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*Liberation*

I HAVE DEVOTED MY WHOLE LIFE to the study of Chan, Pure Land, Vinaya (Buddhist codes of conduct), and even Esoteric Buddhism. My studies have not simply been an idle accumulation of facts. Rather, I study Buddhadharma for the sake of actualizing it; I study Indian and Chinese forms of Buddhism for the sake of making them relevant to a modern society, so people today will have the opportunity to understand, appreciate, and use the wisdom of Buddhadharma. This is my commitment and life's mission. All forms of the Buddhadharma have a single flavor – the flavor of liberation.



CHAN MASTER SHENG YEN  
*The Dharma Drum Lineage of Chan Buddhism, 2006*

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# *An Ecstatic Experience in the Universe*

A Dialogue between  
Chan Master Sheng Yen &  
Astronaut Dr. Edgar Mitchell



Astronaut Edgar D. Mitchell on the Moon in 1971 Photo by Astronaut Alan B. Shepard Jr. / NASA

This article is an excerpt from the booklet *The Buddha Mind, Universe, and Awakening – A Dialogue between Master Sheng Yen and Astronaut Dr. Edgar Mitchell*. Dr. Mitchell held a Doctor of Science degree in Aeronautics and Astronautics from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In 1971 he was the lunar module pilot for the Apollo 14 moon landing, and spent nine hours working on the lunar surface. He was the founder of the Institute of Noetic Sciences (IONS), a nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting individual and collective transformation through consciousness research, transformative learning, and engaging a global community in the realization of our human potential. The following dialogue took place on May 31, 2008 in Taipei, and was moderated by Raymond Yeh, a Professor of Asia University.

*Prof. Yeh:*

Among Dr. Edgar Mitchell's many accomplishments, one of the most significant ones is that he is the sixth person to land on the moon. On his return trip to Earth, as he saw how miniscule Earth was in comparison to the immensity of the universe, he suddenly underwent a special experience. Even after he returned to Earth, he still couldn't understand that experience. Being a scientist, yet unable to come up with a scientific explanation for the experience, he hence founded a research institute specifically to research and investigate the relationship between science and spirituality.

Meanwhile, Master Sheng Yen is the first person in the world to advocate the concept of protecting the spiritual environment. Over the past decades, he has been promoting his vision of "uplifting the character of humanity and building a pure land on the earth." Consequently, he was selected by *Common Wealth Magazine* as one of the fifty most influential persons in Taiwan in the past four hundred years.

First, Dr. Mitchell, the epiphany you experienced during your return trip from the moon can be characterized as earth-shattering and mind-boggling. Can you please share that experience with us briefly, and then Master Sheng Yen will respond from a Buddhist point of view?

*Dr. Mitchell:*

I'd be delighted, yes. It was after the successful completion of the work on the lunar surface, and we were starting home. The orientation of the spacecraft coming home was such that we were perpendicular to the flight path and we were rotating. That was to keep thermal balance on the spacecraft from the sun, to make sure that the spacecraft was equally heated all around. Because of that, every two minutes as we rotated, this picture of earth, of the moon, of the sun, and 360 degrees of the heavens was visible in the spacecraft's window. We must point out that in space, because of the lack of atmosphere, there is nothing to obstruct the vision of the stars. On earth the stars we look at are twinkling. But in space, without the atmosphere that causes the twinkling, you see the stars brightly just as they are, and they are ten times brighter and ten times more stars than you can possibly see from the highest mountain on earth on the clearest night.

As I watched this, it was utterly magnificent. Some of you may have seen some of the recent pictures from the Hubble Space Telescope. What we can see in space with naked eyes is almost what we can see with eyes using a smaller telescope from earth, and the universe is so magnificent and so beautiful that it just defies description. You have to

see it to understand it. I realized from my training at Harvard, and MIT, in the United States, in astronomy, getting my doctorate, that the molecules of my body, and the molecules of the spacecraft, and the molecules of my partners' bodies were created in star systems. That's how the matter in our universe is created; matter is made in star systems. Instead of being an intellectual idea for me at that point, it was an ethereal idea. It was at the feeling level; it was at the emotional level that those were my molecules created in the ancient star system, and I was akin to the stars. It was a feeling of ecstasy and joy to recognize this connection to the whole universe and to feel it in that way.

This experience continued when I was not working. I still had work to do, of course, in the flying of the spacecraft. But when I got a chance to look out the window as we rotated and saw this magnificent panorama of the heavens, and the earth, the moon, and the sun, it was just overwhelming, and I felt this joy, the ecstasy of being a part of this. I realized that we humans on earth forever, throughout our whole history of evolution from coming up, have always asked questions as we looked into the heavens, such as "Who am I?" "What is it all about?" "What is my relationship to all of these?" I thought, as this was happening, that maybe we, the first generation of space-faring people to go out from our planet and see earth and the heavens from this different perspective of space, are to re-ask those ancient questions all over again.

From the point of view of being a space-faring civilization I realized that science is a fairly modern development in human understanding, as its modern form began in the West only about four hundred years ago, with Sir Isaac Newton and the great thinkers of that period. A great distinction was made in the seventeenth century by the great thinker and philosopher, Rene Descartes, who came

to the conclusion that body and mind, physicality and spirituality, belong to different realms of reality. Now that serves a very noble purpose in the West. But at that point in Western history, the church was persecuting those who disagreed, to the point of burning them at the stake for disagreeing with the church. The Cartesian conclusion that body and mind, physicality and spirituality, were two different things and didn't interact caused the Inquisition, which was the police agency of the early church, to quit burning people at the stake who disagreed with their theory, as long as they stayed away from mind, consciousness, and spirituality. Thus, science in the Western world, for the last four hundred years, grew up as a strictly materialistic concept without any understanding, whatsoever, of mind, spirituality, or of that side of human existence until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when quantum mechanics came along. But that's enough for that story for the moment.

As I came back and landed on earth, I could not understand this ecstasy, this magnificent experience I had in space. So I started asking questions about it, and reading, and found nothing in the science literature that explains this type of ecstasy. I looked into the religious literature of the West – nothing I could find. Then I got some help from other scholars, and started looking in the ancient mystical literature, and found in the Sanskrit of ancient India the concept of *samadhi*. It was the experience of seeing things separately like they are, but experiencing them internally, at the level of emotion, as a connected one, as a unity, and therefore a blissful, ecstatic response to that, and that was the experience. I said yes, that was exactly what happened in space.

*Prof. Yeh:*

So in other words, you know you are one with everything else.



Photo by NASA

*Dr. Mitchell:*

Yes. That is exactly what came out of it, the feeling of total unity and oneness with everything that exists.

*Prof. Yeh:*

Master Sheng Yen, from the perspective of the Buddhadharma, does Dr. Edgar Mitchell's experience of becoming one with the universe constitute the attainment of enlightenment? Or is it a process of attaining enlightenment?

*Master Sheng Yen:*

First, I want to congratulate Dr. Mitchell on having such a unique experience. Among a thousand people, it is difficult to find a person with this kind of experience. So, is such an experience enlightenment? The answer is "yes" and "no". To say "yes" means that if, in the process of one's life, a new experience occurs and produces in that person a new introspection, then we can call it an enlightenment. But the problem is that some people treat such experience as an unexpected encounter and never look into it

afterwards. If so, then it is useless to them and it is not an attainment of enlightenment. As for others, such experience causes them to generate a lot of new ideas, or lead to new pursuits or new explorations. Then, we can call it attaining enlightenment. We call this latter type of people those with a good karmic root or wisdom.

Dr. Mitchell is a scientist, but he could not resolve the issues related to such an experience from a scientific perspective. So, he thought that it is a novel field, and started to pay attention to and look into it. I think what Dr. Mitchell experienced is a kind of mystical experience, which belongs to the realm of religion. The field of science cannot explain it. Nor can philosophy make generalizations about it with theory. It is an actual psychological experience. This kind of psychological experience is generated through one's eyes and body. After it occurs, it also causes a bodily reaction in Dr. Mitchell. Seeing the whole surrounding in its totality, he felt it is unified with himself, rather than being separated from him.

Such an experience can be said to go beyond science. Because some people have indeed experienced it, we can't deny its existence. But having experienced it doesn't mean that everybody can see it. So, it is a personal experience. Take Dr. Mitchell's case as an example. At that time, there were six people on the same mission. But why was he, out of the six people, the one who had undergone the experience? From the perspective of scientific theory, if one person has seen it, then the other five should have seen it too. However, this is not science. Instead, it is an individual's personal experience.

