統一
人即為是山
山即為是人

*With one step into the mountain,
One becomes one with the mountain.
The person is the mountain;
The mountain is the person.*

人山既一體
處處即山頂
當下即如是
見處處風光

*With person and mountain as one body,
The summit is everywhere.
At this moment, it's just "thus,"
The scenery seen in every place.*



無論何法門
所見所悟者
無常無我空
即本性風光

*Regardless of whatever Dharma gate,
What one sees and awakens to
is impermanence, selflessness, emptiness.
This is the scenery of one's original nature.*

入門方便異
所悟非為二
方便即善巧
終極本性一

*Expedient ways to enter this differ,
Yet what is awakened to has no difference.
Expedient means and skillful methods,
Ultimately are of one nature.*

方便是契機
本性為契理
契機而契理
禪修圓滿境

*Expedient means accord with one's capacity;
Original nature accords with principle.
When one accords with both capacity and principle,
Chan practice is completely fulfilled.*

July 25, 2014
Dharma Drum Retreat Center, NY, USA



Calligraphy & Paintings by Chi Chern Fashi
English Translation by Chang Wen Fashi & Xueshan
Art Direction by Shaun Chung



DDMBA Ontario Grand Opening

On Sunday October 26, 2014 DDMBA Ontario celebrated the grand opening of its new center located at 1025 McNicoll Avenue in Toronto, Ontario. The many activities held on that day included a touching speech by DDM Abbot Venerable Guo Dong, a beautiful inauguration ceremony led by monastics, and outdoor activities and exhibits.

Though it felt like a particularly cold, cloudy, pre-winter day in Toronto, people's hearts were warmed through the sense of being together. Members brought out their various talents to raise money for the center; some designed natural organic soaps, others offered hand-crafted beads. The luncheon food was prepared and well arranged by dedicated volunteers. Outside, a wishing tree was set up for people to make a wish to Avalokiteshvara, and write their own heartfelt vow to be hung on the tree. Volunteers were on hand to make sure the wishes did not blow away with the cold autumn wind. Members sang Buddhist themed songs to bring festive cheer to the area, as participants took turns carrying bowls filled with water to practice mindful walking.

Recently Chan teacher Gilbert Gutierrez paid a visit to Toronto. During his stay, he remarked how the work that went into the center is the collective effort of many hearts, over a long term period of time. It's through people's open hearts that spiritual places are made for others to continue their practice. Gilbert reminded the group that every small effort counts, and when there is no attachment to self, what can be done collectively is boundless. DDMBA Ontario's new home was never the result of one person, but rather the collective

abilities and passions of many different people. While some have donated their time to different volunteer efforts, others have donated financially.

Perhaps the most significant gift is applying the practice of Chan to daily life, even in small ways according to people's abilities and conditions. Without this, the center could not possibly have been built. Through the gift of the practice comes energy to sustain the chapter's programs and tell others about the benefits of Chan practice. As Gilbert and other Dharma teachers have reminded the group, everything comes down to practice and right views. With the heart of practice arises the courage to live in this moment fully, make mistakes, and learn from those mistakes, to the point where they are not even seen as mistakes anymore. As Master Sheng Yen himself has written, "In broadly sowing the fields of merit, why fear any hardship or rebuke?"

DDMBA Ontario sincerely thanks the support of monastics, the Vancouver DDMBA Chapter, and all the practitioners who worked together to make this dream possible.

by Evelyn Wang

Chan Meditation Center “Fulfilling a Wish”

“The making of Dharma Drum culture: gratitude, a great number of good people, great morality have come together to ensure the success of this distinguished gathering ... We are providing spiritual sustenance ... we use the method, use the concept to regulate ourselves and allow ourselves to lead lives of greater ease, happiness, peace, health, and well-being, This is our goal.”

— Chan Master Sheng Yen

“The Chan Meditation Center has already been established in New York for 35 years. The tree that Shifu planted that year has grown and flourished. In order to benefit a greater number of people, a new Chan Meditation Center is in the midst of being born. Fulfill a wish. Expand the Center.”

— from the film “Fulfill A Wish”



Fundraising Event

The Chan Meditation Center officially launched its expansion project on October 5th, 2014 with a fundraising charity sale. The project was headed by CMC Director Venerable Chang Hwa and board member Lily Kung, assisted by dozens of CMC volunteers and a group of DDMBA members from Taiwan. Four hundred guests filled the Mudan Banquet Hall in Flushing New York. The theme of this event was “Fulfilling A Wish”. This effort generated over 900 thousand dollars.

The event began with a solemn procession of six small groups of 20 candle bearers each: monastic sangha, seniors, adults, youths, teenagers and children – representing CMC’s past, present and future. The red LED candles were mounted into a board erected on the stage to reflect CMC’s 35th anniversary.

