

禪
CHAN MAGAZINE

SPRING 2015



光明遠大

聖嚴



Great Light

Calligraphy by Chan Master Sheng Yen

“Sharing does not mean loss. For instance, I light a lamp, but I do not keep it for myself. On the contrary, I lift the lamp high, so people who do not have lamps in the dark can see. The light in my hand will not dim or disappear. Furthermore, to have greater light for everyone, I seek a way to increase the brightness.”

— CHAN MASTER SHENG YEN
Master Sheng Yen Teaches Huatou Chan, 2009

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From the Editor

THIS ISSUE MARKS ANOTHER MILESTONE in the history of our magazine; we welcome our first art director. Shaun Chung is a multidisciplinary designer, with focus on typography, publication design, exhibition design, and brand identity design. Since 2009 he has served as art director for several art exhibitions at the Chung-Shan National Gallery and other museums. Based in New Taipei, Taiwan, he holds a Master of Fine Arts in Design and Technology from Parsons The New School for Design, New York. From 2011 to 2014 Shaun was the resident designer and librarian for Dharma Drum Retreat Center, and that is where I met him. I was delighted with the loving care he put into our library, from exhaustive work on the cataloging system to an elegant redesign of the room's décor. When we wanted to hang large posters of our meal liturgy in the dining hall, Shaun designed the English version with a typeface that beautifully complements Chi Chern Fashi's calligraphy in the Chinese version. He redesigned DDRC's "brand identity" – the look of our posters and mailings, and helped fine-tune our website pages.

I have every issue of Chan Magazine here on a shelf beside me, going back thirty-eight years. They present a kaleidoscope of creative styles, reflecting the tastes of the various editors and the changing times they lived in. The magazine's style evolved and matured well beyond the primitive look of the first issues I designed in 1977. When I returned as

editor-in-chief in 2012, I was eager to jump into the digital age of publishing. I'd had a long career as a darkroom technician, and then a second career as a technical writer and software screen designer. So I was experienced in working with black-and-white photos as well as teaching myself to use graphics and publishing software. But I was greatly blessed to have Shaun mentor me in the finer points of text layout and the proper resolution of a photo intended for print. Eventually he suggested a format redesign that I liked so much I adopted it, starting with the Winter 2013 issue.

I was sorry when Shaun left DDRC because I enjoyed having him as a co-worker; he really is a lot of fun. But we stayed in touch. He has continued to help with the magazine, designing beautiful bilingual layouts of Chi Chern Fashi's poetry. He continues to offer polite suggestions on my layouts; I might think something looks perfectly fine and then he'll do some small tweaks and it looks infinitely better. Personally, I love the hands-on creativity of actually laying out and producing the magazine. But the work takes an enormous amount of time, which I might better spend in developing content. Since Shaun is so much better at design and production than I am, I decided to invite him on staff. I'm very grateful that he's agreed. ∞

Buffe Maggie Laffey
Editor-in-Chief

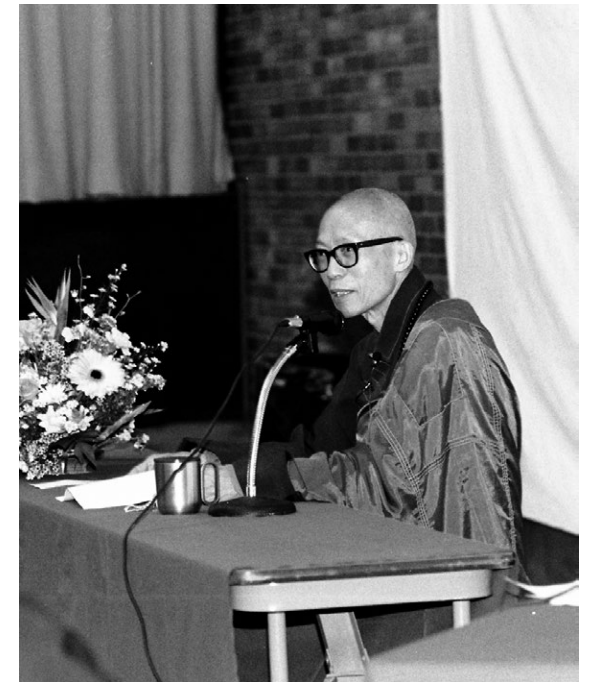
Reason and Emotion

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” (*Chan men*). It is one of a selected number of books which have been translated into English for eventual publication. It was translated by Chiacheng Chang under the auspices of the Cultural Center of Dharma Drum Mountain, Taiwan, and edited by Ernest Heau. The talk was given at the Taiwan Center, New York City, November 13, 1992.

BEFORE WE BEGIN LET ME ASK YOU, do you consider yourself to be emotional? Do you consider yourself to be rational, or somewhere in between emotional and rational? Whether you think you are emotional or rational, in both cases you are right. But strictly speaking, rationality in its ultimate sense does not actually exist. Now let's look at what “sentient beings” means in Buddhist terms. “Sentient” indicates that one has emotions and feelings; and so sentient beings are said to be people who are emotional, self-centered, and attached to their self. If people are always self-centered and attached, are they objective or subjective? (Audience: “Subjective.”) Since they are subjective, can they be rational all the time? (Audience: “No.”) So people can't be purely rational all the time, and we can say that most people are emotional. Nevertheless, there is difference among emotions – some people can be very emotional and self-centered, while others who are less emotional can be very generous.



Master Sheng Yen in November 1992

Love in Its True Sense Is Free of Subjectivity

Normally speaking, loving kindness is a feeling of love that one has for all others. The problem is that for many people, love is about pursuit, going after and possessing what they desire and crave. This is like the fairy tale where the wolf says to the rabbit, “I love you so much that I want to eat you.” Most people’s love is possessive rather than devoted. But love in its truest sense is unconditional, not self-centered and not subjective; this is the genuine meaning of emotional love. In Buddhist terms it is the feeling of compassion. To handle our own or other people’s affairs with feeling is to be emotional. Many people anger easily and regret it afterwards, and can’t understand why they are angry. But they still can’t control themselves at the moment they get angry. So is this rational or emotional? (Audience: “Emotional.”) If it is emotional, is the moment of regret itself emotional or rational? The moment of regret may be rational, but it’s a pity that regret *per se* is often incorrect.

Generally speaking, to handle things with logic or reason can be said to be rational. But this is not absolutely correct, for every individual has their own reasons. For example, in the US presidential election between George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton, whose reasoning was right and whose was wrong? It turned out that the majority of people supported Bill Clinton’s political ideals, so by this standard his reasoning would be more correct. But the question is, the reasoning of the majority and minority, the rich and poor, the powerful and insignificant, are all problematic. So whose reasoning is truly reasonable? From this we see that reason has its problems too. Sentient beings’ reasoning has a selfish inclination, as they tend to align their interests to benefit themselves; they

point their fingers at others, shifting responsibilities to others. As a Chinese saying goes, “Heaven and earth destroy those who don’t take care of their own interests.” From the Buddhist point of view, all people live a selfish life. So where does reason come from?

Sentient Beings Are All Selfish

Since humans are sentient beings, they are naturally emotional, although their emotions may differ in degree. Some people are selfish for their own sake, some for their family’s sake, and some for the sake of their career or social group. So the range of selfishness can be wide or narrow. For example, the now much advocated ecological movements want to protect the whole earth and its living environment for human beings. Generally speaking, this is in the interest of the public; hence it is selfishness that seeks the best interests of all humanity.

The other day a journalist came to Chan Meditation Center to interview me, and we talked about what kind of gratitude humans should show as Thanksgiving Day approached. The way Americans celebrate Thanksgiving is very interesting. When the early settlers had little to eat in winter due to the icy cold weather, God was very merciful to provide them with turkeys for food. From then on, every family would eat turkey on Thanksgiving Day. How is this actually showing gratitude? While a custom may be well-meaning at first, originally without any selfish element, it can over time turn out to be a bad custom marked by selfishness. If we don’t follow the Buddhadharmā and have no idea what selfishness means, then we won’t even realize that it’s not right to be selfish. If everyone is selfish, then who can actually benefit in the end? For example, there are gambling casinos in Atlantic City in the state of New Jersey. Tourists spend money trying their luck, hoping to

win more money, and professional gamblers hope to make a living by winning. If everybody wants to win, then who should be the loser?