One of my disciples had practiced meditation with me. After having finished seven days of practice, on his way home, he saw that the trees, grass, people, and even little insects were all welcoming him and smiling at him. He felt the whole world was so beautiful and thought that he had attained enlightenment. So, he came back swiftly to tell me what happened to him. I asked him, "How did you become enlightened?" He explained the situation to me. I told him, "What you experienced is wonderful. Congratulations! But it will disappear in a little while. Just go out again to look at those flowers, grass, trees, or little animals and people. You'll find the intensity of their smile is not as strong as before. Gradually, your experience will fade." He asked, "If so, how can I preserve (or sustain) it?" I said, "If you want to preserve it, you must keep practicing."

Yet, such mystical experience is not the purpose of our spiritual practice. The purpose of spiritual practice is to empty our "self." After we have emptied our "self," does this world still exist? To all of us, this world does exist. To the people with religious experience, such psychological experience also exists. But in terms of the highest state of Buddhism, we must treat it as non-existent. Certainly, the experience does exist, but we must treat it as non-existent. Then there won't be any

worry or attachment in our mind. It is precisely a kind of liberation.

*Prof. Yeh:*

So, in terms of the Buddhadharmā, even if we have an apparently unique experience, do we need to let it go too?

*Master Sheng Yen:*

Though the experience is real, don't treat it as truly existent. Even though everything in the world is real, but they are all temporary and fleeting. They will change both in quality and in quantity. Since they will change and are constantly changing, they are not considered real. So, while they are existent rather than non-existent, they are not real.

*Prof. Yeh:*

Dr. Mitchell, is your experience repeatable? Have you re-experienced what you have experienced before, and how often?

*Dr. Mitchell:*

Yes. I am able to re-experience that. But as Master Sheng Yen said, I am a meditator, I practice my meditation, and I have learned to repeat the experience by going into deep meditation. I do know the practice of emptiness, and have reached that state where not only you can have the experience but it is meaningful to you. Exploring my thought after this (experience), I used the tool of science, because science has produced in a short period of time the greatest explosion of knowledge of how nature works. So I want to use the tool of science to help understand and deepen these experiences. Fortunately I have come in contact with many great Buddhist thinkers and practitioners, and they have taught me along the way, too, much of what we are talking about here. ☺

# The Importance of Faith

BY

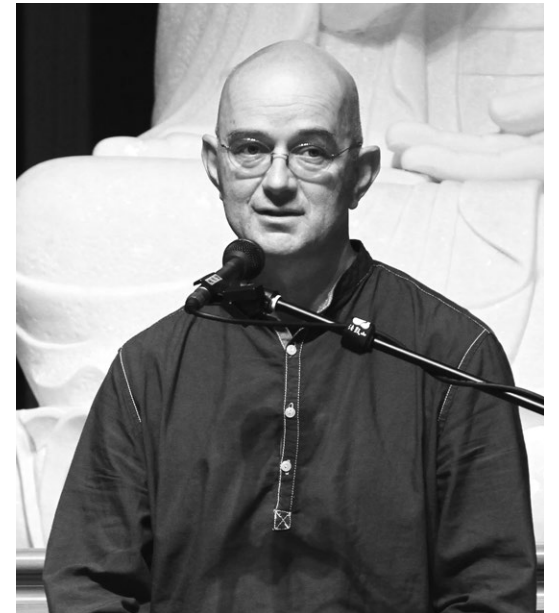
Žarko Andričević

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 from the sixth day of a ten day Huatou retreat led by Žarko at the Dharma Drum Retreat Center in June, 2016. Transcription and editing by Buffe Maggie Laffey.

## Faith and Understanding

I WOULD LIKE TO TALK ABOUT a very important aspect which is a prerequisite for effective practice, and that is: faith. It is important that we have faith in this path of Chan that we are following, and in the teachings of Chan. It is also important to have faith in the method, and it is very important that we have faith in ourselves. These are all necessary conditions for the success of our practice.

When we are talking about faith in the context of Buddhism and Chan we have to understand that the concept is different from faith as understood in other religions. Faith in Buddhism is not a kind of dogma, it's not something that we take for granted and have to just believe. In other religions faith is based on simply accepting certain dogmas without being able to find out whether a thing is like that or is not like that. Faith in Buddhism is quite a different



Žarko Andričević Archive Photo



kind of faith; it is based on our understanding of cause and effect.

Usually faith in Buddhism is understood as faith in Buddha, in Dharma, in the sangha, and in the law of cause and effect. To have faith in the law of cause and effect actually means that we don't simply accept things because somebody has said they are so, but we make inquiry into things. We have to find out the ways in which causes and conditions are connected, in order to develop faith in the law of cause and effect. We have to actually understand it. Faith in Buddhism is connected very much with understanding. The more we understand, the more faith we will have. This is what makes the Buddhist conception of faith quite different from the conception of faith in other religions.

## Faith in Buddha Nature

When we are talking about Chan there is another very important aspect of the teaching in which we have to have faith, and that is the teaching of buddha nature. The whole teaching of Chan is based on a

belief in buddha nature, on the faith that all sentient beings actually have this buddha nature. All methods of practice in Chan are based on that very strong belief and faith in buddha nature. If we don't have that faith it's very difficult to practice. This teaching of buddha nature goes all the way to the Buddha himself, to Shakyamuni after he had his experience of enlightenment. In the sutras we can read that he said "Wow this is amazing, what I just discovered right now is that all sentient beings have it, but they don't know they have it."

That means that what he discovered in his enlightenment is not something which is unique to him, to the Buddha. He discovered that we all possess that same nature, but we just don't know it. Why don't we know? We don't know because our mind is covered by veils of ignorance and vexations and all kinds of obstructions; we just can't see that nature. It is there but we are not aware of it. So we have to trust Shakyamuni Buddha that we all have buddha nature; trust not only the Buddha but the whole lineage of great teachers who came after, including the patriarchs of our Chan tradition. This is very

Photo by Jed Adan

important in the practice of Chan. All methods of Chan are based on that fact.

## Not Transforming but Returning

Therefore when we are using Chan methods it is not that we are trying to create an enlightened state; it is not that we are trying to transform ourselves into something we are not. We are not trying to change ourselves from being ignorant into being wise, from being selfish into being compassionate; it doesn't work that way. The methods are actually helping us to go back to what we originally are, to go back to our true nature which is the buddha nature.

It is not that we create something. I will say again, it is not that we transform ourselves into something we are not already – instead we are returning to what we already are but don't *know* that we are. The methods are helping us to remove these veils of ignorance and vexation in order to discover our true nature which is there all the time. We don't create this buddha nature by working on the method; our buddha nature has always been there. That's why practice is very often described as going back to our true home, going back to what we really are. Therefore it is very important to have faith that we have this buddha nature.

## Leaving Self-Centeredness

This buddha nature can actually be seen. We can see how it manifests in different ways and at different times, in ourselves and in other people. Acts of generosity and self-sacrifice, compassionate actions that we sometimes see people do or find ourselves doing, these are all manifestations of our buddha nature. In other words whenever selfishness withdraws itself, when ever this self-centeredness even for a moment opens up, then our buddha

nature is shining through. It is visible when we think of other people and do something for the general benefit, rather than only for our own benefit. This buddha nature is absolutely not mysterious and unrecognizable in our own experience. We can see traces of it, and therefore seeing the traces of it we have to develop faith that it is here in ourselves, in everyone actually.

How can we get to this buddha nature? By leaving these self-centered attitudes and opening ourselves up, by rising above our own selfish small interests and perspective. This is precisely what we do when we are using methods of practice. By using methods we leave self-centeredness, we leave our small selfish painful narrow perspective on life, and we open ourselves up to who we really are, and then we also see how and in what way we are connected with other people. We also can see that buddha nature is in them. The practice is very difficult if we don't have this faith.

Practice is very difficult if we are exclusively occupied with the idea of gaining benefits just for ourselves. Then the practice is very much under the influence of this self-centered attitude which we want to get rid of with the practice, and there is a contradiction present. Therefore it is important to have this wider view of our practice. It is important to have faith in our buddha nature; this is essential in the context of Chan practice.

## Faith in the Method

The other thing is of course to have faith in the teachings of Chan and in the method itself. It's very important to trust that this method can help us reach our goal. These methods are not someone's inventions from yesterday; they are not some kind of experiment. These methods have been used for thousands of years, and generations of practitioners were able to reach their goals by using these methods.



They come all the way from Shakyamuni Buddha himself. Even though some methods in Chan seem like they exclusively belong to the Chan tradition, they have deep roots in Buddhist tradition in general; they are based on the same principle. They may be used in a special way which makes them very effective, but they have their roots all the way back to the teaching of Shakyamuni Buddha.

