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CHAN MAGAZINE

AUTUMN 2015



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The Beauty of Incense Light

Calligraphy by Chan Master Sheng Yen

“Beings who are always mindful of the Buddha, always thinking of the Buddha, are certain to see the Buddha now or in the future. They will never be far from Buddhas, and their minds will awaken by themselves without any special effort. Just as people who have been in the presence of incense will naturally smell sweet, they are adorned with the beauty of incense light.”

— THE ŚŪRAṄGAMA SŪTRA

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From the Editor	4
Setting Up a Buddhist Altar at Home <i>BY Chan Master Sheng Yen</i>	6
Making Offerings to the Lotus Sutra <i>BY Chan Master Sheng Yen</i>	11
About Agarwood Incense <i>BY Venerable Guo Yuan</i>	12
Graceful Incense <i>BY Venerable Chi Chern</i>	14
Praise of Incense <i>BY Venerable Chi Chern</i>	16
Is It Necessary to Burn Incense Scars When Receiving Precepts? <i>BY Chan Master Sheng Yen</i>	18
The Arising of Conditioned Appearance From the True Mind – Part 9 <i>BY Abbot Venerable Guo Xing</i>	26
The Past from CMC, DDRC and DDMBA Worldwide	30
The Future retreats, classes and upcoming events	36
Chan Meditation Center Affiliates	38

From the Editor

IMAGES OF INCENSE SMOKE in Venerable Chi Chern's paintings inspired me to produce a special "incense theme" issue.

Chinese readers will immediately recognize Venerable Chi Chern's poem as an imitation of the "Incense Anthem" (Chinese *Lu Xiang Zan*), an ancient hymn chanted by Chan Buddhists at the start of some dharma services. I've heard this hauntingly beautiful melody during our Bodhisattva Precepts Ceremonies. It is always sung in Chinese, but the liturgy books include an English translation; I am especially fond of the imagery in this phrase: "Bodhisattvas Mahasattvas under incense-cloud canopies."

I learned that in traditional Chinese Chan, periods of meditation were timed by the burning of an incense stick. Thus, in Chinese, a sitting period

is called "a stick of incense", the timekeeper is called the "incense watcher", and sitting meditation is called "sitting incense". I used to imagine that the "incense board" (Japanese *keisaku*) was called that because it was used to give "incentive", but now I know better.

Today we have digital devices to time our sitting periods. But we still offer a single stick of incense during services. In America we don't seem to burn very much incense; I know of American Buddhist centers where they don't use any at all, because it irritates some people's allergies. I hear that in Taiwan there is an old tradition of burning great handfuls of incense sticks when praying at a temple. (This may be how "incense-cloud canopies" are formed.) These days, when people are more conscious of the environment and air pollution, various Taiwanese temples are encouraging a move away from this old tradition. At Dharma Drum Mountain in Taiwan they are promoting the use of "green candles", little battery-powered votive lights, to use instead of burning incense.

I think it is customary to light an incense stick at the start of a Dharma talk. One time on retreat, Master Sheng Yen was about to begin his talk when he noticed no incense had been lit. While we waited for his attendant to light some, Shifu remarked that, although he knew some people were irritated by incense, he himself could "not breathe without it". Of course he didn't mean that literally, but his remark has stayed with me. The aroma of



Photo by Peter Lin

incense seems to *belong* in certain settings. When I step into my meditation room, the lingering fragrance brings to mind how it feels to sit in meditation, and I am immediately more calm and settled – Pavlovian conditioning, no doubt, but very useful.

In the nineteen-seventies, about a year before Shifu came to America, my college professor Dr. Chun-fang Yu brought us on a class trip to the Temple of Enlightenment in the Bronx. There I picked up a pamphlet written by Dr. C. T. Shen titled *How to Meditate*. One phrase in particular struck me; it said one should meditate in a "full of holy air room." Then, that phrase reminded me of the hushed atmosphere of the Catholic church of my childhood. Now it is the feeling I have when opening the door of my meditation room, or entering our Chan Hall.

I took Dr. Shen's pamphlet home and began to practice the basic instructions. I had only my bedroom to sit in; I made sure it was clean and tidy and full of fresh air, and I sat in front of a little red glass Buddha. I couldn't afford to burn incense often. One day while sitting in meditation I suddenly smelled a delightful aroma, finer than any incense I could afford. It came from nowhere, lasted a good while, and then was gone with no trace. Later when I was studying with Shifu I asked him about this. He said it was a sign that I was practicing correctly, but that I should forget about it and not hope for it to happen again.

"Full of holy air room" does not mean a room full of incense smoke. It means order and wholesomeness, and the feeling you get when you enter the room. An atmosphere can build up over time when a room is reserved and consistently used for meditative practice. This might be the accumulation of subtle energies, or it may only be a conditioned mental association aided by a lingering odor of incense. Regardless, I find it beneficial to my practice to keep such a room in my home.

Shifu never taught us it was *necessary* to have a Buddha statue and make offerings to it. Many Americans coming to Buddhism want to leave behind the ritual trappings of religion, and with Chan they can feel comfortable doing so. Then there are people like me, who love rituals and sacred images. So I was delighted to find Shifu's article on setting up a Buddhist altar.

Thanks to the "Complete Works Project" (translating Master Sheng Yen's books that have not been previously published in English) I found two articles by Shifu for this issue. *Setting Up a Buddhist Altar at Home* is directed at lay people, while *Is It Necessary to Burn Incense Scars When Receiving Precepts?* concerns monastics. Both were clearly intended for a Chinese audience; home altars and ancestor plaques are not common in America, and very few Americans take the Chan monastic robes. But I believe our readers will find both articles interesting and enjoyable.

As practitioner with a home Buddha room and several altars, after reading the *Altar* article I've had to rethink my clutter and clean up ashes, dust and melted wax. I was impressed that the first point the article makes is consideration for other's feelings, and that it also suggests courtesy towards non-Buddhist deities. The *Incense Scars* article shows us a Shifu with lively voice from his younger days and includes a delightful bit of autobiography.

When selecting material for this magazine I must consider Shifu's guideline: "Is it useful?" For me these articles by Shifu help clarify the Right View of why one would burn incense in front of a Buddha statue, or what to think of someone who burns it on their own scalps. So, light up some quality incense, curl up in a comfy chair, and enjoy the read. ☺

by *Bufe Maggie Laffey*
Editor-in-Chief

Setting Up a Buddhist Altar at Home

BY

Chan Master Sheng Yen

This article is excerpted from a forthcoming book by Master Sheng Yen tentatively titled *Common Questions Asked by Buddhists*, which was originally published in Chinese in 1988 as “學佛群疑” (*Xue fu qun yi*). It was considered by him to be a companion volume to his book *Orthodox Chinese Buddhism*, which was published in 1964. *Chan Magazine* thanks Venerable Guo Chan of the Sheng Yen Education Foundation for permission to print this article. *Common Questions Asked by Buddhists* is currently being translated in its entirety by Dr. Hueping Chin and Dr. Jerry Wang, with English editing by Ernest Heau.



Photo by Tong-Yang Lee

Question: How should lay Buddhists set up an altar at home?

Answer: This is a frequently asked question, which also implies another question: Is it necessary for lay Buddhists to set up a Buddha altar at home? If so, how should they do it? The answer really depends on the individual situation. If the dwelling is small, or if you live in a dormitory, share a room or a house with co-workers or classmates, it would not be convenient to set up an altar. In such cases, if you worship¹ regularly at a fixed time, you may place a sutra where you would normally place a Buddha statue. In this situation, it is not necessary to burn incense or candles, or offer water or flowers. Before and after worshipping, it would be appropriate to bow with joined palms, and prostrate to show respect and sincerity.

If your roommates or housemates are also Buddhists, it would certainly be alright to set up a

common altar or a Buddha room. If you are the only Buddhist, then you should not be so particular as to insist on setting up an altar; as it may court others' resentment and dismay.