To Reason Is to Take People into Consideration

To reason means to take others into consideration, to think objectively and to consider the interests of the public more often. This is also true between husband and wife and between friends. If the husband only considers himself, or the wife cares only about her own standpoint, that would be unreasonable on either side. If they take each other into consideration, which is reasoning with emotional sensitivity, then they can be an ideal couple. Emotions are not all bad or all good. Self-centered emotions are harmful to us and to others, while caring and forgiving emotions benefit both us and others.

Some have people said to me, “Business people can’t believe in Buddhism.” When I asked them why, they said, “After believing in Buddhism, you can’t tell lies any more. If business people don’t tell lies, then their business won’t go well, and they won’t be able to make money.” For example, in Mainland China you used to see slogans on shop entrances such as “No Cheating for Both the Young and the Elderly” or “Real Bargains for Real Stuff.” Now in Taiwan you can often see signs that say “On Sale Below Cost Price” or “On Sale, Buy One Get One Free” on shop entrances. Are these signs always telling the truth?

Must business people really lie? Sometimes small lies may help not only to make a profit for oneself, but also benefit others. For example, for something with an original price of 10 dollars, a salesperson may tell the customer, “This item costs me 12 bucks. Since you’re a good customer, I’ll let you have it at the cost

price.” So the buyer may think, “It’s very nice of this friend, to sell it to me at the cost price.” And so he may happily decide to buy it. Lies like this may make people buy things they didn’t intend to buy originally, and thus enable the shop owner to make a profit. But this kind of lie can only apply to small deals; it won’t work for bigger deals. For bigger business, one single lie or one bad check is enough to ruin one’s reputation. Those who sell melons will claim their melons to be most sweet, but unless they’ve tried it themselves they can’t really know for sure. Is telling lies in business correct or not? From the Buddhist perspective, telling lies is wrong.

Recently I heard about a lay practitioner who was at that time, chairman of the Young Buddhist Society in New York, who told friends that he did business according to Buddhist principles. He said that by doing business with a due Buddhist attitude, he had won people’s trust and enjoyed good credit. This naturally helped to create more business for him. Now he likes to share his experiences and urges business people to believe in Buddhism and to have deep faith in the law of cause and effect.

Having a Stable Personality Lies in Suitable Practice

Emotions are harmful when one deceives and tricks others intentionally, or when one is emotionally unstable. Unstable people frequently lose their temper and after regretting it, would prostrate to the Buddha. But later when interacting with others, they would lose their temper again. Again and again in regret, they prostrate to the Buddha. I often meet people like this who say, “Shifu, I believe in Buddhism and I know that I shouldn’t lose my temper and fight with people. But still, I lose my temper and scold people.” Recently when I was in the American Midwest, a doctoral student



Master Sheng Yen in November 1992

from Taiwan told me, “It’s really strange, Shifu! I can’t read sutras. Whenever I read sutras in the morning, I end up fighting with my wife in that very afternoon.” I said, “This is not right. Reading sutras is supposed to enhance your compassion. How come you end up fighting with your wife?”

He said, “Shifu, whenever I read sutras, I am hoping that in the future, I won’t fight with my wife. But afterwards we always end up fighting. What I fear always happens eventually.”

I said: “You are not reading sutras the right way. While reading sutras, are you thinking about avoiding fighting and losing your temper in the afternoon? If you read sutras with such a mindset, your mind is already turbulent. After reading the sutra, you will naturally become agitated and end up fighting with each other.”

Sitting next to him, his wife then said, “Shifu, my husband just won’t listen to me. I tell him to read sutras with a relaxed mind, and he just won’t listen!”

I told him, “From now on you should read sutras with peace of mind. How can you expect yourself to avoid being emotional if you chant, read sutras and practice in such an anxious and agitated mood?” This example shows that it’s not as if this bodhisattva is not powerful enough and not responsive. Rather, it’s because he is not practicing properly; his practice attitude is problematic. This doctoral student chanted sutras and practiced in an emotional manner, and so the effect of his practice was naturally emotional. Our emotions need to be harmonized and regulated. To study and practice Buddhism is to cultivate calmness and peace of mind; with that, we will

naturally become more rational than emotional. If we always expect some purpose in our practice, worrying about achieving it sooner, that will create emotional problems.

Transform Emotion into Reason while in Motion

Reciting the Buddha’s name and chanting sutras are useful, although that may not make you automatically become more rational. Now I’ll teach you some methods to transform emotion into reason:

(1) *First principle: gathering the mind*

Draw your attention inward from outside, do not focus it on others and don’t put it on what you see and think, or on appearances or phenomena you encounter. Then be mindful of your breathing and contemplate: “When I am angry or agitated, how do I breathe? Do I breathe hastily?” This will show that your mood and your breathing are closely connected.

(2) *Second principle: think mindfully*

Put your attention on the sensation of your breathing, and then be attentive to what your mind is thinking. If you can be mindful about what you are thinking at the moment, then the very thought that was making you angry or upset has already stopped, and won’t make you angry anymore.

(3) *Third principle: close your eyes*

When you feel you are about to become angry with someone, immediately close your eyes and be mindful of your breathing. Maybe the other person is still angry and keeps shouting at you. At that moment, close your eyes and tell yourself, “I’ll wait for a while, and deal with you later.” Seeing that your eyes are closed, the other party might think that you are sick or that you have thrown in the towel,

and thus won’t try to provoke you anymore. Deep breathing is not the same as mindful breathing; by itself deep breathing can still make you feel tense, while mindful breathing can help you calm down as you inhale and exhale.

Harmonize Your Emotions in Stillness

You can use the above methods when experiencing unstable emotions while active in daily life. Now I will talk about harmonizing and balancing emotions while in stillness. I’d like you to do the following things one after the other: First, close your eyes. Now relax your head and facial muscles. Next, relax your shoulders. Then put the weight of your body onto the back of the chair, so that your center of gravity lies between your buttocks and the cushion. Then relax all the parts of your body that have sensation. Finally, keep your eyeballs from moving too much, and relax the eyes — this is when you relax yourself the most. Let go of all that is going on in your brain. Sit quietly like this for two or three minutes, and then open your eyes. This is actually a kind of rest for both your brain and muscles. After resting for a while, you will find that your emotions can actually relax as a result. Buddhism requires us to put equal emphasis on understanding and practice. Many people may intellectually understand a lot about Buddhist teachings, but actually lack practice and realization. It’s not enough to merely know about the teachings without putting them into practice.

Caring too much about trivial things or judging others by your own standards are actually afflicted emotional attitudes, even though they may appear to be rational. For example, a certain Buddhist person may have some knowledge about the Buddhist precepts and how a Buddhist should behave, but

then they just use the precepts as a standard to judge monastics. If other people are keeping the precepts in their mind while you are using the precepts as a yardstick to criticize, you are only afflicting yourself. Nevertheless, reasoning is still beneficial. Rational people are clear about things and principles; they have a calm and cool head in dealing with people and doing things.

We should be clear about things and principles. Some people only know about principles without understanding things; they are not wise in relationships and thus experience setbacks all the time. We often hear people say, “Why are you so naive?” Things and reason don’t always match up; what you say may make much sense, but when it comes to actual practice you can’t really do so perfectly. A professor of business administration in Taiwan was an authority in his field. He was appointed as general manager for a company but quit in less than half a year. His explanation was, “I am suitable for teaching business administration, but not cut out for being a manager.” That’s why scientists in modern times talk about empirical science. As to theoretical science, it only deals with possibility, which won’t necessarily lead you to a successful result.

In terms of Buddhaharma, we should make a clear distinction and understanding about things and principles. Things are things, which can’t always really be explained in words. On the other hand, principles — reasons and concepts — can usually be explained by language. When you are looking at things in and of themselves, you don’t necessarily have to attribute to them certain principles; they are basically reasonable in and of themselves. However, when things happen, the subtlety in applying the principles depends on what one has in mind; so using a preconceived, prescribed theory as the standard may not really work.