Thinking about the methods in this way can give us new confidence, can help us trust that these methods are proven to be good and that we can benefit by using them. Because if you doubt the goal of your practice, if you doubt the method and the process of your practice, if you have thoughts like “What am I doing here? Does it all make sense?” of course our practice will not really be effective. It will actually be blocked by such thoughts and doubts. It is very important to think about those things, and to clarify our path. If we don’t think about those things, then the path in front of us is not clear, so we stumble all the time and we can’t progress smoothly.

## Faith in Ourselves

Besides faith in buddha nature, in the teachings of Chan, in the path and the methods of Chan, we also need to have faith in ourselves. This is very, very important. How can we have faith in ourselves? We have to think that before his enlightenment Shakyamuni Buddha was just like we are now. He had a lot of wandering thoughts and probably a lot of pain in his body, sitting all day long in meditation; it definitely wasn’t easy. All teachers in the past, all the patriarchs passed through the same experience we are passing through now. But they had faith, they were very persistent and determined to reach their goal, and they succeeded.

Usually we don’t know these teachers from all the difficulties they had before their enlightenment

experiences, because in the stories they are very often presented as enlightened teachers. But maybe not always so – for example in the case of Shakyamuni Buddha the years of his training and the struggles he was going through are very well described. These enlightened teachers might seem to us to possess a perfection which is impossible to reach, so far away from where we are. But we can see that our situation is not really different from that of Shakyamuni before his enlightenment, and also not different from the situation of other teachers before they reached their goals. This can give us confidence that we all can do it.

This confidence is gained in several ways. In one way confidence is gained through study. If we study the teaching then we can gain faith through understanding. So study is very important, but on the other hand we can gain faith through practice itself. How do we gain faith through practice? Simply by practicing and witnessing how we change, and if we can change even a little bit, that is a sign that change is possible. If we can change a little bit, then big change can happen too. As we practice, slowly we are gaining this kind of confidence in ourselves, confidence that we are capable of using the method to change our situation.

## Faith Doesn’t Happen by Itself

I’m sure that all of you today feel much different than was the case on, maybe, the second day of the retreat. I’m sure that you have succeeded in this process of harmonizing your body, breath and mind to a certain extent. Sometimes we are not aware of that when we are practicing. But if we look at ourselves and think of the ways we have progressed through the last several days, we can actually see that change. That change is due to the fact that we practice and we use the method. We are the ones who did it. It is very important to understand that, however fixed

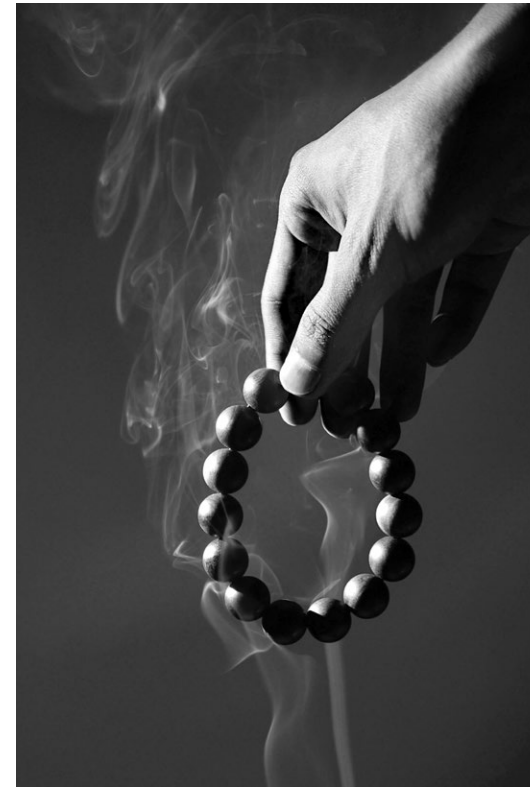


Photo by Vector Xue

our condition might seem, through practice we can change it. Once we have this experience of change through practice, then through it we gain confidence in ourselves, and we start to develop faith in our abilities to practice and to use methods.

But of course we need to practice diligently in order to develop confidence in ourselves. So even if you don’t have confidence, you have to put your whole being into practice, you have to be diligent in order to find out – this is how it goes. Confidence and faith are not things which will happen by themselves; it is always the result of our work, the result of what we do. It’s very important to understand that it is not a matter of whether you have it or you don’t have it. We are actually beings who are creating

ourselves from one moment to another, whether we are practicing or not, we are creating ourselves. This, what we are, is our own creation. Once we hear about the teachings of Chan or Buddhadharma, and once we start to use the method, then we enter into this conscious creation of our own life. We start to give a very conscious direction to our life. As we do that, we see in what way we are changing, and out of that change we can gain this confidence and faith.

## Faith is Strength

Faith in Buddhism and faith in Chan, as I said at the beginning, is not like in monotheistic religions. We don’t rely on some outer power to save us; we are saving ourselves with the help of the teachings, with the help of Buddhadharma and with the help of methods. But we have to rely on ourselves; therefore we have to have faith in ourselves. Confidence and faith are gradually developing through our engagement in teaching and learning about the Buddhadharma and practicing the Buddhadharma. The more we learn, the more we practice, the more our faith and confidence grows.

I hope you see how important it is to have faith and confidence, because I know that in practice when we experience difficulties it’s easy to be discouraged, it’s easy to start doubting ourselves, losing confidence and being stuck in that way. Faith is something which gives us power, faith is strength. Faith is power to continue even when it seems there is no hope. If we have this power to continue, we see that we can overcome all these difficulties which at the moment seem absolute. This is how we move on the path. Faith and confidence are very important factors in our practice. So please give rise to this faith and be confident in yourself, and have faith in the method as well. Clear away all these doubts, and the practice will develop smoothly and continuously. ☯



# *The Arising of Conditioned Appearance from the True Mind*

## *Part 12*

BY

**Abbot Venerable Guo Xing**

This is the twelfth 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.

### **The Continuity of Sentient Beings**

FIRST “THE THREE SUBTLE and six coarse appearances” arise, next the world appears. “Self” also comes into existence. “Self” is the same as sentient-beings. Then, how are self and the world perpetuated?

The world is perpetuated because the mind interacts with non-existing, illusory phenomena, thus forming earth, water, fire, and air. The perpetuation of sentient beings takes place through the processes of rebirth.

Originally, after phenomena arise, they will cease to exist as long as you do not continue to interact with them. The world will disappear and so will you. Now, why is our present world continuing to exist and perpetuate? That is because we are constantly and incessantly interacting with the world. On the other

hand, if we practice Chan meditation, and through the practice reach the state of “the earth drops and the space shatters,” then this world will cease to continue.

Let us first try to explain how sentient beings are perpetuated. It’s because of one unaware thought. With this one deluded thought, ignorance arises. One unaware thought gives rise to delusion. We talked about the notion of “enlightened illumination” before, where the mind believes that there must be an object to be illuminated. Because of this deluded thought, we lose the ability to perceive things without relying on the eyes, ears, and nose. Because of this deluded thought, after rebirth, our eyes can only see but not hear, and our ears can only hear but not see.

Have you heard that there are children being trained to read with their hands? In fact, the mind exhibits the ability to perceive all phenomena,



Photo by Mayur Gala

without needing to depend on the eyes, ears, and body. Training to read through the hands is merely recovering that ability.

*The Shurangama Sutra* states: “A point of light is seen to appear. When the light is seen clearly, deluded thoughts arise – both hatred in response to incompatible points of view and love in response to compatible ways of thinking. The thought of love flows out to the fertilized egg, which is then drawn into the womb. Thus the parents’ intercourse leads to the attraction of a being with whom they share a common karma. Due to these causes and conditions, the fetus develops, passing through the *kalala* stage, the *arbuda* stage, and the stages that follow. Birth from a womb, birth from an egg, birth in the presence of moisture, and birth via metamorphosis come about in response to these circumstances:

birth from an egg arises from mental activity; birth from a womb occurs because of emotion; birth in the presence of moisture occurs through union; and birth via metamorphosis is brought about through separation.” (*The Shurangama Sutra*, English translation by The Buddhist Text Translation Society, 2009, 147–148.)

This passage is saying that, when the body of the intermediate state (*antarābhava*) is in the process of rebirth, it will first see a light that it has affinity with. The light is manifested from your own consciousness, because we have this drive to illuminate an object. So the light appears. When you see this light and make a judgment, thoughts and differentiation will consequently arise. In other words, while you are in the intermediate state, you see your parents’ act of intercourse. If you prefer the father, then you’ll

disfavor the mother, and vice versa. Those favoring the father will become female. Those preferring the mother will become male. Once the gender is determined, then you enter the womb, and possess the mother's body. Whenever I tell people that we've all experienced possessing another person's body for most of a year, they've all disagreed with me.