If you are the only Buddhist in the family, it's also necessary to follow similar guidelines as if you live in a dormitory; otherwise, it may create discord in the family. Don't let your Buddhist practice lead to ill feelings and resentment toward Buddhism within the family. If the whole family believes in Buddhism, or you are head of the household, or both spouses practice, and there is space, these would be the best [conditions] to set up an altar or a Buddha room.

When setting up an altar in the living room, select the side of the room where the main furniture would normally be. There should be no window behind the statue, and the statue should face a door or window, so there would be plenty of sunlight, and the altar is clearly in sight when people enter the door.

¹ "Worship" can refer to different forms of meditative absorption, e.g. chanting, reading sutras, or making prostrations. According to Shifu "[...] there are two types of worshipping. First, ordinary people worship the Buddha statue in order to get some type of response or benefit from the Buddhas. Second, serious practitioners use the Buddha statue as a tool. This does not mean that serious practitioners do not derive benefit. There is a response, but it comes from the actions of the individual. Serious practitioners should not have the thought or wish that the Buddhas will do their work for them. If there is any benefit to be gained from the Buddhas at all, whether it be by paying respect to the Buddha, or by using the statue as a tool, that benefit comes from the Dharma that the Buddha taught. The act of paying respect to the Buddha is an aid in incorporating more Buddhadharma in our practice. Thus, what may appear to be worshipping becomes, in fact, a kind of practice, a cultivation. Prostrating to the Buddha becomes a meditative exercise. However, this is a Chan point of view. Other forms of Buddhism, such as esoteric Buddhism, teach differently."—Master Sheng Yen, "Buddha Images," in *Zen Wisdom – Knowing and Doing* (New York: Dharma Drum Publications, 1993), 227.

The Heart of a Home

The altar is the heart of a home; it should generate a sense of stability and security. As for the locations and directions suggested by geomancers, they can be used as reference for consideration; but one should not be superstitious and feel constrained by them. It would be fine as long as the Buddha statue does not directly face the bathroom, the stove, or a bed.

If you set up a Buddha room, choose a quiet quarter where children or pets don't roam in and out easily. The room should not be a place for receiving guests, chatting or entertaining; it should be used only for worshipping, chanting, and Chan practice, not for anything else. However, if there are already non-Buddhist pictures, plaques, and statues used for veneration, such as Guangong, Matzu, earth gods and ancestors, we should not do away with them right away, just because we now practice Buddhism. They should be removed step by step, gradually.

The first step is to place the Buddha statue in the middle of the altar, flanked by statues of the non-Buddhist deities, and ancestors' memorial plaques. It is not necessary to set up an incense burner and candle holders. The reason for this arrangement is because all benevolent deities and ancestors will protect, support, and be drawn to the Three Jewels. After the altar is set up, they can also become disciples of the Three Jewels and benefit from the Dharma. The next time you move the altar or Buddha room, you may then remove those non-Buddhist deity statues and store them away as keepsakes. As for the ancestors' plaques, they don't need to be placed or venerated at home; they can be moved to the hall of rebirth in a temple or monastery. If one insists on continuing to venerate them at home, they can be either placed on the level below the Buddha's statue, or they can be moved to another location onto a smaller altar and be venerated separately.

In larger temples, for instance, there are halls of rebirth especially for placing ancestors' plaques. Smaller temples usually allow ancestors' plaques and longevity plaques to be placed along the side walls of the main hall. In this way, it not only expresses our prudent filial piety and reverence to our ancestors, but also shows our sublime faith to the Buddha. In such a way, it distinguishes our sublime faith in the Buddha from the filial piety to our ancestors.

No Need for Multiple Statues

At home there's no need for multiple statues of the Buddha and bodhisattvas, as that would add to clutter. One statue of the Buddha can represent all buddhas, and one bodhisattva statue can represent all bodhisattvas. In addition to the Buddha statue, most families choose one from among Guanyin Pusa (Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva), Amitabha Buddha, or the Medicine Buddha.

If you have both Buddha and bodhisattva statues, then the Buddha statue should be placed in the middle or on a higher level in the back of the altar, while the bodhisattva statues are placed on the sides or at lower positions in front. In other words, the Buddha statue should stand out to show his revered prominence. The size of the statue should be in proportion to the scale of the altar and the Buddha room, not too big or too small. If a statue is small but made from one of the seven precious treasures (gold, silver, lapis lazuli, crystal, agate, ruby, carnelian), then a specially carved, multi-leveled shrine can be used to set off the statue's unique grandeur.

After acquiring a new Buddha or bodhisattva image or statue, many people would hold an "eye-opening" ceremony to initiate an ordinary piece of art as a religious article. However, from the Buddhist point of view, such a ceremony is not necessary; Buddha and bodhisattva images and statues are



Shinobu Buddhist Altar Design by Keita Suzuki / Product Design Center

already tools for practice and objects for reverence. Although the Buddha and the bodhisattvas are omnipresent in our lives, we can still use statues and images as objects of devotion to receive our prostrations, offerings, and respect. Conducting the services as we have been taught, we receive benefits and responses from the Buddha and the bodhisattvas. But the most important thing is our faith, sincerity, and a sense of respect, not the statues or images themselves. Therefore, an eye-opening ceremony for the images and statues is not that important.

No Need for Eye-Opening Ceremony

When Shakyamuni Buddha was still living, he went to the Heaven of the Thirty-three Devas for three months to give sermons to his mother. His disciples missed him, so they sculpted his image for worship; yet, there was no account of any eye-opening ceremonies. In subsequent generations, sutras, images, Buddhist articles, pagodas and even temples, became representations of Buddha's



Master Sheng Yen's home altar while studying in Japan in 1970s DDM Archive Photo

presence and his continuing transformation of the world. Nevertheless, solemn ceremonies often generate deep respect and faith in people. Gradually, many kinds of rituals related to worship and offerings came into existence; the eye-opening ceremony was one of them. Therefore, to this day, when a temple installs a new Buddha statue, followers gather together to have an eye-opening ceremony. Similar

to a new firm opening for business, or a ribbon-cutting ceremony for a new building, such a ceremony is a way to make a solemn announcement to the public.

However, when individuals set up Buddha and bodhisattva statues at home, there is no need for an announcement, hence, no need to hold an eye-opening ceremony. As long as you place the statues with sincerity and respect, and make daily offerings of incense, flowers, and fruits, keeping the offerings and the altar fresh, clean, and tidy, you will have a sacred and holy atmosphere to induce the dedication of practitioners.

To keep the indoor air fresh and clean, the incense burned at home should be of refined grade with delicate, faint fragrance. It's good to burn one incense stick daily at home, but do not pollute the air in the house with too much incense. Natural sandalwood and white wood incense sticks are preferred; it is not good to use synthetic chemical or animal-based incenses.

In the Buddha room of a modern home, candles can be replaced by light bulbs. It is necessary to clean the offering table, incense burner, and candle holder often, and keep them dust-free, and free of withering flowers and rotting fruit. Every day, we should set a specific time to conduct the practice, at least burning incense and offering water every morning and evening. Before leaving and after returning home, we should prostrate to Buddha to express our gratitude, respect, and longing for his presence. ☺

Making Offerings to the Lotus Sutra

by Chan Master Sheng Yen

Seeing the Sutra

*signifies seeing the Buddha in person,
so how can one not show reverence and pay homage to the Sutra?*

*By practicing making offerings,
one will generate a joyful and happy mind,
respecting and revering the fact that it is rare to meet the Dharma.*

*I encourage both monastic and lay practitioners
to give offerings of fresh flowers,
fruits,
clean water,
and burning incense,
or alternatively,
any one of these four items.*

*It doesn't matter how much the offering is;
the point is to express our respect and reverence.*

*Excerpt from Wonderful Dharma: A Study of the Lotus Sutra
English translation by Chiacheng Chang*

About Agarwood Incense

BY

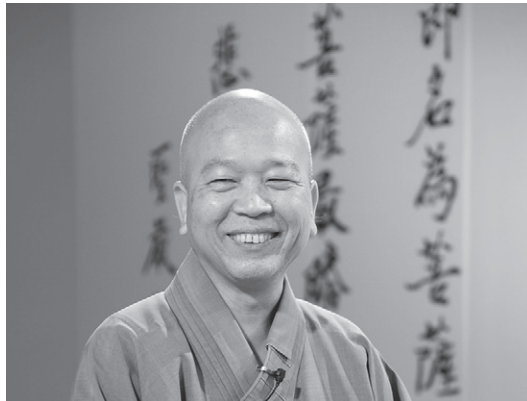
Venerable Guo Yuan

Venerable Guo Yuan is a Dharma heir of Chan Master Sheng Yen. He was for many years the Abbot of the Chan Meditation Center in Queens, NY and also the Dharma Drum Retreat Center in Pine Bush, NY. Currently he is the supervisor of the Chan Hall at Dharma Drum Mountain in Taiwan.

