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CHAN MAGAZINE

AUTUMN 2016



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*Saha*

OUR HUMAN WORLD IS A SAHA WORLD, not a pure land; we have violence, crimes, and disasters. When we inevitably encounter misfortune, they are causes and conditions to help us grow, and opportunities to accumulate experience. However, we should not care only for our own safety and happiness while ignoring the peace and security of society; we should also take care of others. Furthermore, besides hoping to be helped by buddhas and bodhisattvas, we should actually learn to be like them, so when people meet us, we will help them, as if they had met a bodhisattva or a buddha.

”

CHAN MASTER SHENG YEN  
University of Central Florida, April 29, 1995

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## *The Methods of Practice of Chan and Pure Land*

BY

**Chan Master Sheng Yen**

This article is based on a talk given at the University of Central Florida on April 29, 1995, and is excerpted from Master Sheng Yen's book, *Liberated in Stillness and Motion*, originally published in Chinese as “動靜皆自在” (*Dongjing jie zizai*) in 1998. It is one of a selected number of books from the Master's *Complete Works*, and was translated under the auspices of the Cultural Center of Dharma Drum Mountain, Taiwan. *Liberated in Stillness and Motion* was translated by Venerable Chang Luo, and edited by Venerable Chang Wu and Ernest Heau.



## Buddhism, Buddhadharma, Buddhist Studies

BUDDHADHARMA CONSISTS OF the teachings spoken by Shakyamuni Buddha after his enlightenment, and includes the concepts, purpose, and methods for attaining buddhahood. After Shakyamuni became the Buddha, he shared with others his experience and discoveries of the reality of existence and the universe. These people became disciples who gradually formed a group, and this was the process of the development of Buddhism. Therefore, the outer form of Buddhism includes the assembly of believers, its organizational systems and rules, and the activities engaged in by the believers. After Shakyamuni Buddha entered nirvana, Buddhism

endured, and gained a worldwide following because it met these conditions: its founder had a completely sound character, it had a very profound theoretical and doctrinal basis, and its followers had high moral standards. Buddhism became an enduring, major religion due to the three factors of the founder, the doctrine, and the order of followers.

Buddhist studies includes all kinds of research related to Buddhism and Buddhadharma, and on the philosophical thoughts, activities, history and culture related to Buddhist followers, doctrines, and the monastic order. Buddhist studies corresponds to theology in the West in the sense that research into Christian doctrine belongs to the field of philosophy. Therefore, Buddhist studies can be said to be a kind of philosophy focusing on the research of Buddhism.

Photo by Greg Rakozy

However, the scope of Buddhist research is becoming wider, and any research studies related to Buddhism could be called Buddhist studies.

Buddhism, Buddhadharma, and Buddhist studies are closely related and inseparable; otherwise, Buddhism could not have become an enduring and great religion worldwide. From the historic perspective, any Buddhist who made a considerable contribution to the world must not only be a religionist, but also a great scholar, practitioner, and social worker. This is why Buddhism is still important, popular, and well received worldwide after 2,500 years.

## Chan and Pure Land Both Embody the Whole Buddhadharma

The Chinese word *chan* (禪) comes from the Sanskrit word *dhyāna*, which refers to the Indian practice of meditation. “Chan” later became the name of the Chan School in China. In all Buddhist schools or sects, meditation is the common method of practice. Therefore, any Buddhist method that can calm and purify the mind, and give rise to wisdom, may be called Chan.

A pure land is this world transformed into an ideal state through Buddhism. In terms of Buddhist faith, besides the pure land of our human world, there are also heavenly Pure Lands and Pure Lands of the buddhas. Among the Pure Lands of the buddhas, there are many different buddhas and many different Pure Lands. The common aspect of the Pure Lands is that there is no wrongdoing and no vexation. As for the pure land of the mind, it is to be experienced within the mind of everyone.

When I was teaching in the southern United States, the owner of a hotel who believed in the American Dream told me that managing his hotel was very difficult. I told him that this was very

normal because there is no place on earth that is without difficulties. His wife said with a deep sigh that America is just like other places; it is a Saha world with many difficulties. Is it also very difficult in the Buddha’s Pure Land? Not at all! Food, clothing, and supplies need not be exchanged through work. In the Pure Land there is only the spirit rather than the material body; therefore, many problems related to the body do not exist. However, this kind of Pure Land can also be experienced in the human world when our faith is very strong and we calm and settle our minds through practice.