Once, Chan Master Huang Bo was sitting in meditation in the Chan Hall. He suddenly gave a loud shout. His attendant rushed in to ask, "What's the matter?" Master Huang Bo said, "Go to the Nirvana Hall! Hurry!" The Nirvana Hall is equivalent to the modern day hospice, and it was where all the

monastics are sent to when they became very ill. Master Huang Bo ordered his attendant to check on the sick monk to see if he had passed away. Simultaneously, the monk in charge of the Nirvana Hall was rushing toward the Chan Hall with news. The two ran into each other halfway. The monk in charge reported that he first saw that the sick monk had passed away. But when he doubled back to check again, he saw that the sick monk had come back to life and was not dead after all. The attendant said, "Let's go take another look in the Nirvana Hall." The



Chan Master Huang Bo Painting by Chien-Chih Liu

two then asked the sick monk what had happened. The sick monk said, "I dreamt that I was walking on a street and suddenly felt very thirsty, so I started looking all over for a household so I could ask for a cup of water. There happened to be a two-story house by the road. So I went in. There was a woman in a blue robe inside. I asked her for some water and she gave it to me. I was about to drink that water when there suddenly appeared an old man. The old man shouted, 'Ha!' – just like so. I was startled and passed out." Actually, instead of passing out he was

in fact scared awake and ended up not being dead. Chan Master Huang Bo then explained that the water the sick monk was about to drink is the so-called "Lady Meng's Forgetting Potion"<sup>1</sup>. Had the sick monk actually drank the potion, he would have been reborn as a pig.

Have you realized this: isn't the scene that took place in the sick monk's mind only a figment of his imagination? He dreamt about himself walking on the street. Hadn't the dream been generated by the monk himself? But then, he treated the dream as real and further interacted with the dream, thus giving rise to yet another dream, which is getting reborn.

Treating dreams as real is called "deluded discrimination." Wanting this and not wanting that, love and hatred, is called "perception/conceptualization." These are two sets of forces: The former grasps onto the body as "self" and treats dreams as real; the latter one makes discrimination and makes choices, wanting this and wanting that. To sum it all up: There had never been the dualistic notion of subject and object. Once the dualistic mindset arises, we treat the perceived phenomena as real and deal with them as things external to the mind. This is called "deluded discrimination." Then, through continuous interaction with the phenomena/objects, we make further differentiation and discrimination, accepting and rejecting. This is called "perception/conceptualization." These two are the forces behind the continuation of our existence, so that we can continue to live on.

Deluded discrimination is equivalent to "the nourishment from consciousness." Have you heard of "the four kinds of nourishment?" They are: 1) the nourishment from consciousness, 2) the nourishment through thought, 3) sensory food, and 4) sequential food. Deluded discrimination is considered the nourishment from consciousness.

Perception/conceptualization mainly corresponds to the nourishment through thought. Consciousness means that you are using the function of dualistic mind and treat the perceived objects of your awareness as real. Then you continue to want to interact with the objects of your cognition incessantly. This is called the nourishment from consciousness. We rely on this to perpetuate our existence. Sequential food refers to the need to consume physical food every so often. Sensory food is obtained through your six sensory organs, where the eyes want to "eat" pretty things; the ears need to listen to pleasant sounds, etc. The nourishment through thought refers to desires: I want this and I want that. The nourishment from consciousness means there is a dualistic subject and object. There is an "I" who wants – which means you have taken the "I" as real, taken the surroundings as real, and thus want to live on and on. The cognitive function that operates under this dualistic mode is called nourishment from consciousness.

There is a saying, "the rise of discrimination cuts off wisdom." The rise of discrimination means there's subject and object. When wisdom gives rise to subject and object, it's called consciousness or discrimination. As soon as discrimination arises, the enlightened wisdom disappears. Remember what we said before: As long as "you are seeing me," your wisdom-eye has indeed become blind. Is that not so? ☺

*(To be continued)*

<sup>1</sup> Meng Po (Chinese: 孟婆; pinyin: Mèng Pó; literally: "Lady Meng") is a deity of Chinese mythology. She waits in the afterlife at the bridge over the "River of Forgetfulness", which beings must cross on their way to their next rebirth. At the entrance to the bridge, she serves her special herbal soup, which causes the beings to forget their previous life and any suffering they have endured in hell. It is said only the Buddha was able to overcome the effect of the soup and remember all his past lives.

# What's so Special About the Present Moment?

BY

Rebecca Li

Rebecca is a professor of sociology at The College of New Jersey. In 1999 she began translating for Chan Master Sheng Yen and in the same year, began her training with the Master to become a Dharma and meditation teacher. She subsequently trained with John Crook and currently assists Simon Child in leading intensive retreats. In 2016 she became a Dharma heir of Simon Child. At the Dharma Drum Retreat Center she leads the Western Zen Retreat and various weekend retreats. This Dharma talk is from a Beginner's Mind Retreat held in September 2013. Transcribed and edited by Buffe Maggie Laffey.

THIS IS THE TIME of the retreat that was set aside for a Dharma talk. First I want to ask whether anyone has a question about the practice, about what we are doing here? *[No one asks a question.]* Perhaps there is a question but everyone is too polite to ask. This question may have arisen in your mind in one form or the other but maybe you feel "I shouldn't ask that; maybe I'm the only one who doesn't know." The question will be something like this: "Why is it so important to stay in the present moment? What is so special? You keep talking about it over and over again, why is it so imperative?" We ask ourselves, if we truly believe and accept that being in the present moment is important, why is it so hard? Why do we keep dwelling on the past or fantasizing about the future? Have you asked

yourself this question? We would do anything but be in the present. Interesting, no?

This is not mentioned to be accusing of anybody. It's just kind of funny that we hear it's theoretically a really good thing to stay in the present, but we simply can't, or won't, (or both)? So perhaps it's helpful for us to look into this a little bit to see what's really going on, instead of assuming that we really want to but we just forget. There might be a real reason why we prefer to be in the past or in the future, rather than to be in the present. So let's take a look. What do we generally do when we are not in the present moment? Is the mind usually thinking about the future, about what's going to happen next? What food will be served for dinner? Some of you may be planning what you are going to do when



you get home tomorrow. Some other thoughts may be worries, for example: What if this doesn't work out? What if I spend all this time on this retreat and meditate every day but I never can calm my mind?

## Scrapbooks and Memories

*[A student asks about scrapbooking: in trying to stay in the present, how should she approach making a scrapbook with photos of her grandchildren?]*

If I understand your question correctly, you are asking: if you're supposed to be in the present, how are you to deal with business that has to do with the past, such as your grandchildren's precious photographs? These things, the scrapbook and the

memories, are not two things. In this moment you are making a scrapbook, looking at photographs which may remind you of a happy time. These remembered thoughts and feelings are replaying in your mind in the present, are they not? There is no real conflict. There's nothing wrong with having memories. We all have memories of the past. The question is: do we know what we are doing in the mind with these memories? Are we replaying memories and mistaking them for something that is happening now? Or do we know clearly that this is the past? Can we tell the difference?

Some of you might know people who live in their past. Maybe you have seen movies that portray someone who was a beautiful, successful actress but now she's no longer a famous movie star, yet she

Photo by Joanna Kosinska

walks around her house in her glamorous dress still acting as if she was in her star days, still living in that dream and refusing to see what is reality now. This sounds very extreme; in a portrayal like this, there is something seriously wrong with this person. But we all do this from time to time, don't we? We go into a memory and we want to relive it. When we see someone else do this, we think that person really needs to see a doctor. But when we ourselves do it, we don't recognize it.

The question is, do we know what we are doing with the past? When you're doing a scrapbook you have this moment from the past. You are organizing in the present moment, touching these photographs and focusing on the task at hand. You know clearly that you are handling these pieces of memory, which is different from invoking the past over and over again at the expense of what is really right here and now. But the question is, are we aware that we are doing that? Sometimes it's hard to tell because very often our mind is simply too scattered and confused



Rebecca Li at DDRC Photo by David Slaymaker

to be able to discern what really is going on. Is our mental representation of what happened in the past the same thing as the actual event?

When that event was happening, in that moment it actually took place. Now, our memory brings back the image of what happened and also invokes the emotion that comes with it. But is our image in memory actually what happened at that time? If we really think about it, it's kind of impossible because when something is happening we are only able to perceive part of what's going on. Ours can only be a very partial representation; it is not possible for it to be exactly what happened. That past event is already gone but we may not be able to see that our image of what happened is not really the whole picture. Or to put it another way, it is a distorted image of what happened.