LET ME SHARE WITH YOU THE STORY from the *Surangama Sutra* about agarwood incense:

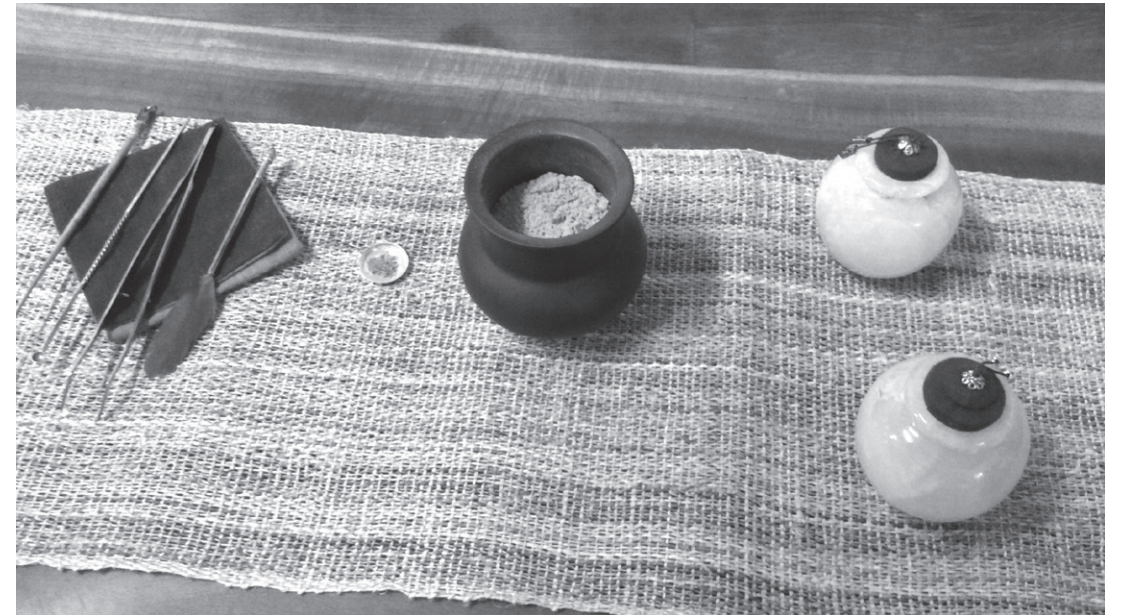
The Fragrance-Adorned youth, arose from his seat, bowed at the Buddha's feet, and said to the Buddha, "I heard the Thus Come One teach me to contemplate attentively to all conditioned dharmas. After I heard the Buddha's teaching, I left and lived in a quiet and clean dwelling. When I saw the bhikshus light agarwood incense, the fragrance quietly entered my nostrils. I contemplated on this fragrance: it did not come from the wood, nor from emptiness; it did not come from the smoke, or from the fire. There was no place it went to and no place it came from. Because of this, my discriminating mind was dispelled, and I attained the absence of outflows. The Thus Come One affirmed me and called me 'Adorned with Fragrance.' Defiling scent suddenly vanished, and wonderful fragrance was both secret and all pervasive. It was through the adornment of fragrance that I became an Arhat.

— from *The Surangama Sutra, Volume 5*



Venerable Guo Yuan DDM Archive Photo

Through this story we can see that The Fragrance-Adorned youth reached enlightenment through inhaling the scent of agarwood while a bhikshu was burning incense. In connection with these bhikshus of the era of the Buddha, the literatis and monastics in the Tang Dynasty of China used agarwood as well. Apart from making offerings to the Buddha, they also used agarwood as a mean to harmonize the mind while in meditation.



Setup for incense ceremony Photo by Venerable Guo Yuan

The method of fuming (pan-frying), the finest form of using agarwood, had been developed by this period of time. A tiny portion of fine-sliced agarwood is placed on a thin strip of metal. The metal strip is gently heated on top of a small piece of charcoal in a incense burner. The aroma of the agarwood is emitted, but not the smoke. By inhaling the fragrance, body and mind will become delightfully clear, bright and calm.

The fashion of savoring agarwood has lasted until now. The reason can't be fully understood unless the preciousness and scarcity of agarwood are described here. During the process of growth, if the agarwood tree is attacked by storm ravages, lightning or insects, it excretes resin around the wound to protect itself. Usable agarwood is only created when the resin reaches a certain level of intensity. Usually, a good quality of agarwood can only be produced when the tree has been growing for over one hundred years.

There are many different ways of using agarwood besides making offerings to the Buddhas. Official purposes, and making fragrance and perfume are common as well. Because of the durability of the aroma, it is widely used in the burning-hot Middle East as perfume. The demand has never been satisfied as it is always difficult to obtain, so the price is very expensive.

Agarwood is always ranked at the top among the other three kinds of precious fragrance: sandalwood, ambergris and musk. Its unique fragrance is unforgettable. It reminds us of the spirit of bodhisattvas – able to endure hardship and misfortune with courage. After all, its fragrance is always valuable to human beings. When we enjoy agarwood, we may perhaps realize the very essence of impermanence and emptiness. At the very least, we should give rise to a spirit of respect and gratitude. ☺

Graceful Incense

BY

Venerable Chi Chern

Written March 30, 2005 at Ipoh, Malaysia. Published in *Buddha Mind, Chan Affinity* “佛心禪緣” (*Fu xin chan yuan*) by Dharma Drum Buddhist Foundation, Taiwan, 2014. English translation by Venerable Kongzhu.



Painting by Venerable Chi Chern

IT KINDLES ITSELF, only for giving out its gentle fragrance, refreshing the surrounding space, cheering up the sense organ of nose, and comforting the uneasy mind – such is a stick of incense, standing straight up in the incense burner. At its tip, a tiny little red light is seen, and the fragrant aroma floats in the air, creating a very pleasant visual impact.... With just a little piece, an incense of supreme grade can enlighten the atmosphere of an entire space. So delicate, between being and not being, it brings a feeling of cozy freshness. In paying respect to the beloved Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, lighting up a stick of incense is the highest offering.

Silently, the incense spreads its essence, regardless how people might see it, standing fast to its duty – not giving more because of people’s love for it, nor withholding any because of people’s distaste. In any space, as long as there is incense burning, all who enter will feel open and friendly. The sensation of the nose being massaged by the fragrance, so soft and subtle – as if being present yet not, while not being there but it is – can calm down and comfort the restless mind.

People are fond of incense. Yet nowadays the sensibility of the human nose is somewhat dull. So some people like rather strongly perfumed incense. There is a variety of scents in incense, such as pungent, sour, bitter, sweet, and spicy. Some are stimulating to the nose; some bring saliva to the mouth; some can create a long lasting aftertaste, and some make people delight in subtlety.... When it is burned off, the light of incense is gone, but the fragrance still lingers, without immediate withdrawal. The lasting scent offers prolonged enjoyment.