## Chan and Pure Land Are Both Buddhist Studies

The Chan and Pure Land Schools are both based on Buddhadharma, and both have a long history. Each has its own theories and methods of practice and many scholars do research on those topics, so they could also be seen as Buddhist studies. When people introduce me to others they often mention that I have a doctorate. Some people remark, “Why does a monk need a doctor’s degree?” Or, “Why does a monk need so much education?” Actually, whether today or in the past, any monk or nun who has made great contributions was mostly well-educated. If I had not been educated, I would not be able to give a lecture to an audience of intellectuals like here today.

Since Chan does not rely on words, some people believe that Chan teachers do not need to be educated. Besides, the Sixth Patriarch Master Huineng of the Chan School was said to be illiterate. This may not be factually true, because in his *Platform Sutra* Huineng quotes from five, six, or more Buddhist scriptures. In any case, even though the Sixth Patriarch may not have been a scholar, he did have profound understanding of the Buddhist scriptures. And while Chan talks about not relying on words, among the

eight major schools of Buddhism in Chinese history, the Chan School left the most written works. This is very interesting.

Someone may say, “Since one can be reborn in the Western Pure Land simply by reciting the name of Amitabha, there is no need for knowledge and intellect in the Pure Land School. All problems are solved by simply reciting ‘Amitabha!’” These are lazy words from lazy people. There are many eminent masters of the Pure Land School, including both monastic and lay practitioners, who left many written works quoting from the scriptures to explain the importance of Pure Land and the reliable methods of practice. Furthermore, in order to understand many of the Pure Land scriptures, one needs to study them along with the Sanskrit originals. Therefore, in the Pure Land School, there is also profound knowledge.

Though I have a doctorate in Buddhist literature, I dare not say I am well versed in all the schools and sects of Buddhism. However, I did write a book called *Recitation Practice and Rebirth in the Pure Land Tradition* (Chinese *Nianfo sheng jingtu*), which can be used as a reference.

## The Chan Methods of Practice

Chan practice methods can be divided into two main categories: the first category includes methods like the Five Methods for Stilling the Mind, which allows us to settle our mind in order to accomplish the purpose of liberation. The second category consists of “investigating Chan” through the use of methods like *huatou*. The purpose of this type of method is to shatter one’s deluded mind and get rid of self-centeredness, so that wisdom can manifest as enlightenment. Whichever Chan method one uses, one first needs to relax the body, brain, and mindset before one can become settled and calm. I often teach people a simple method for relaxation, which is to

be aware of one’s breathing. It helps one to relieve nervousness and afflictions. A simple method is enough for everyday life, but for deeper practice, one should seek guidance from a teacher.

## The Pure Land Practice

The Pure Land School in which one recites the Buddha’s name to be reborn in the Pure Land, is an independent school found only in China and Japan. It emphasizes faith, making vows, and practice. The methods are twofold: one is to focus on reciting a buddha’s name, the other is to practice the three pure virtuous deeds of generating bodhi-mind. In the Pure Land School, faith is belief in the vows of Amitabha Buddha, in which anyone who believes and vows to be reborn in the Pure Land can do so. The practice consists of wholeheartedly reciting “Amitabha” or “Namo Amitabha.” One listens to the sound of their own recitation of the Buddha’s name, their mind continuously returning to focus on the name of Amitabha Buddha. This is similar to the Chan method of being aware of the breath.

Besides reciting the name of the Buddha, in this world one should purify one’s thoughts, words, and deeds through the pure virtuous deeds [of action, speech, and mind]. Otherwise, [even with faith and vows] one will not be able to enter the Pure Land. Of course, if one’s practice is insufficient, even if one is able to enter the Western Pure Land through Amitabha’s compassion and one’s vow, one still cannot immediately see Amitabha Buddha.