### Dwelling in Past Happiness

We choose to remember what we want to remember. We may dwell on something that's very pleasant: a family reunion, we love our family, everyone having so much fun. This is something that has already passed. It is not happening now, but we replay it over and over again in our mind, maybe because we savor the happy feeling that it brings up in us. Now that is one reason why we don't want to be in the present – we want to visit past happy memories. What is your experience? Does that ultimately make us happy?

Maybe you have had this experience: you play back some video of happy times with family members who you don't see very often. You play that video, revisit that happy feeling, and then you feel sad afterwards because you wish they didn't live so far away from you, or you wish that vacation never had to end. It's quite interesting. We dwell in past memory believing that we find happiness there. That's why we sacrifice being in the present, so we

might have a fleeting moment of happy feeling. But then, we end up feeling something amiss because the past is gone. There is this feeling of dissatisfaction, a sense that something is lacking in the present. Why do we emphasize so much about being in the present moment? The answer is: when we are not in the present moment we look to the past believing we can find happiness there. But what we end up with is suffering, in the form of feeling that we are separated from those we love, or that we have lost what we really like.

### Fantasizing the Future

How about fantasizing about great things that can happen in the future? Maybe there is a fun thing you have planned for next week and you think about how great it's going to turn out. Or maybe you are about to graduate college and you're thinking you're going to get your dream job and then you will become successful and make a lot of money. Fantasy can happen in a moment when you meet with some success; for example if you are working in academia and you get a positive comment on a paper. You fantasize that you're going to get promoted and become an important person in your field. You can go on and on fantasizing about a bright, wonderful, future; we all have done this. Is that pleasant?

Maybe you met someone and just can't stop thinking about them. You start imagining that person will love you back and you're going to get married and have this great family and will live ever after this beautiful full life together. Have we all done this kind of fantasizing? What happened after that, disappointment? We may not need to wait that long to experience disappointment. When we fantasize about future success in anything – love, relations, career – maybe the next thought will be, what if I publish this paper but people think it's stupid? What

if I go out with this guy and he turns out to be a really mean person? What if we get married and we can't agree on whether we should have children? What if after graduating I get this job and really hate it, after investing all these years in education? The "what if's" begin to creep in, maybe?

We might try to find happiness in fantasizing about the future; that's why we do it! Again, we do it at the expense of being in the present moment. But if we really look at our experience we may see that fantasizing about the future often leaves us with anxiety, worry, and fear. So that's a great price to pay. But we believe that's where to find happiness; dwelling on pleasant past memory, or fantasizing about a bright future. Where else can we find happiness? The idea of finding happiness in the present might have never crossed our mind.

I teach college and one thing that I hear students say a lot is "Oh, I'm in college just so I can get it over with." Does that sound familiar: to get it over with? As if whatever I'm doing now, something better is waiting for me. So we're sitting here on the meditation cushion, at some level thinking "Oh I'm waiting for the bell to ring." So that, what? I can move my legs? I can get to breakfast? Whatever is going to happen in the future is better than now. It's quite funny, no? We have this way of thinking. We are not used to the idea that we can find fulfillment, contentment, peace, and joy in the present. We have conditioned ourselves to look for it in the past and the future; ignoring time after time that this actually brings us suffering.

### Don't Believe Anything I Say

Now this is the time when I like to remind you that you should not believe anything I say. I don't want you to believe me. Whatever I say, take it with a gigantic grain of salt; don't just take my word for it.

You should take it back and test it with your own experience. Examine it, investigate it, find out for yourself if I am making this up. Is there any time at all, when you dwell in the past or fantasize about the future, that you find ultimate happiness? Don't be so ready to answer. This is a project I'd like you to undertake for days and weeks and months after this retreat. I'd like you to investigate this.

Why do we not want to be in the present moment? It is not an accident, our very entrenched habit of going to the past and going to the future. There is a real reason why we do what we do: we are simply not convinced that fulfillment can be found in the present. We genuinely believe that happiness is somewhere else. And because of that our mind behaves accordingly, moment after moment after moment. Occasionally we can be in the present moment, we can feel the joy and happiness in it, and then we go back to the past because we believe that deeply. Now again, don't just believe me. Look at your own mind and see if that's really what's going on. It's going to take some time, I guarantee you. But question yourself "Do I actually believe that being in the present moment is what I want to do?"

## Do We Know That We Suffer?

This is why we emphasize the importance of being in the present moment. Outside of the present moment, in the past, in the future, there is suffering. You may have heard that suffering is the first noble truth of Shakyamuni Buddha; if you have studied any Buddhistharma you will have heard this. And usually, we think "Okay, the first noble truth: suffering. I got it, what's next?" And then we don't think about it again. There is a reason why this is the first noble truth. The Buddha, after attaining enlightenment, the first thing he wanted to tell people was: there is suffering. Can we understand how important this is?

Do we bother to *really* understand it? Do we know that we suffer? Or do we do things we believe bring us happiness, but actually cause us suffering and we don't even know it?

We are not aware of our suffering. If we are not aware that we are suffering, chances are we are not going to do anything about it. You may have heard that Shakyamuni Buddha is like a doctor, and it's a good analogy. What he's trying to help people see is that we are quite sick. And only when we realize we are sick will we understand the importance of seeking treatment, of taking medicine. If we think "I'm not sick, I'm fine!" will we take medicine? No. Shakyamuni Buddha said we're all quite sick. But we are not convinced. When we are not convinced, when we don't believe we suffer, then of course we won't take the medicine. We won't practice. We won't make the effort to stay in the present moment. We won't remember to follow the method, which is your medicine. We think "I'm not sick. The doctor said I have to take this. I'll take a little bit of it, just to make you happy, but I don't really need it." Many people are like that. I know I'm like that from time to time; do you know you're like that? Are we aware of our suffering?

## Shaking the Mind

When we are cultivating this awareness, when we do sitting meditation to concentrate the mind, what we are doing really is to get our mind less confused for long enough so that we can take a look at it. Because most of the time we don't know what's going on in there, we're simply too scattered, too distracted, too confused. When we have the method to anchor our mind – the breath, the counting – it allows this confusion to settle down. Think about a bottle of water with a lot of silt in it. If you shake it up, it's all murky and you can't see through it. How do you go



Photo by Steven Ma

about trying to see through the water in a bottle with a lot of silt in it? Stop shaking it.

You may think "I'm not shaking my mind." But every time you hear a sound and think, "Hey what's that? Who's out there? What's that bug?" – that's shaking the mind. When a pleasant memory comes through and we follow and try to hold onto it, that's shaking the mind. Or a thought about someone who said something offensive to us; we replay it over and over thinking "How dare that person treat me like that!" We are shaking our mind. There is no problem inherently in doing this; you just need to know what you are doing – you are keeping your mind murky and confused. If that is what you want you're doing a great job. If what you want is a calmer mind, so you can see what's in it and perhaps understand why you're doing what you are doing, then keeping the mind murky is not going to help.

It is totally your choice. All I'm asking of you is to discern clearly what decision you are making. If you decide to follow a past memory when it arises that's not a problem. Just know you are shaking up your mind. Maybe a pleasant sensation arises,

such as "I am feeling so calm, and so relaxed, this is great! If I keep sitting this way I think I'm going to be enlightened tomorrow, because it's going to get calmer and calmer..." Now we're fantasizing about the future. We follow this thought and we're not here in the present any more. Fantasizing about the future is not inherently a problem. But know that when you make that decision, you are choosing to shake up your mind and keep it murky. Every time there is movement in the mind, you have a choice. You can keep the mind quiet and still so that you can see through the water and be able to understand what's going on in the mind, or you can stir it up and keep your mind obscured.

## Do You Want to Know Your Mind?

Maybe you don't really want to see what's in your mind. You don't know what you're going to find, maybe you don't really want to see it. Ask yourself, do I want to understand my mind? If you don't want to know your mind, what are you doing here? There are a lot more fun things to do than this; go to the beach, go to a picnic, watch a movie. Why are you making your legs hurt sitting on this cushion? Ultimately you need to ask yourself these hard questions. You read books, you listen to Dharma talks, you listen to teachers, and you exhaustively tell yourself you need "to stay in the present moment." But you don't believe it. You need to practice, to cultivate this clarity of the mind, but you don't buy it. Ask yourself that question; what am I doing here? Why? That's why we asked you this question on the first night: what brought you here? What are you looking for? Maybe you didn't give it very much thought, but if you put yourself through all this pain in the legs and the back, and if you want to establish a meditation practice and do this, you might want to ask yourself why.

The reason why I bring this up is that I have worked with people who have been doing this for thirty years and they don't know why. They attend a seven or ten day retreat, two or three times a year, even though every single time their body has intense pain from doing this, and they don't realize that deep down they don't believe in the importance of the present moment. They are just hoping that if they sit their butt on this cushion long enough, something is bound to happen.