Being Clear about Things and Principles

In one of the sutras, the Buddha uses a parable to explain the distinction between things and principles. In his time there were over sixty schools of philosophy in India, each with their own views and explanations about the universe and human life. One of the Buddha’s disciples then asked him: “What is the origin of human life and the universe?” The Buddha replied, “I’m not going to answer this question. Instead I will tell you a parable. Suppose someone was shot by a poisoned arrow in a battlefield. Now I ask you, do you need to find out from which direction the arrow was shot, who shot it, or who made it, how the poison was applied to the dart? Or do you need to pull it out immediately, in order to save the person’s life?” The disciple said, “Of course the first thing to do is to pull out the arrow!”

This story tells us that Buddhaharma stresses practicality, and holds that the principle is to solve our urgent problems, rather than deal with too many unrealistic theories. When dealing with things, the priority is to deal with things themselves. There are principles behind dealing with things, although the principles may not be the theories derived from logical thinking and debating. But they reflect a natural law, and the way most people desire it to be. This poisoned arrow parable as taught by the Buddha is a principle in and of itself.

The Buddhist precepts are a list of things we shouldn’t and mustn’t do; on the other hand, we need to do what we should do. Concentration means doing what we aspire to do with a cool head. To achieve the purpose of not committing wrong, we also need to be calm. Some people clearly know that they shouldn’t do a certain thing but do it anyway. This is the lack of a cool head. The basic effect of practicing concentration is to enable us to develop

calmness of emotion. For example, getting up early every day to prostrate to the Buddha, reciting the Buddha’s name, and sitting in meditation can all help us keep our emotions calm. Faith is also very important. For example, we can express faith by getting up early and prostrating to Avalokiteshvara. If we do this and we believe that the bodhisattva will protect us wherever we go, then we will have calm emotions and won’t feel worry and fear. Confidence is important, but religious faith is even more important, for this kind of faith can help us calm our mind. Religion is emotional, but it also has the function of reason.

Reason and Emotion Need to Be in Harmony

Regarding that reason and emotion need to be in harmony, are water and fire compatible with each other? Common sense says that water and fire are not compatible, but this is not necessarily true. In fact, water needs fire and vice versa. This is referred to in Chinese as “water and fire complementing each other” as natural phenomena. If water is water and fire is fire, and they are not complementary and harmonious, life would be miserable. If it is all fire would that be good? By the same token, is it good if it is all water? It should be that they are complementary to each other so as to be in harmony to be of any use. Take the principles of *qian/kun* (heaven/earth) and *yin/yang* (female/male) for example. Are they complementary or contradictory? Are reason and emotion complementary or contradictory? For the average person, compassion is emotional and wisdom is rational; for a great practitioner, the manifestation of wisdom must be accompanied by compassionate actions to benefit sentient beings. When one knows what compassion means, one must be a person of greater wisdom. Therefore, emotion



Photo by Taylor Mitchell

and reason should be two sides of the same coin and in harmony with each other.

Buddhaharma is not apart from worldly dharmas. People often say to me, “Shifu! I am a layperson. I talk about mundane stuff, and do mundane things. So I’m afraid you will laugh at me.” But I say, “If there aren’t mundane things and mundane dharmas in this world, then what is there for me to do?” So, Buddhist monks should regard all mundane things as that which they should be concerned about. The only difference is that Buddhist monks use Buddhaharma to comfort and guide laypeople in their mundane affairs. ☺

The Arising of Conditioned Appearance from the True Mind

Part 7

BY

Abbot Venerable Guo Xing

This is the seventh 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.

True Awareness Transcends Visual Awareness

AS WE DISCUSSED PREVIOUSLY, visual awareness does not depend on causes and conditions. At the same time, the sutras also state that there are nine conditions that must be satisfied for us to see an object. There are nine prerequisites for “seeing.” They are: space, light, sensory faculty, surroundings, intention, base of discrimination, base of defilement and purity, the root basis, and the seeds. There must be the eyes, the surroundings, light, space, intention, the Five Sense Consciousnesses, the Sixth Consciousness, the Seventh Consciousness, and the Eighth Consciousness. At the same time, the *Shurangama Sutra* also states that True Visual Awareness, our Nature that is capable of seeing, does

not depend on causes and conditions. Why is there this incongruence?

Here we are referring to “When you are able to use your true awareness to be aware of the essence of your visual awareness, you will know that your true awareness is not the same as the essence of your awareness. The two are quite separate from one another. The essence of awareness is not the equal of true awareness.” (*The Shurangama Sutra*, English translation by The Buddhist Text Translation Society, 2009, p. 76). True Visual Awareness transcends dualism — the subject in the act of seeing and the object of what is being seen. This is talking about the ultimate truth, which is the True Mind itself. This is not referring to the worldly type of visual awareness, which requires the nine prerequisites. What we are discussing now is the first and ultimate truth.



Photo by Li Chu

This is how the Buddha explains it: When we see light, the mind that can see is not the phenomenon of light. When we see darkness, our mind that can see is not “darkness.” What possesses the function of seeing is the mind, not the eye. It’s the same way with seeing space or solid objects. What allows us to see, that mind that has the function of seeing, is not “light,” not “darkness,” not “space,” nor “solid objects,” either.

The Buddha further explains that, when you are aware that you are seeing (meaning that, first, you are able to see, and second, you know that you are seeing), the True Mind isn’t that awareness that knows you are seeing (the second level of seeing). When you see a phenomenon, isn’t it because there’s a mind that can see and there’s an object that can be seen? This way of seeing is seeing with

the dualistic mind, not the True Mind. Visual awareness, operating with a dualistic mind, becomes “consciousness” — (one of) the Five Consciousnesses and the Sixth Consciousness. The True Mind, on the other hand, is wisdom, which transcends the dualistic mode of subject and object. It is not a dualistic visual awareness.

Ordinary people are accustomed to regard all phenomena using the dualistic mind. Originally, in every moment, all phenomena are the manifestation of the True Mind. Similar to what we discussed previously — “Visual awareness is not a perceived object, at the same time it’s not separate from objects.” — you cannot separate phenomena and the True Mind. The True Mind and phenomena are always but one. True Nature cannot be separated from phenomena. Departing from the Mind that



Master Shenhui Painting by Chien-Chih Liu

has visual awareness, phenomena do not exist. Departing from phenomena, there is not an independently-existing Nature either.

Incessantly, ordinary people use the present thought to grasp onto (attend to) the preceding thought, which has already perished. But ordinary people do not realize that the preceding thought that they are hanging onto has already perished. An analogy we use is a burning incense stick making circles in the dark. When you make such a circle, a ring of fire appears in midair. But, in truth, what seems like a spinning ring is only that one point of glowing incense. The ring of fire has already vanished. What remains is merely the effect of the persistence of vision, which leads to the perception that the fire ring still exists. Like this analogy, originally, both prior and later thoughts are the unmoving True Mind itself. From the vantage point of the later thought, the perished prior thought has become a phenomenon that does not have awareness. From the vantage point of the vanished prior thought, the later thought is the dualistic mind that operates with subject and object.

I can say similarly, for instance, “I am great; you are no good.” At the very instant each word is uttered, the true mind is manifested. When “I” was said, the rest of the words in the sentence have not yet appeared. By the time I get to the word “you,” the first half, “I am great,” has already vanished. Yet, we do not feel that it has indeed vanished. By the time I get to “good” in the phrase “no good,” the earlier word “no” has completely vanished. Still, we feel it is one whole sentence. This is because the mind-consciousness has the function of recording and retaining.

What is worse, we take the words “I” and “you” as the real persons, “me” and “you.” Operating like this, prior and later thoughts arise incessantly, one after another without stopping. We constantly take phenomena as self, taking the dualistic mind that



The Ring of Fire Photo by Taylor Mitchell

rises and perishes as the self. We fail to see the True Mind, which is non-dualistic and unmoving. That is the True Self.