Many people mistakenly think that Pure Land practice only requires reciting the Buddha’s name, but one must also do charitable deeds. Besides, the spirit of Buddhism is to learn to become and be a buddha. If one wants to learn to be a buddha, one must begin with the bodhisattva path, which is not working for one’s own welfare but for delivering

all sentient beings. As a result, to be reborn in the Pure Land one must give rise to a bodhi-mind of benefiting others. In other words, one should take care of the human world, and at the same time vow to be born in the Western Pure Land. This is more reliable.

Western Buddhists have been willing to accept the methods and concepts of Chan, but it is not easy for them to accept the Pure Land School. This is because they are already familiar with the heaven of Christianity, which is comparable to the Pure Land of the buddhas.

However, the Pure Land way of thinking that I’m explaining is also acceptable to Westerners; reciting Amitabha Buddha’s name can help settle the mind and relieve physical pain; it can also give rise to wisdom. With wisdom, one can dissolve vexations and solve difficulties, conflicts, and contradictions. Therefore, although reciting the Buddha’s name can result in rebirth in the Western Pure Land, one need not recite the Buddha’s name just for that purpose.

## Benefits of Reciting the Buddha’s Name

There is a grandmother who dislikes her daughter-in-law for lacking filial piety. She often scolds her son and daughter-in-law for their faults. Her daughter-in-law finds this very annoying, so she



Photo by Sabine Schulte

also often complains about her mother-in-law for being stubborn and not being appreciative. She even considered moving her mother-in-law out of the house to live by herself. In the end, both came to see me. I advised the granny not to scold her son and daughter-in-law because the more she scolds, the more troublesome things will become. I told her it would be better for her to recite the name of Amitabha Buddha, and the more she recited the Buddha’s name, the more wisdom and merit she would have. As for the daughter-in-law, I also advised her not to complain about her mother-in-law, but rather to recite the name of Amitabha Buddha. Later on, since both were reciting the name of the Buddha, they have lived peacefully. Apparently, reciting the name of the Buddha can resolve vexations and benefit the present life.

The last instruction in Dharma Drum Mountain's "Common Endeavor of Buddhists" is to recite Amitabha Buddha's name continuously. If one uses the time spent speaking ill of others and engaging in idle talk to recite "Amitabha Buddha" instead, one will have good personal relationships, wisdom, and no vexations.

## Chan and Pure Land Are Both Practical Methods

Chan and Pure Land are practical methods and one can obtain from them great benefits for the body and the mind. Many people have mistakenly thought that studying Chan is only for enlightenment, and if one does not become enlightened then the efforts are wasted. Likewise many think that practicing Pure Land is only for the purpose of solving the problem of life and death, and that it is useless unless one can be reborn in the Pure Land. Actually, if one practices either Chan or Pure Land, one will receive benefits in this life anytime and anywhere. Either method may lead to enlightenment and rebirth in the Pure Land. Those who are enlightened can surely be reborn in the Pure Land, people who wish to be reborn in the Pure Land but are not yet enlightened can also be reborn in a Pure Land, and all those reborn in the Pure Land can surely become enlightened.

## The Vision of Dharma Drum Mountain

The vision of Dharma Drum Mountain is to uplift the character of humanity and to establish a pure land in the human world. This is related to today's theme because before we become a buddha, we should do well what a human should do; and before reaching the Western Pure Land we should engage in caring for human society. Dharma Drum Mountain uses various

types of education to conduct the work of social care, and at the same time, uses caring for human society to accomplish the purpose of education.

Our human world is a Saha world, not a pure land; we have violence, crimes, and disasters. When we inevitably encounter misfortune, they are causes and conditions to help us grow, and opportunities to accumulate experience. However, we should not care only for our own safety and happiness while ignoring the peace and security of society; we should also take care of others. Furthermore, besides hoping to be helped by buddhas and bodhisattvas, we should actually learn to be like them, so when people meet us, we will help them, as if they had met a bodhisattva or a buddha.

Whether they practice Chan or Pure Land, all Buddhists are learning to be bodhisattvas and buddhas; otherwise, one cannot be enlightened and see their buddha-nature. It is impossible to succeed in practicing the Buddha path without compassion and caring for others and society. Therefore, having faith in the Buddha is to learn to be like a buddha; ultimately, one should make one's character become like that of a buddha. After all, the purpose of Buddhism is to learn the wisdom and compassion of the Buddha.