We need to investigate our mind. Ask ourselves hard questions. Now, I am very sorry to be disturbing your peace like this because some of you might think that you all came here to

be peaceful, to be happy and relaxed. Well, there are many things we can do to relax. How about getting a massage? You pay someone, you don't need to do anything, and they massage you all over. Oh, so relaxed! Go to the spa, if that is all we're looking for. There is more than that; we are looking for more than that. Do we know? Is it clear in our mind? It takes time, and actual effort, a willingness to ask ourselves challenging questions especially for some of us who have been doing the practice for some time. We may not want to find out, "Oh, I don't know what I'm doing!" because it's kind of embarrassing. So we shy away from asking, but we need to ask ourselves hard questions.

## “Chan is Not Supposed to be Comfortable”

A very dear teacher of mine, John Crook, who has since passed away, was Master Sheng Yen's first European Dharma heir. I often remember something



“Chan is not supposed to be comfortable.” Photo by Chi-Kao Chang

he said; “Chan is not supposed to be comfortable.” We investigate things in our mind that we have been running away from, avoiding. So if all you want to do is to run away and avoid, I think there are many ways in this world to do that: television, smart phones, video games, movies, books, and so on. There's no shortage at all. We don't need to do this retreat; we have a lot of options. Yet we are here. Do we still want to hide and run away from these tough questions we've been avoiding?

We practice on the cushion to establish the technique of anchoring our mind using the method. When I say “anchor the mind”, that means our mind always knows where to go. So in our sitting meditation when some very disturbing memory or emotion comes up, what do we do? We come back to the breath. We will have lost count, so we go back to number one. If we have been overtaken by this upsetting memory; if we went back and relived all the trauma and pain – “one” is the anchor of our life, always return there. That's why we teach the breath

method; is there any time you have been without your breath? That's the great thing about this method; our breath is always, always there.

When we practice and get better at this technique of anchoring the mind, then this bottle becomes more still. We will still stir it up when we follow these memories and fantasies, but we bring our self back and we stop shaking the bottle. Then the silt has a chance to settle down. If you are not convinced and you really need a visual demonstration, when you go back home get a bottle of water and put some silt in it and shake it up, and then shake it less, and see what happens. Really try it, it's kind of fun. It happens slowly, it's not like you sit in meditation and suddenly it's all clear, of course not. But if we shake the mind up less, it's a little less murky and we can see through a bit more than before. That's when we are able to see what's going on in the mind, discern our motivation and our intention.

## Becoming Who We Want to Be

Why are we doing this? We may say, “Sometimes I'm just kind of mean, I say things that are passive aggressive to people, I don't know why, it just happens.” It doesn't just happen; we've been thinking those thoughts a lot, so when we open our mouth it comes out. When we shake that bottle of murky water less we may see “Oh, I think I'm jealous of that person, that's why I'm kind of cold to her.” Then we can choose what to do, rather than thinking “I have no idea why I don't like her.” If we really look at our mind, we begin to understand why we do what we do.

What we are doing in sitting meditation is to practice stabilizing the mind. Remember that the anchor of the mind is “one”; it's pretty simple, right? We go back to number one, and as the mind stabilizes we naturally have more clarity, we don't need to look for additional clarity. When we stop

shaking the bottle the water becomes clearer, our mind less confused. We naturally have more insight into why we are the way we are. We are more able to pay attention because we're not so confused and preoccupied. Then we can be the person we want to be.

Everyone wants to be a good person, kind and considerate. But a confused mind makes it difficult. When we know what's going on in our mind, we can stop saying things that we really regret afterwards. We can be happier with who we are. We also truly see our suffering; then maybe we will finally be convinced that Shakyamuni Buddha was right. I think maybe he knew something. Maybe we should really look at how much we cause our own suffering, creating anxiety, worries, and fear while believing we are getting happiness. That's a pretty big mistake. We are getting the opposite of what we thought we were doing. When we truly see how much we suffer we will naturally remember to come back to “one,” to come back to the present moment.

Don't believe me. Don't just treat this as something someone said and store it away – question it. Test it out. Use it to look at your own experience. Meanwhile, here in this retreat use this opportunity, this environment that's been set up to help us remember the anchor of our mind. During the sitting periods, use the meditation method, return to the breath, and count “one.” When we are off the meditation cushion, while walking, doing work practice, body in movement, when standing in line waiting for food, taking our food, eating – at all times keep the mind with what the body is doing. Stay with the changing sensations of what the body is experiencing. Whenever we notice “I don't want to do this, this is boring, this is dumb,” say “Hmmm, this is interesting; what's going on?” Allow yourself to question the method. Maybe you can find out what's in your mind. ☺



# 2016 Bodhisattva Precepts Ceremony

BY

Fiona Nuttall

Fiona Nuttall, Zhi-jing Fa-hong, is the first Dharma Heir of Simon Child. Fiona trained with John Crook and Simon Child from the 1990s, and is Chair of the Western Chan Fellowship (WCF) committee. She has been leading retreats for WCF since 2007.

I HAD WANTED TO TAKE the Bodhisattva Precepts for many years and more recently it had seemed even more relevant as I became more involved in the work of our Chan organization in the U.K. Making the trip to the U.S. seemed a small price to pay for that opportunity, but it was a long way to go. Fortunately, I was able to break the journey with Rebecca Li and David Slaymaker in New Jersey before setting out on trains and taxis to DDRC in Pine Bush, NY.

The organizational aspects were very well covered with Wen-Chiao Peng's efficient administration before the event and a team of welcoming reception volunteers in the main house. As I registered, the purification practice group, led by Ven. Guo Dong passed through the area sprinkling water and I knew that I had really arrived with a chance to be still and hear the chanting and observe the ritual.

People were arriving in large numbers and there were lots of excited voices and greetings going on making me realize that I wished that I knew more than a few words of Chinese! As I wandered about, there were no faces that I recognized and yet I still felt somehow at home, as we were all united in a

common purpose. I got introduced to Greg who was sitting waiting to be taken to the dormitories and a bond was formed. Similarly, I introduced myself to Kathleen from Florida and, by coincidence we were sitting next to each other throughout the retreat, in the Chan Hall and the dining room.

From the orientation onwards the style and nature of the retreat became apparent. Instruction, rehearsal, understanding and practice, practice, practice. The role of the Helper at the end of each row became key to our progress as we learned how to fold, make movements and deport ourselves. At times, I got frustrated with myself for not picking these things up earlier, but the "Bodhisattva Dharma Protector" helpers were very patient with us and I was grateful for that patience.

Being a European put me in a minority, but we were well catered for in terms of translation, with excellent, skillful, simultaneous translation via headphones. Watching the videos of Shifu's talks from a similar retreat in Taiwan brought back memories of retreats with him and of his kindness and compassion. There were a few nostalgic tears

and also warm smiles. The videos were subtitled so again we could fully understand what the teachings behind the precepts were. Those talks left me in no doubt about the seriousness of the undertaking and also the need to proceed with it.

The days passed and the practicing got more intensive. I was tired some of the time and jet lag crept in but the food was amazing and sustaining – those kitchen volunteers really pulled out the stops for us! I have very fond memories of the gluten balls and they disappeared really quickly

with people going back for more. All the food was colorful, appetizing and nutritious. Who knew that "salutary medicine" would be so delicious?

I'm not a chanting practitioner, but I enjoyed getting to grips with the chants and the voices of the dozens of women behind me chanting their hearts out meant that I managed a rudimentary attempt at the chants myself. The Precentor also had a wonderful voice that added to the quality of the ceremony and the practice beforehand. Similarly, the crispness and precision of the Master of Ceremonies' voice added to the sense of occasion giving gravity and pacing the event for us. Those announcements were the most "Chinese" aspects for me and yet I did not feel like an outsider, but part of the group. I must apologize for my terrible renditions of the Chinese parts of the text, but I did my best. Repentance was a major feature of the preparation and the style of the practice was new to me with chanting alongside the prostrations and it was beneficial and releasing.



Bodhisattva Precepts Ceremony at DDRC Photo by Tajen Liang

The final ceremony on the last morning brought it all together and we were initiated as "infant bodhisattvas". We have committed to work with the precepts for as long as it takes. There is no going back now! People were very happy and joyful afterward and then the chance to speak to people with whom we had shared this "silent" space came about. I could finally talk to the two women on either side of me; Anchi and Kathleen; who were great companions along the way. And my friends in the work practice periods chatted about their lives outside the retreat which was great.