Therefore, only when the mind that keeps grasping onto preceding thought comes to a full stop, then the non-dualistic, unmoving True Mind can manifest. In [Chan Master Sheng Yen’s book] *Master Shenhui’s Realm of Awakening*, there is a phrase, “In prajna, nothing is known, yet nothing is unknown.” If there is something to be known, then this knowing is confined and limited. Therefore, only knowing without any objects of knowing can truly exhibit “nothing is unknown.” Similarly, the third stage in the Silent Illumination practice is described as “without contacting things, it knows.” What this means is that, as long as there are objects that can be contacted by you, then what can be known is limited. It would not be “nothing is unknown.” It would, indeed, not be True Knowing. ☯

(To be continued)

Strong Determination

BY

Žarko Andričević

A martial arts and yoga teacher since the 1970s, Žarko first encountered Buddhism in 1975. Ten years later he started the first Buddhist study and meditation group in Croatia which today is known as *Dharmaloka*. He met Chan Master Sheng Yen in 1996 and received Dharma transmission in June 2001. The following talk is taken from a Huatou retreat he led at the Dharma Drum Retreat Center in November, 2014. Transcription and editing by Buffe Maggie Laffey.

Giving Rise to Determination

GOOD MORNING TO EVERYONE. Time is passing very quickly; do you have that feeling? In almost no time this retreat will end. For precisely that reason we must mobilize all our energy to work hard on our method. We should use every moment to the very end of this retreat, and in order to do that we have to give rise to strong determination. In Huatou Chan it is sometimes called *angry* determination. Ah, but don't become angry [*laughter*], just be determined, okay? This strong determination is not something you either have or you don't have; it is something we can actually give rise to. We can become extremely determined in the context of practice even if maybe we were not determined at the beginning.

What are the conditions which help us give rise to this strong determination to practice? First of all, we have to take full responsibility for

ourselves and for our own practice. This has to do with understanding karma in Buddhism. We know that we are the creator of our own life. We are responsible for the things which are happening to us. Therefore there is no one else to blame, and at the same time there is no one else to rely on. We can't hope that somebody else will do the work for us. So in that sense we take full responsibility for our life, knowing that we are the only one who can give the right direction to our own life. That's very important for giving rise to this strong determination.

The other thing which is very important is a deep understanding of the mind of life and death. In a general Buddhist context this means understanding the nature of *samsara*, the nature of suffering. The suffering in our own life is actually a great motivation for practice; if we have a deep understanding of our own suffering then there won't be any doubt whether we really want to be liberated



or not. This wanting to achieve liberation from suffering helps to give rise to a strong determination to follow the path, or, in the context of this retreat, to use the method.

We have to mobilize all our energy. We are supported in this by the fact that we take responsibility for our own life, and also have a deep understanding of suffering and a strong wish to be free from suffering. All of these conditions actually enable strong determination to arise, and it is essential for our practice.

Illustrative Stories

But let me illustrate this. There are a lot of stories in Buddhism which can help us understand very clearly what it means to be *really* determined. For example, if by accident you fall into a deep well and find yourself at the bottom, what kind of thoughts

do you think will go through your mind? Will there be many wandering thoughts? Will you start to think, "Hmm, what did I do yesterday? What was that conversation I had with someone several days ago?" and so on? It's almost impossible that you would think that way. I'm sure we all know that in that situation there would be only one thought in our mind: how to get out from that well. That means giving rise to a powerful determination to get out, to alleviate suffering, to liberate ourselves. Unlike someone who finds himself at the bottom of a well and doesn't know how to get out, we *have* a means to get out – we have a method, we have concepts, we have guidance, we have all the necessary conditions to get out. But we have to *use* them. We have to be serious about this situation we are in; out of that seriousness, strong determination will arise.

I'll tell you another story, about one of the previous lives of the Buddha. In one of his past

Photo by Shaun Chung



The Hungry Demon Rakshasa and the God Indra Drawings by Reene Laffey

lives the Buddha was a young ascetic practicing austerities somewhere in the region of the Himalaya. The God Indra saw him practicing really hard and decided to test him, so he turned himself into a hungry Rakshasa demon and appeared in front of the young practitioner. He decided to tell him half of a very important Dharma teaching contained in one sentence, but not tell him the other half. The rakshasa said “Everything is constantly arising and perishing; this is the law of birth and death.”

The young practitioner heard this and was extremely curious. He approached the hungry demon and asked him “Please, can you tell me more?” The demon said, “Well, I could, but I am extremely hungry; if you allow me to eat you I will tell you the other half of the teaching.” The young practitioner said “But if you eat me, how will I be able to hear the other half?” And the rakshasa said “Hmm, let me think how we can do that.” Then he came up with an idea: “If you climb up that tree, and I stand below the tree and open my big mouth, as you jump from the tree I will tell you the other half before you fall into my mouth. So you will hear it and then I will eat you.”

The young practitioner really wanted to know the Dharma. But could he trust this hungry demon? What option did he have – he really wanted to hear the Dharma – so he decided, all right, he’d jump. He climbed up the tree, and as he jumped the hungry demon told him the other part of the teaching: “When arising and perishing ceases, this is the great peace and joy of *nirvana*.” These are the words that the young practitioner heard as he was jumping into the mouth of the hungry demon. But then a miracle happened – at the moment that the rakshasa would eat the young ascetic, the demon suddenly turned back into the God Indra and received the young man into his arms. Indra told him he was sure that in his future life he would become the Buddha.

Make Use of Good Conditions

So where is our determination in relation to this story? Are we wasting our time here, following wandering thoughts about irrelevant things? If we imagine ourselves to be in a well there is only one thought in our mind – how to get out. Here we *have* a method to get us out; all we have to do is glue ourselves to that method. So ask, investigate your huatou from one moment to another. There is nothing else for us to do here but to stay with the method. It is so simple. We are provided with everything: a place to sleep, warmth, and food; everything is here for us. We only need to do one thing, and that is to be with our method. I don’t know, maybe this place is *too* good, [laughter] it definitely does not compare to the bottom of a well. But precisely *because* the conditions here are so good, we must use these conditions in order to practice, because in other conditions it is not so easy to practice. Here we have everything we need; therefore we should try to mobilize all our energy.

Take up this huatou without leaving any gaps. When you’re asking and there is a gap, it should be a gap of silence into which no single wandering thought enters. Then you ask again, and again you are in silence. Then you ask again. The more determined you are, the fewer wandering thoughts there will be. Gradually you can make this gap much wider; you ask and then for a minute or two you are in this state of wonder, a state of wanting to know without any single wandering thought being there. Eventually you won’t need any words. Your determination and sense of doubt will arise with such power that you will be completely in that state with no need to put more wood on the fire. It is very important that we establish continuity with the method. But we have to be inspired to do that; when somebody knows that his house is on fire we

don't need to beg that person to come out, he will come naturally.

I know that being quite comfortable here, in good health with plenty of food and everything that we need, it is not easy to think about the fragility of life. Especially if we are young, we think that we will be young forever. Even if we are older we think that we won't change. Things seem quite stable from this perspective; somehow we lose that sharp reflection that our life really is extremely fragile. One day we are well and another day we can be seriously ill. Anything can happen; people are continuously dying around us for all kinds of reasons. Life depends on many conditions that are continuously changing so we can't really be secure in it. As long as we are in good health, as long as we are here, alive, we have to use this precious opportunity to go beyond birth and death, go beyond this thinking mind and discover our true nature.

From the idea of being determined to actually *being* determined; sometimes there is a huge gap, sometimes not. But it's all there inside us. If we can somehow awaken this potential energy in ourselves, we would know very clearly what it is to work very hard on the method, what it means to be *really* determined. The story I told earlier about the previous life of the Buddha was quite drastic; he was ready to give his life just to hear one sentence of the Dharma. Here we are practicing in a place which is quite luxurious compared to a cave in the Himalaya, and we are listening to the Dharma every day. We have everything we need to practice and, yet at the same time we worry about, what – comfort, discomfort, body pain?. This does not compare to a readiness to give one's life just to hear Dharma. Well, I'm not trying to make you feel bad, but I'm looking for your dormant energies to be awakened, to work on the method with all your power.