Incense is quite welcome in any place, yet gentle and delicate incense disperses its fragrance in silence – it does not irritate the nose, pierce the ear, stab the eyes, burn the tongue, nor harm the body – everything and all is offered in silence, including receiving appreciation. Chan practitioners also diffuse fragrance, the fragrance of Chan. Silently they give out a formless fragrance, comforting the heart, calming the mind. As it wafts through the air, it empowers peace of mind and joy of spirit with the dances of the five sense organs....

How wonderful the gracious and noble incense is! ~

Praise of Incense

A song in imitation

by Venerable Chi Chern



一爐好香
法界蒙熏
諸佛海會悉遙聞
隨處結香雲
誠意方殷
諸佛現全身

*As fragrance of supreme incense
Permeates throughout the Dharma Realm
Reaching assemblies wide and far
Forming auspicious clouds everywhere
Granting our utmost sincere devotions
In perfect manifestation, all Buddhas appear*

一柱清香
供養三寶
祈求佛菩薩加持
一切皆平安
少病少惱
身心都健康

*A stick of graceful incense
Dedicated to the Three Treasures
Praying for blessings of all Bodhisattvas
May all be peaceful and safe
With decreasing sickness and anger
May body and mind be at ease*



一瓣心香
奉獻衆生
但願有情得安樂
六道盡沾恩
正法弘揚
宏願深且廣

*The incense of immaculate mind
Offered to all sentient beings
Wishing joy and no worry
May all in the six realms benefit
With Buddhadharma flourishing
May great vows be widespread and deep*

一味禪香
鼻根品聞
心中體悟六根通
禪無言空相
能所相泯
定慧本一體

*The aroma of incense from Chan
Appreciated in delight by the nose
Realizing interconnection of six sense faculties
Chan is wordless without form
All returns to emptiness
Samadhi and Wisdom are one, not two*

Written September 18, 2014 in New Jersey, USA

Chinese Calligraphy and Painting by Venerable Chi Chern
English translation by Venerable Kongzhu

Is It Necessary to Burn Incense Scars When Receiving Precepts?

BY

Chan Master Sheng Yen

Not all readers will have heard of the practice discussed in this article, but those familiar with Chan monks and nuns may have noticed the three (or more) circular scars on top of their heads. There are three stages of Chan monastic ordination: novice, full ordination (bhikṣu/bhikṣunī), and Bodhisattva precepts. During the ceremony for receiving the Bodhisattva precepts, lit incense cones are allowed to burn down on the ordinand's scalp, creating the scars. This occurs in a group setting, ordinands and trainers chanting the name of the Buddha all the while. It takes about fifteen minutes for the cones to burn down completely. Afterwards, cooling watermelon rinds and aloe are placed around the burned area, but the burns themselves are left untouched for several days, to avoid infection and to allow a clean scar to form.

This article was originally written in 1962 for the Chinese Buddhist magazine “海潮音” (*Haichao yin*, Sound of Ocean Waves). Later it was published in Master Sheng Yen's book “律制生活” (*Lu zhi sheng huo*, Vinaya and Daily Living, 1963). It was translated into English by Jeffrey Kotyk and edited by Chiacheng Chang.



Painting by Chien-Chih Liu



Master Sheng Yen Photo by Venerable Chang Chen

IS IT NECESSARY TO BURN incense scars on one's scalp when receiving the precepts? I believe that, after writing my views on this question, those who do not agree with burning incense scars will oppose me while those who approve of it will be against me, as I both approve and disapprove of the practice.

According to the general opinion based on untrustworthy information in crowd sourcing, receiving precepts and burning the scalp with incense are two aspects of the same thing. If the scalp is not burned when receiving precepts, then those who have received the precepts will have no way of obtaining recognition from the majority of people. Furthermore, it is thought that the more burns on

the scalp the higher the level of precepts. This is why some believe that with the novice precepts there are three incense cones burned, while with the bhikṣu precepts, nine, and the bodhisattva precepts, twelve.

The Hīnayāna precepts, in reality, fundamentally disallow intentional damaging of the body; it is a violation of precepts. *The Ten Recitations Vinaya* (Chinese *Shi Song Lü*; Sanskrit *Daśa Bhāṇavāra Vinaya*) of the Sarvāstivāda School has a clear rule where intentionally severing one's finger is committing a transgression of *duṣkṛta* (evil action, or wrong doing). It is impermissible to sever intentionally a finger just as it is impermissible to burn a finger. We can just as well reason and know

the answer as to whether or not burning the scalp constitutes a transgression. This is why Tibetan Lamas have no custom of burning incense on the head even though they practice Esoteric Mahāyāna and advocate austerities. In Theravadin countries, this is basically unheard of. The novice and bhikṣu precepts are both Hinayāna precepts, which include no practice of burning the scalp with incense. It is only adopted in Mahāyāna Bodhisattva practices.

Self-Harm as an Offering?

The primary canonical basis for burning incense scars is the *Brahma Net Scripture* and its various commentaries. Its sixteenth minor precept states, “Seeing a beginner bodhisattva come in search of the Mahāyāna sūtras and disciplinary codes from a hundred or a thousand miles, all the austere practices should be explained in accordance with the Dharma, such as the burning of the body, the burning of the arm, and the burning of the finger. If they do not burn their body, arm, or finger as an offering to the buddhas, they are not renunciant bodhisattvas. Even for hungry tigers, wolves, lions, and all hungry ghosts, they should cast off the flesh of their bodies, hands, and legs, offering it to them. Later, the True Dharma is to be explained in sequence, for each and every one of them to open up their minds and understand the truth.”

This austere practice teaches that renunciant bodhisattvas burn their bodies, arms, and fingers, as well as cast off their flesh and offer it to hungry tigers, wolves, lions, and all the *hungry ghosts*. As to accounts of burning the body as an offering to the buddhas, apart from the *Brahma Net Scripture* most other Mahāyāna sūtras on precepts do not have any clear prescriptions for it. However, in other types of Mahāyāna sūtras and śāstras there actually are accounts of it. For example, in the chapter entitled

“Past Lives of Medicine King Bodhisattva” (Chn. *Yao Wang Pusa Benshi Pin*) in the *Lotus Sūtra* there is an account of burning the body as an offering to the Buddha, which receives the simultaneous praise of buddhas in worlds as numerous as grains of sands in eight billion Ganges Rivers: “Good! Good! Virtuous man! This is true effort. This constitutes genuine offering to the Tathāgata by practicing the Dharma in its true sense!”

Tiantai Master Zhiyi (538–597) also read this part and had a flash of awakening, whereupon he settled into stillness and entered meditative concentration, personally witnessing the assembly on Vulture’s Peak, solemn and still undispersed. It is clear that the merit of burning the body as an offering to the buddhas is inconceivable. This is why the same chapter in the *Lotus Sūtra* also states, “If one has aroused the aspiration to attain *anuttarā-samyak-sambodhi*, and is able to burn a finger or even the great toe as an offering to a Buddhist stūpa, it would be superior to offering one’s country, city, wife, children, and a great chiliocosom of mountains, forests, rivers, and ponds, as well as various treasures.”

Not for Beginner Bodhisattvas

However, we should be clear on one fact: Medicine King Bodhisattva’s ability to practice this kind of austere path is beyond comparison with a beginner bodhisattva who is at the stage of ordinary being. Medicine King Bodhisattva first takes in various kinds of incense materials for a thousand, two-hundred years, and then further smears fragrant oil on himself. With supernormal power and aspirations he then spontaneously burns his body, which is alight for another one thousand and two hundred years whereupon his body then burns out. It begs the question of who among us can have this kind of supernormal power and aspirations, and then

combust himself or herself? Who is able to burn this body of flesh and blood, and then burn it for one thousand, two hundred years?

There are many examples in Buddhist sūtras where someone does not mind casting off their body to hear the Dharma, hence in the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* Samantabhadra Bodhisattva tells Sudhana, “Within my ocean of Dharma, not a single word or verse was obtained without giving away [cherished] positions such as that of the Wheel Turning King or without relinquishing every possible possession.”