The purpose of Buddhism is to learn the Dharma as spoken by the Buddha, such as the methods and concepts of practice of Chan and Pure Land. The Dharma comes from the Buddha, and has been passed on generation after generation by the Sangha from India till the present time. If someone claims he has no lineage transmission and is himself a buddha, then this is questionable. It may be another new form of religion but it definitely is not Buddhism. Having received transmission and certification from my teachers, I am happy to share with all of you these concepts and methods of practice from the Buddha, as they are the real Buddhadharmas. ☸

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Led by Dharma Heirs of Chan Master Sheng Yen



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Haus Tao, Wolfhalden, Switzerland

CONTACT [hthalmann@gmx.net](mailto:hthalmann@gmx.net) • [www.chan-bern.ch](http://www.chan-bern.ch)



### 7-Day *Silent Illumination*

Led by Simon Child • 18 – 25 March 2017

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### 21-Day *Intensive Chan*

Led by Venerable Chi Chern • 31 July – 21 August 2017

Dłużew, Poland

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### 49-Day *Intensive Chan*

Led by Venerable Chi Chern • 18 July – 5 September 2018

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# Chan School Use of Pure Land Methods

BY

Venerable Chi Chern

Chan Master Chi Chern discusses the origins of the practice of reciting the Buddha's name, and how this Pure Land method is used in the Chan School. He also clarifies erroneous views that may arise about the concept of Amitabha Buddha's Western Pure Land. This article is taken from two Dharma talks given at an intensive Chan retreat held at the Dharma Drum Retreat Center in July 2016. It was translated by Echo Bonner, transcribed and edited by Buffe Maggie Laffey.

## Introducing a New Method

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.

We have taught you the techniques and principles of the method of counting the breath, so that you will know what the functionality will be when you apply this method: it will keep your body and mind calm and stable. Your mind will be very clear and you will know how to deal with the illusory or wandering thoughts which occur. You will know these thoughts

arise out of your habitual tendencies, your past habits of creating the recurring cycle of birth and death. You are here on retreat to cultivate Chan practice, to use the Chan method to deal with the habitual tendencies that you have always used to create more karmic retribution for yourself. However, if the practice is not offering you fixed functionality – if you are sitting here not really able to deal with these habits of yours, then Chan practice is useless for you.

If you come here because you want to escape from that busy life of yours, if that is your attitude, then you won't gain much benefit from being here. You need to truly understand the purpose of practice: it is to regulate your body and mind so that you can maintain clarity and awareness at all times, to be able to apply the functionality of your practice to any situation. It is to help you discover the right way



Photo by Frank McKenna

to deal with your habits and not go back to your usual way of conducting affairs. If you can do this, Chan practice will be beneficial for you. Otherwise, if you spend time here just escaping from your busy life, the function of your practice will not be able to develop to help you make a difference in your life. In that case, being here is no different from just going on a trip somewhere sightseeing. So it is very important for you to understand the true function and the true purpose of doing Chan practice here.

It is impossible to reach enlightenment or liberation from spending just a few days on intensive retreat. It is very important for us to recognize *why* we come here; what is the direction of the goal we are trying to achieve? We know that we need to continuously practice so that we are familiarized with the method and know what functions the method

will bring us. We also know that not everybody can benefit from this particular method of counting the breath. So we're going to introduce another method.

## Reciting the Buddha's Name

In the counting the breath method, we use the tactile sensation of the breath as a way of focusing our concentration to be able to maintain clear awareness. We use the sensory organ of the physical feelings to sense the breath moving in and out of the nostrils. For some people this method may not be suitable, because they are too sensitive. When they use this method they try to control their breathing, with the result that this method doesn't relax them, rather it makes them more tense. For such people we need to introduce another method, which uses the sixth sense

organ, the organ of consciousness. In this method we ask the practitioner to recite a Buddha's name or a bodhisattva's name; we use that functionality of the consciousness of reciting to help us focus our mind.