Thirst in the Desert

There is one very nice method I heard from Shifu [Chan Master Sheng Yen] a long time ago. It's not related to huatou but it is related to the process of practice in general. A person is lost in the desert without water. It's terribly hot and that person walks with only one thing in mind – to find water to drink because his life depends on it. So he walks and is extremely thirsty and then in the far distance he sees an oasis; he sees water. Of course he is not looking anywhere else; he goes straight to that place. He walks and walks and then he comes into the oasis and he goes directly to the water. First he washes his hands and his face and then he drinks a little bit of water, and then he drinks a little bit more water. Because the air is so hot he decides to enter the water. So, very slowly (because it's dangerous to enter the water quickly when you are very warm), very gently he enters the water. Then he starts to swim and it is like he becomes water.



Photo by Taylor Mitchell

This whole process is very similar, or it *should* be similar, to how we approach our meditation practice here, and to the stages we go through in this practice. What is essential at the very beginning is the thirst. We have to be thirsty, and we have to see our practice as the possibility of satisfying that thirst; this is absolutely essential. If the method of our practice is just one phenomenon among thousands of other phenomena, and we only pick up our method from time to time, that's not real thirst. It's far away from being determined. It's far away from seeing the method as something which can save our life, but that is *precisely* how we have to view our method. We have to look on ourselves as a thirsty person who walks in a desert. It's very difficult to have that view if we don't see our life in the light of impermanence.

If we are not thirsty we should ask ourselves, why are we not thirsty? Can we really not need the water of practice? We have to look deeply into ourselves, examine all the uncertainties in our life, these rising and falling experiences, knowing that we will continue to face many difficulties. There is no person who does not meet difficulties in life. Knowing this, and knowing at the same time that the practice offers a solution and can actually liberate us from all suffering, we must give rise in ourselves to this thirst for practice, and in that sense take working on the method very, very seriously. When we look at ourselves in that way it's possible to give rise to this dormant energy within us. It's possible to awaken that thirst in ourselves, to find that strong motivation to continue our practice in a different way.

Part of this powerful willingness to continue with the method arises in the process of practice itself. If we expect all of this to arise before we actually begin our practice, then it won't happen. We have to motivate ourselves, but in the context

of practice this determination will grow. The more we practice seriously, the more this determination grows, and the more confidence we gain in ourselves. It's actually all connected with the practice itself. We have to take this practice very seriously and then all these things will arise, and at some point we will find that the practice goes smoothly.

Huatou is Tasteless and Dry

In the beginning it's quite difficult. You start working on the huatou but you are just repeating some words which don't have any meaning, and it doesn't produce the expected effect. There is not any kind of doubt arising; it feels like an absolutely tasteless and pointless thing to do. It *seems* like that at the beginning. You're repeating some question, you're asking huatou, but nothing is happening. There is nothing for the mind to taste there, it's somehow very dry. You are questioning but your mind is indifferent, as if a completely neutral thought arises without bringing any corresponding emotion with it to somehow attract your attention.

This is how it seems at the beginning – what can we do? We should continue asking, mobilizing all our energy, and we have to have faith in the method. We must trust that we are capable of working on the method, and that the method is capable of bringing us where it is supposed to bring us. Again, we have to try to give rise to this thirst, maybe by thinking about impermanence, about uncertainties in our lives. Do we really know who we are? Do we know where we came from, or where we are going? Whenever we investigate these fundamental issues of life, there is a possibility for this thirst to arise, for inspiration and motivation to arise. The fundamental truth about our lives is there all the time, but we cover it up with all sorts of things. As long as we are covering it, everything seems more or

less fine, but actually it's not. We all live like that. But here is the opportunity to dig deeper into ourselves and put this cover-up aside, to awaken this thirst for the true knowledge about ourselves and life.

Engaging ourselves in practice with this great thirst would be a much simpler situation than the one we have now. Sitting with a thousand wandering thoughts is an extremely complex situation, very superficial on all levels. There is dissatisfaction with the fact that nothing is happening. It is much simpler to put aside all these irrelevant and trivial distractions, bring forth the fundamental issues of birth and death, and take up the method seamlessly from one moment to another. Besides determination we also need persistence, taking up the *huatou* and not letting go of it; as soon as it goes, bring it back.

In the beginning, it will be us on one side and the method on the other – the one who asks, and the *huatou* which is asked. But if we proceed with determination and energy the gap will be less and less. Then it is like the man walking straight towards the water. If we can walk as straight as that towards the *huatou*, having it in our mind all the time, then the gap between ourselves and the *huatou* will lessen. Eventually we will become one with the *huatou* in the same way that the man became one with the water.

Asanga's Solitary Retreat

Now I'll tell you another story. This one is about a famous Buddhist teacher who lived in the fourth century in India. His name was Asanga. He and his equally famous brother Vasubhandu were the founders of the Yogacara school, a very important school in Mahayana Buddhism. (The Chan school has connections to this school; Bodhidharma brought with him to China the *Lankavatara Sutra*, which is part of Yogacara teaching.)

At one point Asanga decided to go for a solitary retreat. He climbed a mountain, found a cave, and began his practice. His main purpose for this retreat was to receive teaching from Maitreya Bodhisattva. So he did all kinds of practices to invite Maitreya to appear in his cave. He practiced very seriously for three years but nothing happened, no trace of Maitreya Bodhisattva. Asanga said "Well, this doesn't have any meaning anymore. I'm leaving this retreat." He left his cave and, going down the mountain, he heard the sound of bird wings. He saw a bird entering a nest in a cleft in the stone cliff. As he looked closer he realized that the bird had shaped the stone with its wings by continuously flying in and out. He was absolutely amazed! Wings are so soft and the rock is so hard, how persistent that bird must be to erode that stone! He said to himself, "Well, I have to go back to my cave. If that bird can do that to stone, my meditation is definitely an easier thing to do than that."

He went back and another three years passed, but still no trace of Maitreya Bodhisattva. Again Asanga said to himself, "This doesn't make sense anymore. I have to leave my retreat." So he left. As he was going down the mountain he heard water dripping on a stone. He went closer towards that sound and saw that soft drops of water, falling just from time to time, had actually carved a hole in the stone below. As he observed that phenomenon he again realized that he was not patient enough, he was not persistent or determined enough, and that his meditation was definitely easier to do than what the water was doing that to stone. So he went back to his cave again.

He sat for another three years but still no trace of Maitreya Bodhisattva. Again he said, "I'm leaving. This is the end." Going down the mountain this time he saw a man sitting near the road with some iron bars beside him, and he was polishing one of the iron

bars with a piece of cloth. Asanga asked him "What are you doing?" and the man said "I am making needles out of these iron bars." Asanga looked closer and he could actually see some needles there; it was not just an attempt to do the impossible, the man was actually successful. Asanga was completely out of himself and he said, "Well now I have to go back again."

After another three years passed without any sign of Maitreya appearing, Asanga finally decided to end his retreat. As he went down the mountain this time, he heard terrible animal screams. He came closer and saw a badly hurt dog. The dog couldn't walk; the whole back part of his body was an open wound crawling with maggots. He wanted to help

this dog, so he used his stick to remove the maggots. But the dog started to scream even more because it was very painful. Then he tried with his hands but that was also painful for the dog. He realized that if he wanted to help this dog he would have to do it with his tongue. And at the moment that he was actually removing those maggots from the wounds of the dog with his tongue, a miracle happened – the dog transformed miraculously into Maitreya Bodhisattva! Asanga said "All these years I was sitting in my cave practicing meditation and there was no trace of you. And now when I've left and I'm helping this dog, you suddenly appear?" Maitreya Bodhisattva said, "I was there all the time, but you were not able to see me."