However, this is done by those who are all bodhisattvas on the stage of tolerance and beyond, when they are in an environment where the Dharma is not available. Additionally, casting off one’s flesh, hands and feet, and then offering them to hungry tigers, wolves, lions, and all the *hungry ghosts* is done out of kind sympathy for beings with the hopes that by means of casting away the body as food we might embrace, transform, and guide them, which is why the *Brahma Net Scripture*, in the same aforementioned precept, states, “Later, the True Dharma is to be explained in sequence, for each and every one of them to open up their minds and understand the truth.”

Bodhisattvas on the Noble Stages

Thus, there is no place in any realm that is not a place for the bodhisattva to cast off their flesh and brains for the sake of sentient beings. The bodhisattvas might turn themselves into a great mountain of meat to save starving people, who then carve them up. They might manifest as a great fish which people take and eat. In order to save a single pigeon, they might be as noble as a king, and yet carve off their own flesh as a substitute. Although they would be gushing blood, they would still not see it as painful.

However, it is only a bodhisattva on the noble stages who can do this; otherwise, if casting off the

flesh and feeding hungry tigers, wolves, and lions came first, how could it be possible that “Later, the True Dharma is to be explained in sequence, for each and every one of them to open up their minds and understand the truth”? Moreover, even if they did have the great mind to cast off the body, not having attained the stage of tolerance they could not possibly be sensing no pain when they did so. Since their life would end in that agony, it would also be difficult to have self-control about where they would go post-mortem.

Ordinary sentient beings have more karmic obstacles than good causes, and more fixed karma than the power of vows, which is why there are few who can experience pain and not become angry, and not many who could become angry and still not descend to a lower realm as a result. Thus the thirty-eighth minor precept of the *Brahma Net Scripture* stipulates that a bodhisattva may not intentionally enter dangerous areas, otherwise they violate a precept. Dangerous areas include “countries in distress, kingdoms ruled by evil kings, precipitous terrains, the deep wilderness, places inhabited by lions, tigers, or wolves, areas suffering distress by water, fire, or wind, areas with bandits, and poisonous snakes on the roads.” There is no contradiction with what the sixteenth article states, as it refers to a bodhisattva on the noble stages; while here it refers to a beginner bodhisattva.

The bodhisattva on the noble stages will cast off his body to feed tigers and wolves, because he is able to embrace and deliver them. Although the beginner bodhisattva might be devoured, bones and all, by a tiger or a wolf, not only would the beasts not be liberated, but, on the contrary, because they ate a bodhisattva practicing the path, the karma of the act would be all the more severe. Thus, it is clear that the merit of casting off the body, as well as the spirit of it, is great, but the beginner bodhisattva is

still without firm footing and cannot so lightly cast away their body, otherwise they will have planted the causes for suffering and will suffer karmic retribution in the form of suffering. That is not at all worthwhile.

In the Buddhist canon, we can see accounts of people casting away or burning their bodies. Even in chapters entitled “Forgetting the Body” (Chn. *wang shen pian*) and “Abandoning the Body” (Chn. *yi shen pian*) in the *Biographies of Eminent Monks* (Chn. *Gaoseng Zhuan*), there are no shortage of such examples. Some did it to protect the Dharma while others did it out of compassionate aspirations for the sake of liberating beings or as a means of seeking merit, thus each was able to make a great impact. Among them there are certainly bodhisattvas of the noble stages in manifestation, but we cannot say there were absolutely no practitioners who were ordinary beings.

Blindly Chasing After Merit

However, if we aren’t sure about this kind of practice, or when it is not for a critical moment, it is best not to hastily employ it because, although the material body is not something to place much importance upon, it is the tool with which we practice the path. If our skill is lacking or our wisdom is weak, then blindly chasing after merit by burning the body, or casting it away, will at best only result in birth in the heavens, whereupon when one’s heavenly blessings are exhausted, one will again descend to the lower destinies, or else perhaps degenerate into the heaven of the Māra King, which would be all the more miserable.

Again, the practice of burning the scalp has no lack of basis in the Buddhist canon. Furthermore, it is not just burning the scalp, but there is also mention of even scooping out the top of one’s head with a knife, pouring in scented oils, and setting it alight as a lantern. This kind of practice certainly deserves

our respect and praise, but it is not something to be forced because, if we lack reverence and endurance, then it would prove unbearable. At the same time the *Brahma Net Scripture* stipulates only the burning of the body, arm, and finger without requiring a person to burn their scalp.

There are some who believe that the very top of a person’s body is the most honored of places, so burning of the scalp symbolizes or represents the burning of the body. This interpretation is, of course, reasonable. However, we need to be clear on one fact: even though the *Brahma Net Scripture* demands that a renunciant bodhisattva must burn their body, arm, and finger, as well as cast the body away as food for lions, wolves, and *hungry ghosts*, it does not at all say that bhikṣus who receive the bodhisattva precepts must first burn their body or cast it away, or that if they do not burn their body or cast it away, then they will not obtain the precepts.

Two Different Matters

In particular, it is not stipulated that the renunciate, prior to receiving the bodhisattva precepts, must first burn their scalp in order to then be able to obtain the precepts. This is why this matter of burning the scalp is not a necessary part of transmitting the renunciant bodhisattva precepts. Burning the scalp and actually transmitting the precepts are fundamentally two different matters. If you say that the renunciate seeking the bodhisattva precepts are supposed to first burn their body and cast it away, and then, thereafter, receive the precepts, the body would already be burned and cast off, so what would be there to receive the precepts? Are we talking about precepts for the deceased, then? Now, although the burning of the scalp is not burning away the body or casting it away, the basis for this burning of the scalp comes from the same origins.



Ven. Yan Guang's incense scars Photo by Ven. Chang Xiang

I personally do not oppose the practice of burning incense scars, but it should come from individual aspirations. Prior to transmitting the renunciant bodhisattva precepts, or in explaining the *Brahma Net Scripture*, the precept master of the precepts ceremony should explain to those receiving the precepts the austerities to be practiced, which are necessary. The main point of austerities is to experience and witness the sufferings of this existence. As long as there is saṃsāra, there is suffering. In terms of suffering, burning the flesh is most unbearable, but although it is painful, the pain of death is even more severe. To burn incense scars is to urge practitioners not to indulge in pleasure and thus forget their original

purpose, forgetting all about the great matter of liberating from saṃsāra and ignoring the suffering of sentient beings. To burn incense scars is to reveal one’s resolve to detach from this body of flesh and blood, and to abandon it whenever necessary.

Some people say that burning incense scars is absolutely not painful – if you do feel pain, then it is a karmic hindrance. This is a deliberate lie! It would be a bit excessive, especially, to require that a beginner in receiving the precepts feels no pain when the burning of incense scars is applied, unless they are bodhisattvas who have returned to the world again. Actually, the point of burning incense scars is not to make someone feel no pain, but on the contrary to expect that the practitioner can have a taste of pain, which will help them become and remain alert and vigilant about their practice of benefiting self and others.

An Offering to One’s Own Nature

Some people misunderstand the original meaning of burning the body as an offering to the buddha, believing that the buddhas and bodhisattvas are pleased to have us burn our flesh as an offering and therefore there is great merit in the act. Suppose this were really so, the buddhas and bodhisattvas would not be much brighter and wiser than spirits who consume sacrificial blood. Actually, burning incense scars as an offering to the buddhas is not an offering to an external buddha, but an offering to the buddha of one’s own nature. Aspiring to burn incense scars, we increasingly forge ahead while day by day gradually drawing nearer to the attainment of Buddhahood. This is why it is an offering to the buddha of one’s own nature and not to some external buddha. The reason the buddhas praise Medicine King Bodhisattva for burning his body as an offering to the buddhas is because they are praising

the firmness of his *bodhicitta* and the greatness of his austerities. It is absolutely not because they are delighted at receiving an offering of burnt flesh.