This method, as described above, of reciting the Buddha's name is not a traditional method. As used in the traditional, orthodox way, with this method one thinks about the Buddha and his compassion and merits, his wisdom, clarity, and brightness. This method was taught by the Buddha himself to help those disciples who went into a deep forest or graveyard at night time; sometimes they would be fearful. So Buddha taught them this method of just thinking of the Buddha to help them get rid of the fear in their minds so they could continue to practice. It's like children when they leave their parents; when they're afraid, they feel comfort by thinking about their parents. In this same way, the Buddha taught his disciples to think of him so the disciple would feel calmer and less afraid. By visualizing all the good merits of the Buddha, it would help that particular practitioner to emulate the Buddha and feel they are also as compassionate. That is the origin of this method established and taught by the Buddha, and that is the traditional, orthodox way of using this method. But what we are introducing here right now is very different; we simply ask the practitioner to continuously, single-mindedly recite the Buddha's name.

When this method was introduced in China the whole method was changed and simplified by the Chinese: the name by itself can represent all the merits and good actions of the Buddha or bodhisattva directly. Even though the method is simplified, all the power of that Buddha or bodhisattva is still contained in their name. This method is not created out of nothing, it has a basis in the sutras, where it says that one who is able to completely concentrate in reciting Buddha's name continuously for seven days

will reach enlightenment. So we want to introduce you to simple and direct method which is very popular among Buddhists.

## The Pure Land Method

In the *Amitabha Sutra* (Sanskrit *Sukhāvatiāmṛtavyūha Sūtra*) it says that if a virtuous person who is about to pass away can recite Amitabha Buddha's name single-mindedly and continuously for one day, two days, or seven days, then Amitabha Buddha will receive them when they die and take them to the Western Pure Land. To maintain single-mindedly and continuously reciting Amitabha Buddha's name is the method called the Pure Land method. The Western Pure Land was created by Amitabha Buddha. Before he became a Buddha he made several vows to help all sentient beings. When he became a Buddha he created a Pure Land where all sentient beings can come and continuously practice. If you want to practice in the Pure Land, then you make a vow and when you die, if it is the right time, you will be able to be reborn in the Pure Land.

This is very well-liked practice method in China, where the Chinese also formed the Pure Land school of Buddhism. The reason it is so well-liked is because it's very simple: just continuously recite Buddha's name until your mind is completely focused and concentrated, and then when you die you will be able to go to the Western Pure Land and continuously practice with the Buddha and the bodhisattvas and all the virtuous practitioners there. A lot of the Chinese patriarchs and masters discovered how very beneficial this method can be so they started encouraging people to use it: Just recite the Buddha's name single-mindedly, and after death one goes to the Western Pure Land. It may not necessarily be after *this* lifetime, but it doesn't matter because once you make the vow, once you start to recite the Buddha's

name, when the time comes that it's ripened you will be reborn in the Western Pure Land. It's guaranteed because Amitabha Buddha said very clearly in the sutra that that's what will happen.

## Description of the Western Pure Land

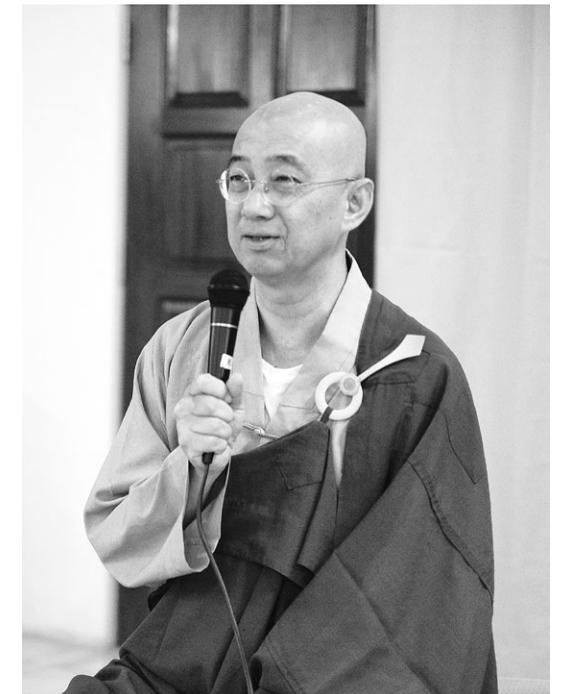
In the *Buddha of Infinite Life Sutra* (Skt. *Sukhāvativyūha Sūtra*) and in the *Amitabha Sutra* it describes what the Western Pure Land is like. It's very beautiful, with wonderful trees and flowers and animals and all kinds of very lovely things, when you see these things you feel very happy. And there, when the birds sing, they are actually teaching you about Buddhadharma; that's how profound and special is the Western Pure Land. In that world you will see Amitabha Buddha, and great bodhisattvas, and many great practitioners, all very diligently practicing, and there the conditions are perfect for practicing.