Finally, I got a ride back to New Jersey after my travel arrangements changed. Who was in the car with me but Greg who I had met on that first day! So Gene and Greg and I chatted all the way to Jersey about all kinds of things, from martial arts to Dharma, to mainland China, finance and writing books! It seems that being an aspiring bodhisattva is not a solitary practice, but a network after all. ☺



# Some Personal Notes by a Chan Catholic

BY

Gregory J. Millman

I BEGAN TO MEDITATE at Dharma Drum Mountain Buddhist Association, New Jersey Chapter (DDMBA–NJ) in February 2016, a few months after suffering what physicians euphemistically described as “a life-changing experience.” Like most euphemisms, that phrase is vague and conceals more than it communicates. From the context in which doctors used it, the phrase seems to mean an experience that could, maybe even should, have been fatal, but instead left one breathing, albeit suddenly deprived of capabilities previously taken for granted as part of who one is. During the long bed-ridden days in hospital and rehabilitation centers, what I had previously taken for granted and had now lost was a source of regret, as were other memories of wasted or misspent time and opportunities in the past. Exacerbating regret for the past was anxiety about the future. What was life going to be now?

However, even in the hospital, I remembered my experience on an intensive Chan retreat more than a decade before. Almost uninterrupted meditation during that retreat had left me with unprecedented clarity and focus, but unluckily without the ability to sustain and deepen those. As soon as I was able, I began to search for Chan, Japanese Zen, Korean Son, Tibetan or other meditation instruction. I discovered with some surprise that New Jersey

has numerous temples and sanghas practicing according to these various traditions. I was referred to DDMBA by members of another Temple, who claimed Chan descent but told me that they did not practice meditation.

Because I am a Catholic, I would of course attend Mass beforehand, often the Saturday night vigil, which left me free to attend the 9:00 AM meditations at DDMBA–NJ, but I knew that, while sitting in meditation and learning from Buddhism, I was following in the footsteps of some of the greatest theologians and spiritual writers in the Catholic tradition during the twentieth century. William Johnston, author of *The Still Point: Reflections on Zen and Christian Mysticism* mentions that even St. John of the Cross, the great Renaissance Carmelite Doctor of the Church, had been accused of being a Buddhist by his less appreciative readers. While living in Taiwan during the late 1970s, I had been seeking opportunities to meditate, and spent some time with Taoists, but was then unable to make contact with DDMBA or Master Sheng Yen. I believe that if I had been able to begin meditation practice then, it might have been a much more positive kind of “life-changing experience.” The community at the DDMBA–NJ has extended a warm welcome and made me feel at home from the start.



Art by Meng-Yin Hsieh

In May of this year, after having heard the charismatic Jimmy Yu (Guo Gu) speak at DDMBA–NJ, and after a subsequent exchange of emails with him, I took the bodhisattva precepts at the Dharma Drum Retreat Center in Pine Bush, New York. For me, this meant for the most part reaffirming the commitment I have made at least annually when I have renewed my Catholic baptismal vows during the Easter liturgy. Repentance also received a great deal of emphasis during the precept rituals, and as a Catholic who has made a practice of frequent sacramental confession and of the liturgy of the Mass, which all but begins with a prayer of repentance, I found this most appropriate. In fact, hearing the Dharma talks that emphasized one’s karmic debt for offenses committed in past lives, perhaps thousands of years ago, I found myself reflecting on Catholic teaching about the sacrifice

made by Jesus on the cross, during which he took on himself all of our sins. I do not think I have ever felt so moved with gratitude for that sacrifice and for the Catholic tradition. I know, of course, that this is not Buddhist teaching, but Christianity is ultimately about only one thing: love, and there seems to be no conflict with Chan on this point. Indeed, in my practice, I often remember a comment of Jesuit father Robert Kennedy, a Zen roshi whose master told him that through the practice of Zen, he would learn to empty himself in imitation of Jesus Christ, of whom St. Paul wrote, “He emptied himself, coming in the form of a slave [...] he humbled himself.” Chan practice does appear to me to be another way of approaching that same objective of pouring out oneself, an approach that is the duty of every Christian and, based on what I have learned of the Dharma so far, of every Buddhist. ☯

# Egg on the Floor

## Understanding the Forms of Buddhism

BY

Nate Satin

DURING GROUP MEETINGS at my local meditation center, I sometimes glance around the room to see how the first-time visitors are holding up. I watch them closely, keeping a sharp eye out for what I call the switch, the moment when a newcomer decides that all this Buddhism stuff is just too strange and cultish, and their face suddenly becomes a blush cocktail of embarrassment and cynicism.

Different people undergo the switch during different parts of the evening service; the monotone chanting of the Heart Sutra is the last straw for some, while for others it's the prostrations in the direction of the bronze Buddha statue at the front of the room. Regardless of when exactly they surrender to their spiritual skepticism, once they leave the center the result is almost always the same; they never return.

For other, less skittish newcomers to spiritual practice, encountering all these odd practices and Asian furnishings – collectively known as the “forms” – sometimes produces a completely opposite reaction: they become obsessed with doing everything perfectly. They work tirelessly to ensure that their sitting posture is always correct, that their chanting is always on point. Such practitioners often become very prideful about *their* style of practice, *their* way of doing things, and they either ignore or

look down on the customs that are followed in other schools of Buddhism.

Both groups of people in these extreme cases are actually suffering from the same problem: a misunderstanding of the real meaning behind the forms of Buddhist practice.

### Not Your Average Dinner Party

My late teacher was very skilled at recognizing when a person was baffled by all the exotic zendo practices. To explain the meaning behind the forms, she would sometimes tell the story of her first meeting with Sonam T. Kazi, a renowned master in the Dzogchen School of Tibetan Buddhism. In 1969, my teacher's husband was one of Sonam's students. One night, the students held a dinner party for Sonam, and my teacher's husband brought her along so she could meet this widely respected Buddhist master.

She had been deeply interested in Buddhism for a long time, but she was still reluctant about formally entering Buddhist practice by taking on a teacher. She had heard spiritual horror stories about all the strange religious practices involved in the study of Tibetan Buddhism, like repeating the same mantra a hundred thousand times, doing a hundred thousand prostrations, and so on. She was very skeptical.

But upon meeting Sonam at the dinner party, her skepticism quickly gave way to admiration and even awe, he being the first “awakened” person she'd ever really met. And yet as she sat at the table, she was still hesitant about formally becoming his student.

She asked him, “Well, if I become your student, do I have to do all these religious things – these chantings and mantras and all this stuff? And do I have to become a Buddhist?”

Sonam replied, “Do you want realization?”

“Yes! Yes!” she answered.

“Well I can give it to you,” he said. “It has been handed to me by my teacher, and we can pass that on. But it's like an egg; it was handed to me in a shell, and that shell is what you're calling Buddhism and all these religious practices. I can pass it to you, but I must pass it on the way it has been given to me, which is with this form that we can call religion. But you're asking me to break apart the shell and hand you the yoke! If I try to do that then we're going to have egg on the floor, and neither of us will have anything!”

She said that at that instant, she had one of those classic light-bulb moments: “I got it!”

### The Shell of Buddhism

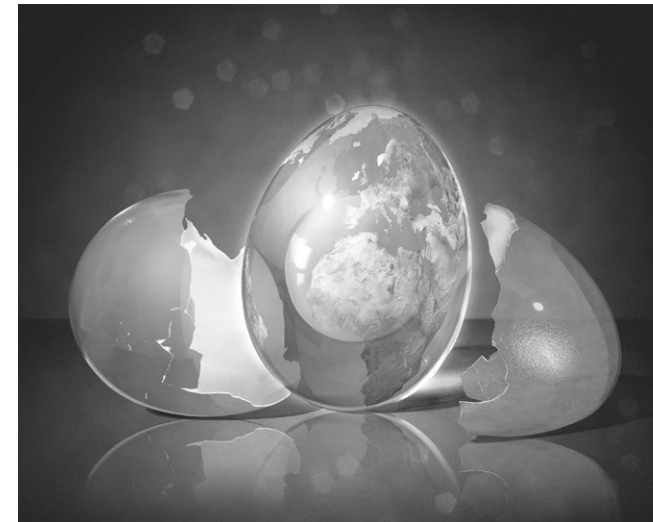
She understood for the first time that religions and religious practices are like vessels, and that although they in themselves may not be the realization we seek, they're still *vital as containers*, containers which handle this higher truth and allow it to be passed on from teacher to student, generation after generation. And even though we're interested in what is contained – the yoke of awakening – we can't just start breaking containers, because, as Sonam says, that's a recipe for egg on the floor.

So if we're truly sincere about wanting realization, at a certain point we have to just take the shell the way it is; we must let go of our initial doubts about entering a new religious tradition, and commit to a spiritual practice in the style of whichever school or tradition feels most comfortable, feels most like home. Somehow we developed a deep connection

to Buddhism, and if we ever hope to quiet our spiritual restlessness, we must explore this connection as earnestly as we can, and see what we find.