The event’s highlight was the charity sale with majority of items donated by Lily Kung and Chiliu Wu, giving away the art collections of their respective deceased spouses, Jeffrey Kung and Fanny Shaw. Many individuals also donated valuable items: Buddhist art, calligraphy, paintings, sculptures and jewelry, including some personal possessions of Shifu’s and other sangha members. CMC’s chorus performed two songs: *Dharma Drum Ode* and *Walking the Bodhisattva Path*. The chorus teacher/soloist sang *The Journey Home* to commemorate the 35th anniversary.

This event would not be possible without the dedication of many volunteers working to make it a reality. Heartfelt thanks and gratitude to the DDMBA volunteers from Taiwan for their generosity and support paying their own ways to be here and pitching in to help when needed.

Groundbreaking Ceremony

On November 2nd, 2014, the Chan Meditation Center held a groundbreaking ceremony for the expansion of its monastery in Elmhurst, New York. The project is expected to be completed by summer 2016.

It was a chilly, windy morning for the outdoor event and Abbot President Venerable Guo Dong commented that “The wind will spread the Dharma everywhere.” The ceremony began with a traditional Buddhist purification ritual; the Abbot President, leading a procession of monastics, sprinkled fragrant water around the perimeter of the expansion site. Then all chanted the *Great Compassion Mantra of Guan Yin* (Avalokitesvara) and the *Heart Sutra*.

After the chanting the symbolic groundbreaking began. A section of patio blocks had been removed to reveal plot of earth. Shiny new shovels adorned with red ribbons were handed to six celebrants: Venerable Guo Dong Abbot President of DDM, Venerable Guo Xing Abbot of CMC and DDRC, Charles Huang Honorary Chairman, Nancy Bonardi of CMC Board of Directors, Lily Kung of DDMBA Board of Directors, and Judy Cheng Northeast Regional Coordinator. Moving in unison, the celebrants lifted and turned the earth three times, while CMC Director Venerable Chang Hwa recited the meaning for each symbolic shoveling:

“The first shovel is for sounding the Dharma drum; illuminating the mind; and glorifying the earth’s land.”

“The second shovel is for rebuilding the Chan Center; moving the project forward smoothly and peacefully, and perfecting the Buddha land.”

“The third shovel is for initiating the great compassionate mind, uplifting the human character, and establishing a Pure Land.”

In his Dharma talk after the ceremony, Venerable Guo Dong said that the physical monastery may go through the process of formation and decay, however what keeps the DDM community growing is the will to uplift the character of humanity and build a pure land on earth. The expansion of the Chan Meditation Center is not only an enhancement of hardware and space, it's also an expansion of the Buddhist pure land.

At noon delicious vegetarian lunch was served. In the afternoon session Ya Han Chang and Anderson Cheng from the CMC Choir group sang

Water, Moon and Mind, a soothing Buddhist song. The day concluded with a tea and fruit session, where everyone shared their practice stories, their vision for a better Chan Meditation Center, and their wish for a bright prospect of Mahayana Buddhism in the West.

Our Shifu Chan Master Sheng Yen once said “Don't worry about having a monastery, but keep a monastery in mind. If we keep practicing diligently, naturally there will be a (physical) monastery.”



DHARMA DRUM RETREAT CENTER
Chan Meditation Retreats



Gateway to Chan
March 14 – 18, 2015
Venerable Chang Wen

Silent Illumination Intensive
May 22 – 31, 2015
Dr. Simon Child



Foundation
March 27 – 29, 2015
Dr. Rebecca Li

Master Sheng Yen Intensive
(Huatou) • June 19 – 28, 2015
Venerable Guo Xing



The Future

Calendar of retreats, classes and other upcoming events


Schedule is subject to change. Please check websites for updated and detailed information.

Zen
and
Inner Peace

Chan Master Sheng Yen's weekly television program

Now on ICN Cable Channel 24.2 in NY

Fridays 6:45 pm – 7:00 pm



Dharma Drum Retreat Center (DDRC) in Pine Bush, NY		
(845) 744-8114 - ddrcc@dharmadrumretreat.org - www.dharmadrumretreat.org		
REGULAR WEEKLY ACTIVITIES		
Thursday Evening Meditation	7 pm–9 pm	Sitting, walking, moving meditation, Dharma talk.
CLASSES & WORKSHOPS (register online)		
Eating With Your Mind	Jan 10	Harry Miller
Beginner Meditation Class	Jan 31	Venerable Chang Wen
RETREATS (register online)		
Day of Stillness	Feb 7	Saturday 9 am – 5 pm
	Mar 7	Venerable Chang Wen
Children's Program	Feb 7	Saturday 9 am – 5 pm
	Mar 7	Little Bodhisattvas Team
Young People's Retreat	Feb 20 – 22	Venerable Chang Wen
Gateway to Chan Retreat	Mar 14 – 18	Venerable Chang Wen
Foundation Retreat	Mar 27 – 29	Rebecca Li