A buddha is an ultimately perfected individual – what does a buddha lack? Does a buddha still need us to burn our bodies with incense as an offering? Consequently, it is indeed required for the instructions on austerities to be given at the precept hall, but it is actually unnecessary to stipulate that they must first be burned with incense prior to receiving the bodhisattva precepts. If they have the mind to receive the incense scars, then they should be praised, but if they do not want it they must not be forced.

The time for burning incense scars need not be fixed. Any time you wish, any time you can go burn incense scars. To burn the top of the head is certainly excellent, but burning another place is good too.

I Burned Nine Cones

Of course burning incense scars at the precept ceremony has never been “forcibly” carried out. Furthermore, at some precept ceremonies it is stipulated that only three incense cones are permitted to be burned. But there are people wanting six or nine incense cones to be burned, and when the precept master does not permit this they simply on their own accord add more in private. It is under such circumstances that I burned nine cones. On the other hand, there are people who do not want to have their scalps burnt, but, being influenced by the group mindset and collective behavior they are compelled to go along with the assembly.

I have a personal story to share about this fact. I had a fellow precept receiver who was originally opposed to burning incense scars, but later it was due to my privately burning nine incense-cone scars that his master asked him if he wanted to burn nine as

well. He at first appeared reluctant, but then, seeing by my facial expression that I didn’t seem to mind at all, he said, “Alright, I’ll also burn nine cones.” Here I had influenced him, but I was not sure whether or not he would blame me later on.

Burning incense scars is incomparable to burning the body, for the pain of it is, after all, limited in degree. It is certainly possible for bodhisattvas who are not on the noble stages to practice it, but it is essential that it comes from one’s own true aspirations; otherwise not only will the teacher and the one being burned both be without any merit from the act, but they will also have committed transgressions.

There is no need to insist that “If you don’t burn your body, arm, or finger, then you are not a renunciant bodhisattva,” and that burning the scalp with incense is not at all equivalent to “burning the body, arm or finger.” From the initial awakening of the mind as an ordinary being to the attainment of Buddhahood there are altogether fifty-two stages involved, so bodhisattvas at the ordinary stages need not be required to emulate those at the noble and worthy stages in all matters. Otherwise, could the exemptible seven branch transgressions in the *Yogācāra Bodhisattva Precepts* (Chn. *Yuqie Pusajie Ben*) and the exemptible ten unwholesome acts in the *Compendium of the Mahāyāna* (Skt. *Mahāyāna Saṃgraha Śāstra*) be subsequently permitted? It is not permitted for those other than bodhisattvas on the noble stages.

Besides, a novice who has received the bodhisattva precepts is also considered a renunciant bodhisattva. A novice could not receive the bodhisattva precepts if they were to burn away their body entirely prior to receiving the precepts. If they first burned their arm or finger and then received the precepts, they would still not be like Medicine King Bodhisattva, who recovers the burnt off arms and fingers with his

power of great vows. In that case, it would actually become an obstacle to receiving the bhikṣu precepts if they had no arms or fingers.

Thoughts of Reform

I have no objection to burning incense scars, but I hope that, later on, Dharma centers that transmit the precepts might give some thought to reform in regards to the practice. I very much endorse reform, but I cannot agree with extreme criticism. There are some who say the motive for burning the scalp is derived from the stipulations set by precept masters, and that it would be a disservice to the purpose, only to encourage hypocrisy, vanity, and image. Such criticism is a bit too much. It may be incorrect to force people to have their scalps burned, but could you also say that the voluntary burning of incense scars is impermissible as well? Shall we not recognize it as a concrete expression of religious sentiments?

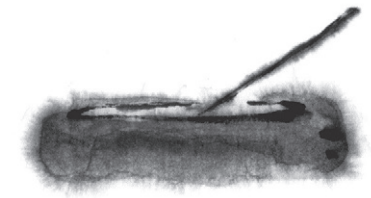
It is right to criticize the problems in a certain time period, but it is wrong if we depart from the essence of a religion. Otherwise how would we be different from Hu Shi (1891–1962) scolding Buddhism for its arhats, monks, and nuns having no thought to conducting themselves well in society?

Historical Accounts

There are also some who engage themselves in textual studies and believe that monks having their scalps burned originated from the cruel orders issued by Emperor Shunzhi (1644–1662) during the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912). I do not know what historical evidence is used as a basis for this, but I can prove that the burning of their scalps by monks does not begin with orders from Emperor Shunzhi in the Qing Dynasty.

In the Late Ming Dynasty in the year 1632 Master Ouyi was thirty-four years old and went into summer retreat, where he was scarred with ten incense cones. Then, on the last day of the retreat when confessions are done, he burned six more incense cones on his head before obtaining the novice bodhisattva precepts. This was twelve years prior to the first year in Shunzhi’s reign (1644). Prior to Master Ouyi’s time, scarring the scalp was not without precedence, which shows that the austere practice of monks scarring their heads did not start with Shunzhi’s orders.

It is indeed true that the first person in China to receive the bodhisattva precepts was Vinaya Master Daojin (d. 444) in the later years of the Eastern Jin Dynasty (317–420). He spent three years in sincere hard practice of the Dharma to receive the essence of the bodhisattva precepts as a spiritual response, though there is no account of him burning his scalp. Later those who sought the bodhisattva precepts might have encouraged and praised the merit of austerities, but it was not required that they had to burn their scalp. This is why today we must not rashly abolish the burning of incense scars, but it is also not necessary to require that a newly ordained must undergo burning of the scalp. Now that this article is written, I wonder who will appreciate my arguments or otherwise accuse me. ☹



Painting by Chien-Chih Liu

The Arising of Conditioned Appearance from the True Mind

Part 9

BY

Abbot Venerable Guo Xing

This is the ninth 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.

PREVIOUSLY, IN OUR DISCUSSION of the “Ten Characteristics of the True Mind,” we focused mainly on the characteristics of the mind. The mind is intrinsically formless; at the same time, it is capable of the functions of cognition and awareness. Now, we are going to turn the discussion to the relationship between nature and phenomena/form.

Ananda, you have not yet understood that the objects we perceive are unreal and illusory. They are subject to change, appearing here and there and disappearing here and there. Yet these illusions, each with its conventional designation, are in fact within the essential, wondrous enlightenment. The same is true of the five aggregates, the six faculties, the twelve sites, and the eighteen constituent elements. It is an illusion that they come into being when both their causes and their conditions are

present, and it is an illusion that they cease to be when either their causes or their conditions are absent. You simply have not yet understood that, fundamentally, everything that comes and goes, that comes into being and ceases to be, is within the true nature of the Matrix of the Thus-Come One, which is the wondrous, everlasting understanding – the unmoving, all-pervading, wondrous suchness of reality. But, though you may seek within the everlasting reality of the Matrix of the Thus-Come One for what comes and goes, for confusion and awakening, and for coming into being and ceasing to be, you will not find them there. (The Surangama Sutra – A New Translation with Excerpts from the Commentary by the Venerable Master Hsuan Hua [Buddhist Text Translation Society, 2012], 89)



Photo by Sebastian Boguszewicz

The Mind itself does not exhibit particular, fixed phenomena. Yet phenomena arise from the Mind. There are the six sensory faculties (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind), also called the six entries. Phenomena are categorized as forms, sounds, smells, taste, physical sensations, and thoughts. They are also called the six sensory objects. Together, the six sensory faculties and six sensory objects are called the Twelve Sites. As the six sensory faculties come in contact with the six sensory objects, the six consciousnesses arise, performing the functions of cognition and differentiation. They are called eye-consciousness, ear-consciousness, nose-consciousness, tongue-consciousness, body-consciousness, and mind-consciousness. All together, the six sensory faculties, six sensory objects, and the six consciousnesses, are called the Eighteen Constituent Elements. The objects of

perception/awareness are collectively called the form aggregate. Perceiving and cognizing are further classified as the sensation aggregate, the perception aggregate, the volition/impulse aggregate, and the consciousness aggregate. Together they are called the Five Aggregates (Sanskrit: *Skandhas*). Then, the Seven Elements consist of the five objects of awareness – earth, water, fire, air, and space – also including the subject of awareness: sensory awareness and consciousness. This classification/analysis of nature and phenomena comes from the perspective of the dualistic mind of subject-and-object. Ultimately speaking, the mind is formless and devoid of characteristics. When the mind gives rise to the various functions, myriads of illusory phenomena arise. At the same time, because these phenomena arise and perish due to causes and conditions, they are “empty and illusory.”