Spiritual practice is the vehicle of this exploration. There's no holy significance to what we do in our practice, or how we go about doing it. We just keep holding onto that shell, day after day, moment after moment, breath after breath. We continue to meditate, bow, and chant in the same specific ways because that's how the teachers and ancestors in our chosen lineage did it – that's what worked for them, that's how they made their eggs.

And if it worked for all of them, then why not for us? ☯



Art by Alexandra Fomicheva

# The Past

from CMC, DDRC and DDMBA worldwide



## Transmission of Bodhisattva Precepts 2016

BUDDHISTS FROM THIRTEEN states of the United States, as well as from Canada, Taiwan, and China, congregated at Dharma Drum Retreat Center at Pine Bush, New York to receive the transmission of Bodhisattva Precepts on May 22, 2016. Three Bodhisattva Dharma Masters, Venerable Guo Fong, Venerable Guo Cing, and Venerable Guo Ping witnessed and transmitted the precepts in the Chinese monastic tradition.

Master Sheng Yen taught that understanding the precepts is essential in order to uphold those precepts. Because repentance is important to nourish our Bodhi mind, the monastics led a repentance service once each day leading up to the

ceremony. Through prostrations we repent what we have done in the past, in front of Buddha we repent and make vows to change.

One hundred and four Bodhisattva Precepts receivers (called newly initiated Bodhisattva) including couples, siblings, family, and friends, were wished “Happy Birthday” at the end of the ceremony by Abbot President Venerable Guo Dong as if they had been reborn with a pure precept/dharma body, and now they are ready to spread Buddha’s teaching and to benefit all sentient beings. Through the precepts, wisdom arises and Bodhi mind manifests, said the Abbot President. ☸

Text by *Wen-Chiao Peng* • Photo by *Tajen Liang*

## Dharma Drum Dharmakaya Center (Massachusetts Buddhist Association, Inc.)

ON MAY 15, 2016 as part of his North American trip Abbot President Venerable Guo Dong visited Boston where he gave a blessing at the Bathing of the Baby Buddha ceremony held by the Massachusetts Buddhist Association Dharmakaya Center. Abbot Venerable Guo Xing from the Chan Meditation Center and the Dharma Drum Retreat Center of New York chaired the ceremony, during which the association officially became part of Dharma Drum Mountain – it is now the Dharma Drum Dharmakaya Center (Massachusetts Buddhist Association, Inc.). Afterwards the abbot president encouraged the more than one hundred participants to study Buddhism together, practice and maintain the Dharma, help others to learn Buddha’s teachings and let Chan Buddhism establish roots here in the United States. ☸



Abbot President Ven. Guo Dong visited Boston

## Dharma Drum at Harvard Divinity School Conference on Buddhism and Race

REBECCA LI OF Dharma Drum Retreat Center was invited to speak at the Buddhism and Race Conference hosted by the Harvard Buddhist Community of Harvard Divinity School on April 22–23, 2016. At this conference, sangha leaders, activists, community members and students joined together to share justice-oriented teachings and training. The event was sold out and it was standing room only when the event opened Friday evening. Rebecca shared in the opening night panel “Why It Is Important to Hold Dialogues on Race and the Challenges Involved,” along with panelists from Zen, Tibetan and Insight traditions. On April 23, in a panel entitled “How to Adopt Practices to Address the Racial Aspect of Suffering,” along with teachers of Tibetan Buddhism, Zen and mindfulness, Rebecca shared practices in Chan to work with forms of oppression and aspects of the teaching that may shut down conversations regarding oppression. The discussion was moderated by Harvard Professor Charles Hallisey. After the panelists shared, discussion was opened up to the audience. In addition to these two panels, there was also a panel where practice leaders in People of Color groups shared their experiences, challenges and successes in creating a space for practitioners to feel welcome and included. There were also breakout sessions where workshop leaders shared practices to facilitate inclusivity and to investigate one’s privileges as a way to deepen one’s practice. Many participants of the conference reported the experience to be transformative to the organizers and look forward to the conference in 2017. ☸

## Grand Opening of DDMBA–NJ’s New Center

DDMBA–NJ held a grand opening ceremony on May 14, 2016 for their new center in Edison Township, central New Jersey. More than 400 monastics, guests and volunteers filled the newly renovated chan hall, dining hall and reception hall. The ceremony was hosted by Abbot President Ven. Guo Dong and Abbot Ven. Guo Xing as well as some secular leaders. The Abbot President explained to the audience the symbolism of “grand opening,” how we can uncover the light of wisdom within us. Abbot Ven. Guo Xing spoke a verse for the ceremonial unveiling of the

Buddha statue. When these two venerables pulled off the veil to reveal a very solemn Buddha, a storm of applause rose from the audience, many of whom burst into tears. After lunch, twenty-six people took the five precepts with Abbot Ven. Guo Xing; twelve of had them actually decided on the spot to take the precepts after the morning ceremony. In the parking lot, a ceremony of bathing the baby Buddha, as well as a garden party, were held under a sunny and cloudless sky with a gentle breeze. The grand opening ended at 3 PM, a day of joy and inspiration. ☸



*Abbot President Ven. Guo Dong & Abbot Ven. Guo Xing pulled off the veil to reveal the Buddha statue*

## Chan Meditation Retreats

### *Essentials of Chan Intensive*

September 16 – 23, 2016

Venerable Chi Chern

### *Western Zen*

October 14 – 19, 2016

Simon Child, Rebecca Li & Hilary Richards

### *Foundation*

November 11 – 13, 2016

Rebecca Li



DHARMA DRUM RETREAT CENTER

184 Quannacut Road, Pine Bush, NY 12566 • +1 845 744 8114 • [www.dharmadrumretreat.org](http://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.



## 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](mailto:ddrc@dharmadrumretreat.org) · [www.dharmadrumretreat.org](http://www.dharmadrumretreat.org)

#### REGULAR WEEKLY ACTIVITIES

Thursday Tea Meditation	2:00 PM–4:00 PM	Eight-form moving meditation, Chan relaxation, tea ceremony, sitting meditation, Dharma talk. Led by Venerable Chang Hu
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#### RETREATS (register online)

Day of Stillness & Children's Program	Oct 22 Nov 5	Saturday 9 AM–5 PM Venerable Chang Hu & Little Bodhisattvas Team
Essentials of Chan Intensive Retreat	Sep 16–24	Led by Venerable Chi Chern
Western Zen Retreat	Oct 14–19	Led by Rebecca Li, Simon Child & Hilary Richards
Foundation Retreat	Nov 11–13	Led by Rebecca Li

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

(718) 592-6593 · [chancenter@gmail.com](mailto:chancenter@gmail.com) · [www.chancenter.org](http://www.chancenter.org) · [www.ddmba.org](http://www.ddmba.org)

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 & Recitation	1 <sup>st</sup> , 2 <sup>nd</sup> , 4 <sup>th</sup> (& 5 <sup>th</sup> ) Sundays 2:00–3:30 PM	Guan Yin Bodhisattva Chanting Service
	3 <sup>rd</sup> Sunday 2:00–4:00 PM	Earth Store Bodhisattva Sutra Chanting Service

#### 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–12:00 PM	(suspended until further notice)

#### RETREATS (Pre-registration advised)

1-Day Retreat	Sep 24	Saturday 9:00 AM – 5:00 PM · Led by Nancy Bonardi
	Oct 29	Saturday 9:00 AM – 5:00 PM · Led by Rikki Asher

#### CLASSES AND WORKSHOPS (Pre-registration advised)

Three-Part Beginner's Meditation Workshop	Oct 8, 15 & 22	Saturday 2:00 PM – 5:00 PM Led by Harry Miller & Peter Lin
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	Oct 16 1:30 PM–4:30 PM	Led by Dr. Peter Lin, film Viewing and discussion Check website for film title and description

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## Entering the Gateless

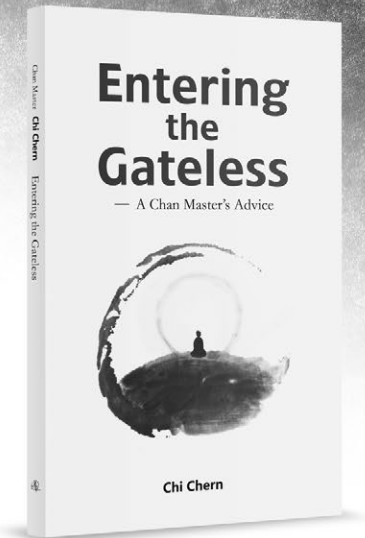
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