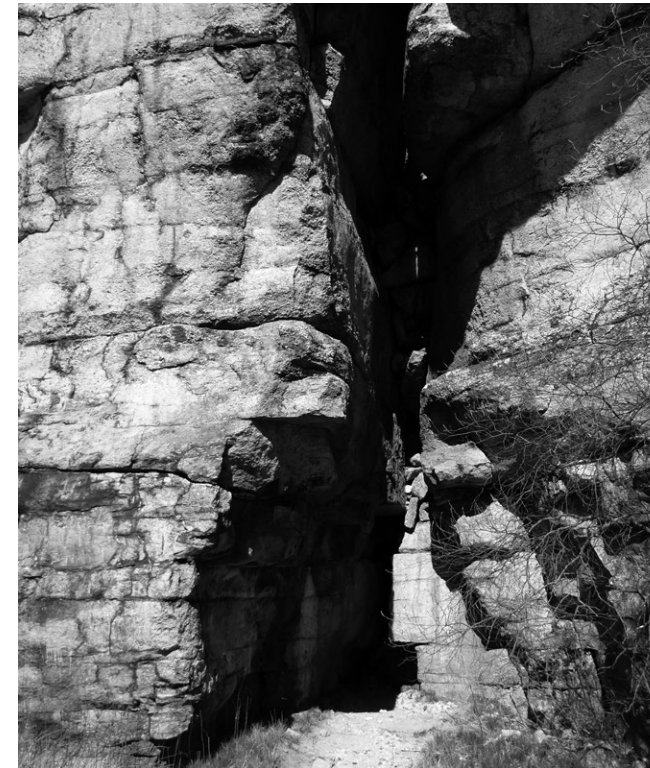


Photo by Shaun Chung

Persistence and Compassion

That story goes on but I won't tell you the rest of it now. There are two very important things in that story. One is, obviously, persistence in practice. He tried for three years, day and night, before giving up. Then each time he came back for *another* three years of hard practice. All those events he experienced when he left the cave also tell us that we have to persist in our determination. Another important thing in this story is compassion, a truly necessary attitude in our practice. If there is no compassion our practice will be very much self-centered, and this is somehow a barrier, an obstacle, a hindrance.

What does it mean to have great compassion as an attitude in our practice? It means that as we practice

we have to be aware that it is not just for our own sake but – well, if I say “for all sentient beings,” that could be a bit abstract. But let’s say it is for all people with whom we interact, then of course it spreads further on. This kind of attitude is very important. The lack of this attitude in Asanga’s practice was the thing which prevented him from seeing Maitreya, who was there all the time. Once that attitude had arisen, he saw him immediately. So you can bring this mind of compassion to your practice. We have to be compassionate to ourselves first, and then extend that compassion to everybody else. We have to practice in this compassionate atmosphere. At the beginning of this retreat I was talking about how we have to create a relaxed atmosphere. But that’s also compassion. When we are relaxing our body, that’s how we are compassionate to ourselves. This attitude that we don’t just practice for ourselves, but that we practice for all sentient beings, is very important. It takes away the self-centered attitude and then practice goes much more smoothly. So this is something we definitely have to introduce into our practice.

A Heroic Act

But my main topic is persistence and determination; please don’t go back now to relaxing and being compassionate towards yourself, and forgetting the huatou. Don’t stop asking it with a strong determination. It’s a heroic act, to take up the huatou and work on it. Master Hanshan from the sixteenth century said that it is like going into battle with ten thousand enemies and you have the huatou as a sword. What are these ten thousand enemies? They are all other phenomena, all wandering thoughts and everything which interferes with our practice. But we take up this huatou courageously as if holding a *vajra* sword, a diamond sword in our hand



Maitreya Bodhisattva Photo by Venerable Chang Wen

cutting through these attachments. That is strong determination – not being distracted, not being fascinated by anything, but going straight towards questioning, giving rise to the doubt sensation.

I will say again that at the beginning it seems senseless and dry, it seems nothing is happening; but we have to persist. We have to go through that stage and make the huatou really our own, become one with it. So don’t let go of the huatou. If you become very tense by working so hard on it, then consciously put it aside for a while. Relax your body and mind and then pick it up again and continue. This is a different case from when you lose the huatou by being immersed in wandering thoughts – if you really feel that working hard on it creates this kind of tension, then for a while you can put it aside and relax. Then pick it up again and continue, maintaining a relaxed body and mind while holding very tight to huatou. So let us try now to practice with more diligence and determination, with more energy, but at the same time don’t become tense. Don’t let go of your huatou. Try to glue yourself to it, stay with it all day long. The last thought in your mind before you fall asleep should be huatou. The first thought when you wake up should be huatou, and so on through the whole day. Whenever you see that you lost it, bring it back immediately. ☺



Retreat Report Malaysia’s Best Kept Secret

BY

Maria Balog

THERE IS A CITY ON THE NORTHWESTERN SIDE OF peninsular Malaysia called Ipoh. Originally named after a traditional local dart poison, today it is one of the largest cities of Malaysia. Almost half of Ipoh’s population is Chinese – some say the picturesque landscape resembles their homeland and attracts more and more Chinese people to settle down at the southern outskirts of the city. Fun fact: parts of the movie *Anna and the King* were shot here. This is also where we find some of Malaysia’s unique cave

temples, which were built around local limestone caves to take advantage of the natural formations.

Around the end of each year, there are a series of meditation retreats that take place at Panna Cave Temple, which was built around one of these natural caves several decades ago. As the programs became more and more popular, new buildings were added one by one, and the temple developed into a retreat center. The oldest parts are now off-limits to most visitors, but the newer halls have plenty of room

Photo by Maria Balog

to accommodate over a hundred practitioners. In the middle of the yard in front of the Chan Hall is a beautiful Bodhi tree, propagated from a tree in Sri Lanka that is, in turn, a direct descendant of the Bodhi tree in Bodh Gaya, under which Shakyamuni Buddha achieved enlightenment.

These programs have been held since 1985, and this past December's seven-day meditation retreat was already the 49th of its kind. The current program of four retreats begins with a five-day retreat followed by a seven-day retreat; these are more introductory level and focus on relaxing the body and following the breath. After that comes a ten-day retreat focusing on the method of Huatou, followed by a ten-day retreat focusing on the method of Silent Illumination. Between all of these retreats there is a rest period of a day or two spent cleaning up and preparing for the next retreat. This past season I had the privilege to attend the first three retreats of this program.

The way I see it, regardless of the subject when they give a Dharma talk, most teachers fall into either of the two extremes of focusing only on teaching the material at hand, or focusing mostly on teaching the students present in front of them. While Chi Chern Fashi is clearly intimately familiar with all the nuances of Chan practice and the difficulties we may encounter at different stages, his most amazing skill lies in engaging his audience and delivering his talks in a way that's easy to grasp, without compromising on the depth of the material he covers. His profound understanding and unique people skills have made him increasingly popular and sought-after all over the world.

The past ten or so years, I had the favorable conditions to attend a number of retreats both with Chi Chern Fashi, and also with various Buddhist groups in the United States. This has had both benefits and drawbacks. Over the years I unconsciously developed a myriad of expectations about what a

retreat is "supposed to be like" and how my body and mind normally respond to the intensive practice. In light of that, here's how everything turned out.

Retreat Rules That Turned Out as Expected

During the first two retreats we got up at 4:00 AM sharp; during the latter two the wake-up bell sounded at 3:00 AM. This came as no surprise, since we received the program schedule along with the acceptance letter. The first two retreats had shorter sitting periods of thirty to forty minutes; the latter two had sitting periods of forty-five minutes to one hour. All the retreats were strictly silent – that means no talking, no listening to music, no computers, cell phones, or even books were allowed, other than the manuals for the retreat that were handed out at registration (all in Chinese). We were not allowed to leave the grounds during each retreat, and we could not keep food and drinks we may have brought in from outside, with the exception of necessary medicine, of course.

Retreat Rules Somewhat Unexpected

To reinforce the rules of silence and not leaving the temple grounds during the retreat, we all had to hand in our cellphones, wallets, house keys, and car keys at the time of registration. Also, to maintain the mindset of constant practice, we were not allowed to return to our sleeping quarters to rest during the day, but those in need of a quick nap could spread out their mats, cushions, and towels on the cool floor of the Chan Hall, and get their rest in there. Also, to keep distractions to a minimum, watches were not allowed in the Chan Hall, and there was a distinct lack of mirrors in the bathrooms.

Schedule Items We Normally Expect

There were sitting meditation periods throughout the day, that added up to about eight hours of sitting per day on the shorter retreats and about ten hours per day on the ten-day ones. We had an hour-long chanting service in the morning before breakfast, which was simple, solemn, and fairly easy to follow. There were also two slow-prostration periods every day, walking meditation with changing pace once a day, and Dharma talks twice a day in the first two retreats and once a day in the latter two. Breakfast, lunch, and medicine meal were also taken as a group, with a work meditation period after each of the meals. The breaks between sits were normally spent

with thorough self-massage, some light exercise, and, of course, using the bathroom and getting a drink of water or tea.