Let's take the eye-faculty as an example. According to our experience, we cannot see without the eyes. Yet according to the sutra, when the eyes stare at the same spot for a prolonged period of time, they become fatigued and thus give rise to the phenomena of light and darkness. Between these two illusory phenomena of light and darkness, visual phenomena are formed. In the sutras, they are called "defilement-fatigue." For instance, if we keep staring at the floor, after awhile, the eyes become tired. Subsequently, we start to see things that are not there, just like illusory flowers appearing in the thin air. The mountains, rivers, and great earth that we see now are basically the result of such fatigue.

The Buddha first explained that the fact that we are able to see is not due to either light or darkness. Had it been "light" that enables seeing, then when it's dark, such visual ability should disappear and we would not be able to see darkness. On the other hand, if it had been darkness that enables "seeing," then "seeing" would disappear when there's light. If we are able to see both light and darkness, then, by logical deduction, the function of seeing does not depend on either phenomenon (neither light nor darkness).

The Buddha then explained that our ability to see various phenomena does not depend on the eye-organ either. Had it been the eye that enables the seeing of phenomena, then there's no need for light and darkness. Therefore, the ability to see various phenomena is not solely dependent on the eyes either.

The Buddha further said, had phenomena arisen due to empty-space, then that means that empty-space is capable of being aware of and perceiving these phenomena, and it would be completely unrelated to the eye-faculty. Since that's not the case, to be able to see phenomena is not due to empty-space either.



Photo by Peter Lin

What the Buddha is doing here is conducting an analysis via logic. Our so-called "eye-faculty" is a function of the mind. It is the mind extracting phenomena of light, darkness, and objects through the eyes. Another way to explain it is that the mind records these phenomena, projects them, and then perceives these projections. We call this process "seeing." When these phenomena disappear, then the eyes, through which we contact the phenomena, as well as the eye-consciousness, will disappear as well. Departing from phenomena, the so-called "seeing" itself also ceases to exist.

Yet, our true mind does not disappear. Phenomena arise and perish, but the mind that perceives and cognizes does not arise or perish

along with the phenomena. The mind that can perceive and cognize does not arise nor perish. In the actual process of seeing an object, what it is that responds to the object and what it is that is capable of perceiving the object is called "consciousness." We may experience the arising and perishing of this "consciousness," but its essence is the true mind. Even when the conscious-mind perishes, the true mind neither arises nor perishes. Take our memories as an example. When we recall a memory, the memory surfaces. Attending to it, the specific memory surfaces. Stop paying attention to it, it disappears. But the mind that is capable of cognizing would neither arise nor perish along with the memories. I often use the ocean and the ocean-waves as an analogy. Waves are not separate from the ocean. Yet the waves arise and perish incessantly; they are therefore empty and illusory. If we mistaken the external forms of the waves as the ocean itself, chasing after the waves, we would forever remain lost between confusion and awakening, between coming into being and ceasing to be, and not be able to obtain understanding.

Now we'll turn to "illusory phenomena." We should all have this understanding: do not think "illusory phenomena" means they do not exist. Illusory phenomena exist in relative terms. Under specific causes and conditions, the illusory phenomena that are perceived in the very moment do indeed exist. However, once the causes and conditions shift, the illusory phenomena cease to exist. The term "illusory" is referring to the phenomenon of arising and perishing. The sutras often state "like dreams and like illusions." "Like dreams" does not mean non-existence. When we are dreaming, the phenomena do exist. Once we wake up, the dreams would then disappear. Such arising and perishing of phenomena is illusory. So, do not think "illusory" means non-existence.

Master Sheng Yen said, "Causes and conditions exist. Self-Nature is empty." It becomes a problem only when you treat illusions as reality. Once you realize illusions are merely illusions, then illusions are instantaneously one and the same as what is real. All phenomena are the mind itself, which is stated as "form is precisely emptiness." Therefore I keep saying, whatever you see, there isn't any one phenomenon that is not the mind. The patriarchs also said, after all that is said, "forms/phenomena are precisely the mind itself." It's never "I perceive phenomena." Once there's the notion of "I" perceiving phenomenon, it has turned into illusion.

We need to be clear about the relationship between nature and phenomena.

The phenomena we perceive, using the dualistic mode of the mind, are illusory phenomena. Yet we take these illusory phenomena as reality. Phenomena are one and the same as the mind. Phenomena can undergo many transformations. For instance, a closed hand becomes a fist, and an open hand reveals the palm. They are different forms of the same hand. The only difference is in the function. Nevertheless, we feel as if the palm disappears when the fist is formed. Or when the palm is revealed, that the fist disappears. In truth, the mind gives rise to myriads of functions and phenomena. When you either open your hand to show the palm, or close your hand to make a fist, your hand has neither increased nor decreased one bit. The mind is exactly like so. There are limitless phenomena manifested in the mind. Just like the internet – when you click on a website, the website appears. It is also like – if in the midst of an open and endless space – you attend to the sky, sky manifests; attend to the meadow, meadow manifests; attend to sounds, sounds manifest. So, have any of these phenomena ever appeared after all? It is your mind that has moved. ☺

(To be continued)

The Past

from CMC, DDRC and DDMBA worldwide

First White House – US Buddhist Leaders Conference

ON THURSDAY MAY 14, 2015 one hundred twenty-five leaders, teachers, activists and scholars from throughout the diverse US Buddhist community participated in a historic White House – US Buddhist Leaders Conference.

The morning session was held at George Washington University's Elliot School of International Affairs. The main theme was "Voices in the Square – Action in the World". Venerable Bhikkhu Bodhi spoke on "The Four Noble Truths of the Climate Crisis", Reverend Angel Kyodo Williams gave a talk on "An Inconvenient Dharma - Cutting the Root of Climate Change", and Dr. Duncan Ryuken Williams gave "American Buddhism: Engagement in the Public Square". Then representatives of several Buddhist organizations, including Sylvie Sun of Buddhist Global Relief, presented five-minute profiles of their communities in action.

At the end of the morning sessions, all participants were invited to sign two joint statements to voice Buddhist perspectives to the Obama Administration: the "Buddhist Declaration on Climate Change" and the "Buddhist Statement on Racial Justice". You can read the statements in full here: <https://spiritrock.org/enews-pages/enews.2015.07-buddhist-leaders-statements>

The afternoon session was held at the White House and included a Vesak Commemoration led

by Reverend Toshikazu Nakagaki of the Buddhist Council of New York and the presentation of the joint Buddhist statements signed that morning. The White House officials and the Buddhists representatives engaged with each other on the issues of climate change, religious freedom and justice for the death of young African-American men at the hands of police.

In his closing remarks Dr. Jack Kornfield, of Spirit Rock Meditation Center, re-emphasized to the White House officials that the US needs to improve itself on these issues in order to "teach" other countries how to do so. He also encouraged all Buddhist communities to stand up and speak out to their congressmen to make better polices on these issues. ☸

by Venerable Chang Hwa
Director, Chan Meditation Center

Buddhist-Catholic Dialogue in Rome

THE BISHOPS' COMMITTEE for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in collaboration with the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue convened a Buddhist-Catholic Dialogue on "Suffering, Liberation, and Fraternity" in Rome, Italy from June 23 to 27, 2015.