Chan Meditation Center (CMC) in Elmhurst, Queens, NY		
(718) 592-6593 - chancenter@gmail.com - www.chancenter.org - www.ddmba.org		
SUNDAY OPEN HOUSE		
Every Sunday	10:00 am–11:00 am	Sitting Meditation
	11:00 am–12:30 pm	Dharma Talk
	12:30 pm–1:00 pm	Food Offering and Announcements
	1:00 pm–1:45 pm	Vegetarian Lunch
Chanting and Recitation	1st Sunday	2:00–3:30 pm Guan Yin (Avalokitesvara) Bodhisattva Chanting Service
	2nd Sunday	2:00–4:00 pm Great Compassion Repentance Ceremony Dharani Sutra
	3rd Sunday	2:00–4:00 pm Earth Store Bodhisattva Sutra Chanting Service
	4th Sunday	2:00–3:30 pm Bodhisattva Precept Recitation Ritual
<i>(If there is a 5th Sunday in the month, there will be a Guan Yin Chanting Service.)</i>		

REGULAR WEEKLY ACTIVITIES		
Monday Night Chanting	7:30 pm–9:15 pm	Last Monday of each month: Recitation of the Eighty-eight Buddhas' names and repentance
Tuesday Night Sitting Group	7:00 pm–9:30 pm	Sitting, yoga exercises, walking meditation, Dharma sharing, recitation of the Heart Sutra.
Saturday Sitting Group	9:00 am–3:00 pm	Sitting, yoga exercises, video teachings by Master Sheng Yen

RETREATS (Pre-registration advised)		
1-Day Retreat	Jan 31 · Feb 28 · Mar 14 · Mar 28	Saturday 9:00 am - 5:00 pm

CLASSES AND WORKSHOPS (Pre-registration advised)		
Taijiquan with David Ngo	Every Thursday 7:30 pm-9:00 pm	\$25 per 4-week month — \$80 for 16 classes First class is free for newcomers
Sunday Afternoon Movies	Jan 18 Mar 15	2:00 pm-5:00 pm Film Viewing and Discussion Led by Dr. Peter Lin
Dharma Drum Young People (DDYP) Gathering	Every 3rd Saturday 2:30-5:00 pm	Buddhists and non-Buddhists between the ages of 16-38 are welcome!

SPECIAL EVENTS			
Passing on the Lamp of Wisdom	Feb 7	9:00 am – 5:00 pm	1-Day Retreat led by Abbot Venerable Guo Xing
	Feb 8	11:00 am – 12:30 pm	Special Dharma Talk by Abbot Venerable Guo Xing
Welcoming Chinese New Year in Mindful Prayers	Feb 19 – 21	10:30 am – 12:00 pm	Medicine Buddha Chanting Service
	Feb 22	10:00 am – 10:50 am	Universal Buddha Dharma Assembly
		11:00 am – 12:30 pm	Special Dharma Talk by Abbot Venerable Guo Xing
		10:00 am – 3:30 pm	Special Activities and Charity Fair

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	London		Joanne Dyson	liew853@btinternet.com www.chanmeditationlondon.org/

Chan Meditation Retreats

Led by Dharma Heirs of Chan Master Sheng Yen

7-Day Silent Illumination

Led by Žarko Andričević • 21 – 28 February 2015

Haus Tao, CH 9427 Wolfhalden, Switzerland

CONTACT Hildi Thalman • info@chan-bern.ch • www.chan-bern.ch • www.haustao.ch



10-Day Intensive Chan

Led by Guo Ru Fashi • 26 February – 7 March 2015

Chan Grove, 198 Fuxing 3rd Road, Taipei, Taiwan

CONTACT inquiry.ccc@gmail.com • +886 2-2891-5205 • www.changrove.org



7-Day Silent Illumination

Led by Simon Child • 21 – 28 March 2015

Dluzew, Poland

CONTACT Pawel Rosciszewski • budwod@budwod.com.pl • +48 601224999 • www.czan.eu



9-Day Intensive Chan

Led by Guo Yuan Fashi • 15 – 23 May 2015

Dharma Drum Mountain, New Taipei, Taiwan

CONTACT img.ddm@gmail.com • +886 975-329-621 • http://onlinereg.ddm.org.tw/9ENRetreat



21-Day Intensive Chan

Led by Chi Chern Fashi • 1 – 22 August 2015

Dluzew, Poland

CONTACT Pawel Rosciszewski • budwod@budwod.com.pl • +48 601224999 • www.czan.eu