Schedule Items That Were a Bit Unusual

There were also two short periods of meditation lying on our backs to help us deepen our relaxation (but not to the point of falling asleep). After each day of practice, the last thing we did was to go back to the classroom and write a short report on our physical and mental state, then we placed the report cards on a desk at the front, so Shifu – as Chi Chern Fashi is referred to by his followers – could read them every night and respond as necessary.



Chi Chern Fashi at Panna Cave Temple Photo by Li Chu



The Inexhaustible Lamp Ceremony Photo by Maria Balog

The last day of the retreat had an entirely different schedule – after the morning meditation we had a short repentance ceremony followed by (re)taking refuge in the three treasures and (re)taking the five precepts. This was the last activity we completed in noble silence, and then it was picture-taking time, clean-up and breakfast, and we could slowly return to our normal channels of communication. The most unusual schedule item, in my opinion, was what followed after breakfast – we returned to the Chan Hall, divided into groups based on our work meditation assignments, and brought up anything and everything that came to mind that could be improved on the temple grounds or in the retreat process. Every group wrote down a number of suggestions from things that actually needed fixing, like leaking pipes or broken door handles, to things of no consequence whatsoever, like spider webs in the corners and how the handles of the brooms needed

to be longer. Then a representative of each group read the list out loud to the monastics in charge of maintaining the temple grounds, who would listen carefully, but quickly made fun of any suggestions that seemed impractical or insignificant. I suspect this activity served two purposes – one was to actually bring attention to things that might have needed fixing, and the other was to let off some steam after several long days of intense practice. The afternoon was spent writing yet another report – the overall summary of our retreat experience and anything else we felt like sharing with Chi Chern Fashi.

Closing the last night was a very special event called the Inexhaustible Lamp Ceremony. The inexhaustible lamp – or in our case, a tea candle – symbolizes the Bodhisattva path: like a lamp that ignites a hundred thousand lamps without itself being diminished, a single Bodhisattva may establish a hundred thousand living beings in enlightenment,

without her mindfulness being diminished (see *Vimalakirti Nirveda Sutra*). So we all gathered in the Chan Hall in the evening, each taking a candle and forming a big circle along the walls of the hall. The leading monastics lit their candles first, then we all passed the light on around the circle and started singing. This special song was also written by Chi Chern Fashi – simple, but very touching, perfect for the occasion. So we walked with our candles in a spiral towards the center of the hall until we could not go any further; then we changed direction and spiraled out to form a large circle again. After a few more minutes of singing and waving the candles side to side, we finally all sat down on the floor and got another chance to share our experiences, this time with all the leaders and participants of the retreat. Meanwhile, Chi Chern Fashi was listening in the far corner of the hall and preparing one last cup of aged pu-erh tea for everybody.

Perks We Might Have Grown to Expect

The retreat center is surrounded by beautiful cliffs and lush tropical vegetation; there's a small lake on one side of the yard and a mysterious fruit tree that supplied an ingredient for some of our menu items. The food was great, usually congee with veggies for breakfast, a noodle soup or rice with stir-fried vegetables for lunch, and fried noodles or fried rice for dinner, along with a wide variety of fruits and occasionally some cookies and cakes and hot chocolate mix for those who chose not to take medicine meal. All the facilities are simple, but comfortable and convenient. Besides the Dining Hall and the Chan Hall, we had a separate classroom where all the Dharma talks were held, and this was also where we wrote our reports at the end of each day and at the end of the retreat.

Perks I Didn't Expect

One of the first and most pleasant surprises for me was the growing selection of tea that was prepared for us to drink during break time. I knew Chi Chern Fashi and all the other monastics would really go out of their way to make us feel well taken care of, but I was still moved every time a new kettle of hot tea appeared in the common area. Fresh pu-erh tea was prepared by Chi Chern Fashi himself all throughout the retreats. A different herbal tea was brewed by the monastic in charge of the kitchen every day, and most days we also had some super-strong ginger tea to warm us up when the weather turned a bit cooler.

Another perk that turned out to be super-convenient was the ongoing laundry service: for a small fee paid at registration, we could hand in three pieces of outer clothing every day and get them back washed and folded a day later. That means that even if you only had two or three sets of comfortable outfits, you could easily stay for two or three weeks without having to hand-wash your clothes – which may not sound like a big deal now, but in the middle of the rainy season with another eighty or so participants around, it makes a big difference.

Another pleasant surprise was having free practice time and outdoors practice time. The idea was that after following the schedule to the letter for a few days, we had gotten the hang of things enough that we could manage our practice time, and rely on ourselves to decide the duration of sitting and break periods, as the location was both empowering and relaxing. On the days when it wasn't raining in the afternoon, we could also choose a spot to sit outside – although to be honest it was just as nice to sit in the Chan Hall. Some of the walking meditation sessions were also held outside, which were always refreshing, especially the longer periods of fast walking meditation so we could really air out our lungs.

Obstacles and Vexations You Would Normally Expect

It was no shock to those who joined intensive retreats before, that the tight schedule and relatively short resting time often resulted in sleep deprivation and some subsequent funny misunderstandings. Also, sitting eight to ten hours cross-legged can cause lots of pain. Some people became irritable due to all the pain and sleep deprivation. Of course, this could vary largely from person to person, as well as lessen or worsen as the retreat went on, but it was always in the cards. And, of course, there was adjusting to the lack of caffeine and lack of snacks between meals, and the resultant hunger and sleepiness.

Obstacles and Vexations You May or May Not Expect

The toughest one for me was having very little personal space or privacy. The retreat center is just on the edge of Ipoh city, so the total land the center occupies is not very expansive. Besides the halls and front yard, there are not many places to wander off to, and it's nearly impossible to find a quiet place where you could be completely alone. At night we slept on the floor in a large sleeping hall together with thirty or so people, which took some getting used to . . . but it really wasn't as bad as it sounds.

The Chinese word used for showering in Malaysia literally translates to "rinse cool," which means most bathrooms only had a barrel of cool water for us to wash with. This was completely reasonable given the warm climate . . . and also really not as bad as it sounds. There were some options to use hot water for your daily "rinsing," but you might not get your turn to use it every day.

On the more unexpected side, there was close contact with the native wildlife – sometimes we

would hear a troop of monkeys storming down on the tin roofs during a meditation session, or had a variety of small animals seeking shelter in the Chan Hall during a big storm. Once I felt something on my back while I was sitting in meditation that turned out to be a chubby lizard trying to climb toward higher elevations.

One of the most shocking things for Westerners however was the difference in culture and way of thinking – what may seem perfectly normal to one practitioner may seem utterly inappropriate to the other. In Eastern culture, the community spirit is always very strong; people often feel the need to show their care towards the other person, much more so than in the West. This got amplified by the excitement of those who rarely meet Westerners otherwise, and so might have gotten a bit carried away in their efforts at taking care of us. From a Western perspective, this often comes across as being treated like children, or having it assumed that we are not capable of taking care of ourselves by ourselves, which can also lead to some funny misunderstandings.

Conclusion

Truthfully, my overall experience was not as pleasant as I was hoping for – it could be best described as about equal amounts of struggle and sense of purpose. Part of the reason why I wanted to join a longer series of retreats was because in the past I came out of most retreats thinking, I wish I could have continued for longer. The usual rhythm of unfolding for me was: adjusting to the environment for a day or two, facing some previously suppressed emotional issues and crying it out for a day or two, then the positive feelings would take over more and more, so I feel very joyful and energetic by the time we go home.



Panna Cave Temple Photo by Maria Balog

So, naively I thought I would have three to four tough days in the beginning, and then I would sail smoothly from then on. Well, it turned out there's another way to extrapolate from my previous experiences, which ended up much closer to the truth: three to four tough days followed by three to four joyful ones, then crashing back down to tough days, then a few joyful ones again, and on and on. These alternating states were easy to follow on the report card I kept every night, not in what I wrote but in how it was written – states of confidence, energy, and joy, or the lack thereof, all reflected in my handwriting – sometimes completely messy and full of mistakes, at other times very neat and organized.