As a Buddhist nun, this was the first time I have formally met with Catholic fathers and sisters. I was very touched by their hospitality and kindness, as well as their open-minded and sincere practice. Every morning, meditation and mass were held for both religions. There was a different dialogue topic each day: "Relational Suffering and its Causes," "Liberation from Relational Suffering," and "Fraternity as the Way Forward."



Venerable Chang Hwa's meeting with Pope Francis

Each representative gave a ten-to-twenty minute talk on each topic from the perspectives of each religion. The formal talks from each speaker were creative and enjoyable. Yet what was even more exciting were the private conversations around the dining table with many questions regarding other's religious experiences, practices and the path to religious lives.

On the last day the dialogue topic was "Future Fraternal Interreligious Cooperation" out of which came a joint statement of our future plans. We agreed to explore collaborative interfaith social action initiatives to address such issues as: global climate change, outreach for city youth, prison ministries and restorative justice, resources for the homeless, immigration, neighborhood social issues, and education.

The highlight of the event was a privileged one hour private audience with Pope Francis, followed by a VIP tour of the Sistine Chapel, Vatican Museum and St. Peter's Basilica. Meeting and shaking hands with Pope Francis will undoubtedly become an unforgettable historical memory for all of us. I cannot thank The Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID) and the event coordinator, Professor Donald Mitchell, enough to make this wonderful memorial event possible.

May all who are in suffering find their inborn compassion and wisdom and live with joy, bliss and peace. ☸

by Venerable Chang Hwa
Director, Chan Meditation Center

Youth Empowerment Workshop – Australia

ON JUNE 13TH 2015, Dharma Drum Mountain Melbourne Centre (DDMMC), together with Dharma Drum Mountain Buddhist Association (DDMBA, USA), the Buddhist Council of Victoria (BCV), the Interfaith Centre of Melbourne, and with the support of the Victorian Multicultural Council (VMC), held the inaugural Youth Empowerment Workshop in Melbourne. The workshop was hosted by Reverend Helen Summers, the Founder and Director of the Interfaith Centre of Melbourne and led by Venerable Chang Ji, assisted by Venerable Guo Chan from DDMBA. Both Venerables are passionate about their roles in interfaith dialogue, protecting the environment, peace-building and developing youth leadership.

The purpose of the one-day intensive workshop was to teach young people how to take control of their lives and achieve a new sense of self-worth, direction and empowerment. The workshop highlighted the influences of the social environment, our attitudes, our goals, and how to bring about awareness of our sense of self. The activities of the day aimed to make the “invisible” parts of life visible to us, so that we might fully realise our potential and perform at our greatest capacity.

In one of the components of the workshop, Ven. Guo Chan guided the group to come up with their “soul profile”, which was a stark contrast to everyone’s “social profile”. One part of the soul profile was to list someone you considered a hero; one young man chose Mother Earth “because it gives, it grows, it holds and is wise” – a wonderful way to define the fluidity and flexibility of great Mother Nature. This same person, listed some qualities that he could be counted on for – being respectful, considerate,

receiving and attentive. Ven. Guo Chan eventually pointed out that everyone was realising that you are your own hero.

Through the great enthusiasm and energy generated by the group, it was evident that the workshop enabled participants to increase their self-confidence and their perception of themselves as leaders and allies. Ven. Chang Ji reminded everyone that when looking at the potential of something, it is not what’s right or wrong, but what is missing. It was a reality check for most, when everyone appreciated that we don’t truly live in this world, but we live in the story that we tell ourselves about the world. It’s up to us to stop being the victim and instead be the creator. As one member of the group suggested, to do this, there has to be a transition of problem-focused thinking to solution-based ideas. Instead of suffering as a victim, we should concentrate on reframing problems into opportunities. ☯

By Vicky Chan



Photo by Jill Wellington



Dharma Drum Retreat Center Photo by Taylor Mitchell

Hemera Contemplative Fellowships at DDRC

THE DHARMA DRUM RETREAT CENTER (DDRC) has been awarded a grant from the Hemera Foundation to offer financial support to educators to attend our retreats. The Hemera Contemplative Fellowships for Educators (CFE) Program is intended to encourage less-experienced meditators to attend a retreat for the first time, as well as extending support to experienced retreatants. CFE support can be available for residential meditation retreats of any length up to a month.

Hemera’s CFE program supports educators’ growth through contemplative practice in a retreat

setting, allowing individuals the opportunity to cultivate mindfulness, compassion, personal well-being, and professional efficacy, and, in turn, embody and apply these qualities to promote positive school cultures.

The CFE program provides retreat scholarship support to people who currently work full-time in pre-K or K-12 education, or are enrolled in a Master’s degree program in education. The long term vision of these fellowships is that they become the basis for an ever-expanding community of educators whose lives and teaching are informed and supported by contemplative practice. Visit the DDRC website calendar to see which retreats are offering this program. For more information on the Hemera Foundation, visit www.hemera.org. ☯

Chan Meditation Retreats

Led by Dharma Heirs of Chan Master Sheng Yen

7-Day *Silent Illumination*

Led by Simon Child • 19 – 26 February 2016

Dłużew, Poland

CONTACT budwod@budwod.com.pl • www.czan.eu



7-Day *Silent Illumination*

Led by Žarko Andričević • 6 – 13 February 2016

Haus Tao, Wolfhalden, Switzerland

CONTACT hthalmann@gmx.net • www.chan-bern.ch



10-Day *Intensive Chan*

Led by Venerable Guo Ru • 26 February – 7 March, 2016

Chan Grove, Taipei, Taiwan

CONTACT inquiry.ccc@gmail.com • www.changrove.org



The Future

Calendar of retreats,
classes and other
upcoming events

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



Great Dharma Drum

Videos from Chan Master Sheng Yen's
television program *Zen and Inner Peace*
<https://www.youtube.com/user/DDMTV05/videos>

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

(845) 744-8114 · ddrc@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	Oct 3	Saturday 9 AM-5 PM Venerable Chang Xiang Little Bodhisattvas Team
	Nov 7	
	Dec 12	
Western Zen Retreat	Oct 9-14	Rebecca Li, Simon Child, Hillary Richards
Foundation Retreat	Nov 13-15	Rebecca Li
Roots of Chan	Nov 28-Dec 5	Gilbert Gutierrez
Investigating Huatou Intensive	Dec 26-Jan 3	Guo Gu

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

(718) 592-6593 · chancenter@gmail.com · www.chancenter.org · www.ddmba.org

GREAT NEWS!! Our construction project permit has been approved!
Work will begin mid-September and last approximately 2-3 years.
All activities will be held at our rented temporary center at 91-26 Corona Ave.
We welcome you to come and practice with us at our new place.

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 2:00-3:30 PM	Guan Yin (Avalokitesvara) Bodhisattva Chanting Service
	3 rd Sunday 2:00-4:00 PM	Earth Store Bodhisattva Sutra Chanting Service
	4 th Sunday 2:00-3:30 PM	Guan Yin (Avalokitesvara) Bodhisattva Chanting Service
<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	Bodhisattva Precept Recitation Ritual Every last Monday of each month
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-1:00 PM	Sitting, yoga exercises, video teachings by Master Sheng Yen

RETREATS (Pre-registration advised)

1-Day Retreat	Oct 31	Saturday 9:00 AM - 5:00 PM - Led by Nancy Bonardi
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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	Nov 15 2:00 PM-5:00 PM	Film Viewing and Discussion Led by Dr. Peter Lin Check website for film title and description

Chan Meditation Center Affiliates

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Chan Meditation Retreats

Foundation

November 13 – 15, 2015

Rebecca Li

Roots of Chan

November 28 – December 5, 2015

Gilbert Gutierrez, a Dharma heir of Master Sheng Yen

Investigating Huatou Intensive

December 26, 2015 – January 3, 2016

Guo Gu (Jimmy Yu)



Rebecca



Gilbert



Guo Gu



DHARMA DRUM RETREAT CENTER

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