The after-effect of the retreats, on the other hand, made it all worth it. To describe it using a metaphor, this long series of retreats was like a detoxification regimen for the mind. By removing all the "junk food"

from our minds' diet for a few weeks, we could feel our bodies and minds becoming noticeably lighter and clearer. During the retreats, we got a chance to really slow down and examine what was happening in our minds, and we could recognize how it was reflected in our lives. We could take a closer look at how we normally keep distracting ourselves through the five senses: snacking out of boredom; listening to music just to avoid being left alone with our own thoughts; or spending too much time online peeking into other people's lives, just so we don't have to deal with our own. The strict schedule and the intense practice can help us break the cycle of these habits. When we return to our lives, we can use this momentum to develop new, more wholesome habits, that can help us stay mindful and integrate Chan practice into our everyday life, continuing to learn about ourselves and spending more time on things that make our lives meaningful. ☺

The Past

from CMC, DDRC and DDMBA worldwide



DDRC Monastic Winter Retreat

THIS YEAR'S WINTER WAS UNIQUE – it saw the very first Monastic Winter Retreat to be held at the Dharma Drum Retreat Center. Winter at DDRC has always been tranquil and beautiful. Naturally, it was also very cold. Holding the retreat here was indeed a quintessential “winter” experience.

From January 12th to 25th, 2015, the monastic sangha of seven nuns and three monks had the rare luxury of temporary relief from their various responsibilities and were able to immerse themselves in tranquility, both internally and externally. With methods of sitting meditation, prostrating, walking

meditation, and listening to Shifu's [Chan Master Sheng Yen] Dharma talks, they thus spent fourteen days in vigorous practice as a group.

The first four days of the retreat were considered “preparatory practice,” focused mainly on harmonizing the body. During these four days, the participants had flexible schedules. Other than mandatory Morning Service, Evening Service, breakfast, and lunch, they could follow their own needs individually, and choose to rest or to practice in the Chan Hall. During the following seven days, the sangha followed a typical meditation retreat

Photo by Jing Zheng



Sharing experiences after the retreat Photo by Venerable Chang Xiang

schedule, and listened to talks Shifu gave during a monastic retreat in 1998. The final three days consisted of sharings and outdoor meditations. It provided a window of opportunity for the usually widely dispersed Dharma brothers and sisters to bond and build camaraderie.

Picture this – waking up in the morning; we were immediately greeted by a silvery world of snow. There was a serene joy of walking and creating a path for oneself amidst the snow. Such experience was a special treat from the buddhas and bodhisattvas and was available only during the winter retreat at DDRC! Just wait and see who will turn out to be the first pioneer to forge a path!

Also picture this – at the end of a day of rigorous practice, opening the doors of the Chan Hall and looking up, we were surprised by the dazzling stars spanning across the inky night sky. At that very instant, the mind became clear and pure, bringing on a deep sense of peace and harmony. This too was owing to the kindness of the Dharma Protectors at

DDRC, that we could so whole-heartedly embrace the starlight as we strolled back to the dormitory. As such, the frigid cold weather simply became immaterial to us.

If you ask about how well everyone practiced, well, the purpose of resting is to prepare for the long journey ahead. So, yes, everyone there really took advantage of the time to fully rest and recharge. While there were four days of “preparatory practice,” by the third day, most people started to become synchronized with the regular meditation retreat schedule, as the surroundings, body, and mind tuned in to each other. What left the deepest impression for us were Shifu's talks. For most of the monastics present, it was the very first time they heard these talks. Back then, Shifu was so full of energy, animating and enlivening his teaching to inspire students. His dedication was deep and profound. We were deeply touched by the talks and were reminded again of our “beginner's mind.” It felt like a brand new start. In the same vein, for this



Frozen Lake at DDRC Photo by Shaun Chung

retreat, it was rather unimportant whether one was familiar or skillful with the meditation methods. Instead, the most important point was to rethink the meaning of becoming a monastic, and to mull over the attitude and focus we should uphold in our practice. Through such exercises, we reinvigorated our minds, which may have become fatigued over time. In this sense, this was truly a “monastic winter retreat,” where the mind that has slowly drifted into “hibernation” is now re-awakened due to its proximity to the original source of heat.

Walking through the ice and snow along the lake shore, people had started a snowball fight! The seven-day meditation retreat had ended. Walking out of the Chan Hall and entering the Chan grove, yet another kind of scenery manifested. Our moods had shifted too. Chatting and laughing softly along the walk, accompanied by soft crunchy sounds of the ice and drifting snowflakes, such outdoor meditation can only be found in the winter at DDRC. We spent the entire morning walking but

did not feel cold at all. Even our hearts felt warm and toasty, too. After all, our affinity with our Dharma brothers and sisters is something that has been forged over many lifetimes and many *kalpas* – how could we not cherish it dearly?

One characteristic of the woods in the wintertime was that their sparseness made them reveal themselves to our eyes. The leaves, in spring and summer, had made it difficult to see into the woods. But by autumn and winter, dropping all the cover, we came to realize that the woods are not really as deep and mysterious as previously imagined, and that they’re in fact surprisingly simple and so devoid of everything. The whole place was made up of an organic black-and-white. It was indescribably pure and clear. All that remains are the wisps of smoke, diffusing into the air without any trace at all. The Monastic Winter Retreat at DDRC thus concluded. ☯

by Venerable Chang Hui
translated by Anny Sun



DHARMA DRUM RETREAT CENTER
Chan Meditation Retreats



Silent Illumination Intensive

May 22 – 31, 2015

Dr. Simon Child



Master Sheng Yen Intensive

(Huatou) • June 19 – 28, 2015

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Essentials of Chan Intensive

July 17 – 26, 2015

Venerable Chi Chern

184 Quannacut Road, Pine Bush, NY 12566, USA • +1 845 744 8114 • www.dharmadrumretreat.org

The Future

Calendar of retreats,
classes and other
upcoming events

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

Zen & 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 · ddc@dharmadrumretreat.org · www.dharmadrumretreat.org		
REGULAR WEEKLY ACTIVITIES		
Thursday Evening Meditation	7 PM–9 PM	Sitting, walking, moving meditation, Dharma talk.
RETREATS (register online)		
Day of Stillness & Children's Program	Apr 4	Saturday 9 AM–5 PM Venerable Chang Wen Little Bodhisattvas Team
	May 9	
	Jun 13	
Beginner's Mind Retreat	Apr 10–12	Nancy Bonardi & Rebecca Li
Silent Illumination Intensive Retreat	May 22–31	Simon Child
Master Sheng Yen Intensive Retreat	Jun 19–28	Abbot Venerable Guo Xing
CLASSES & WORKSHOPS (register online)		
Photo Mind	May 16–17	Taylor Mitchell & Lan Xu
SPECIAL EVENTS (register online)		
Gardening Meditation	Apr 18–19	DDRC Residents
Meditation in the Mountains	May 2	DDRC Residents
Family Weekend	May 9–10	Chang Wen Fashi

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	1 st Sunday 2:00–3:30 PM	Guan Yin (Avalokitesvara) Bodhisattva Chanting Service
	2 nd Sunday 2:00–4:00 PM	Great Compassion Repentance Ceremony Dharani Sutra
	3 rd Sunday 2:00–4:00 PM	Earth Store Bodhisattva Sutra Chanting Service
	4 th 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 Bodhisattva Precept Recitation Ritual
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	Apr 25 · May 30 · Jun 27	Saturday 9:00 AM – 5:00 PM
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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	May 17 2:00 PM–5:00 PM	Film Viewing and Discussion Led by Dr. Peter Lin
Dharma Drum Young People (DDYP) Gathering	Every 3 rd Saturday 2:30 PM–5:00 PM	Buddhists and non-Buddhists between the ages of 16–38 are welcome!

SPECIAL EVENTS

Buddha's Birthday Celebration	May 17	10:00 AM– 3:00 PM	Chanting and Vesak (Bathing the Buddha) Ceremony and other activities
		11:00 AM–12:30 PM	

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9-Day Intensive Chan

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10-Day Shattering the Great Doubt

Led by Simon Child • 31 July – 9 August 2015

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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