By contrast, here in this world we are very busy during daily life and we don't have much time to practice. If we are able to come to this retreat with its intensive training, we will gain some benefit that will help us to focus our mind. It will help us to recognize our habits so, when we go back to daily life, we will be able to apply what we learned. But just imagine if you could go to a place where there is no busy life and no distraction, where all the conditions are conducive to practice. All you do in the Pure Land is sit so well that it is easy to do continuous practice. It mentions in the sutra that if you put in fifty percent effort you get one hundred percent outcome; that's how great this Pure Land is. The Pure Land method was formed in China through the wisdom and the keen observation of the Chinese masters. The patriarchs discovered that many people had benefit from this method of reciting Buddha's name. So they started not just to develop the Pure Land school, but also to

really promote this method, which has become very popular among Chinese Buddhists.

## Development of Erroneous View

Amitabha Buddha's original vow was that he would create this Western Pure Land so that anyone who comes there will continuously and diligently practice together with him and with all other virtuous practitioners. However, we discover that, after a period of time, gradually people's concept of the Western Pure Land has developed in a very strange kind of way; people have this erroneous understanding. They think: "If I can recite Buddha's name then after I die the Buddha will come and take me to the Pure Land, and there I won't have to do anything. I won't have to make a living; I will be



Venerable Chi Chern Photo by Li Chu

provided with food and clothing, everything I need is readily there.” They turn that place into a retirement home. Because of this, a lot of intellectual people who are more highly educated feel this method is really not a good method, it’s for someone to just escape and hide away and retire.

But this idea is quite erroneous. Amitabha created this Pure Land as a sort of university. It’s for you to go there and study your practice continuously and diligently, and when you finish your study, then you can come back, maybe to the Saha world to serve people here. Or you can stay at the Western Pure Land and continue teaching those people who have newly arrived. *That* is the function of the Pure Land that was created by Amitabha Buddha – it’s not for you to go there and retire. So, if you made a vow and you want to just retire in the Pure Land, you have to think again. Because if that’s your purpose, then you know what? You’re not to going get there.

## The One Mind State

The Pure Land method is a very good and very simple method to use. But it is most important that we clearly understand the intention of the vow to go to the Western Pure Land. We make the vow to be born in Amitabha Buddha’s Pure Land so we can continuously practice and cultivate our method. Then after we finish our study there, we can go to other places to serve. However a lot of people have had an erroneous understanding of this method, and therefore are not able to truly benefit from using it. When you use this method you just recite Buddha’s name continuously

until you reach the point that you have completely unified your mind. Then, if you have made the vow to be born in the Pure Land, when you reach the one mind state Amitabha will pick you up when you die and you will be reborn into the Western Pure Land.

However if you do not want to be reborn into the Western Pure Land, you can still use this method to help you to reach the one mind state, and when you reach this one mind state, you can then continually cultivate wisdom. You don’t have to make a vow that you want to be reborn into the Western Pure Land; some people do and some people don’t. As an example, some people don’t necessarily have to go to university to study, they can just study with good teachers, they can apply the methods and practice diligently and still get the outcome they are aiming for. So you don’t need to go to the Western Pure Land or go to a university to study. But many people find this method is very helpful to cultivate their



Photo by Devanath

mind to reach the one mind state, and they will be able to continuously go deeper and discover their wisdom and then that will help them benefit a lot of other people.

A lot of people feel that when they reach the state of unified mind and continual cultivation, then they will be able to reach the enlightenment state, and in that state the Pure Land has already revealed itself; this is called the Pure Land of the mind only. This way of using the reciting Buddha’s name method to help the practitioner eventually to reach enlightenment is very much in accordance with the Chan method of how to cultivate a person’s mind. Therefore many Chan practitioners use the reciting Buddha’s name method to reach a unified mind without being disturbed by any other external or internal environments. So this method all in all is very precious and special, and therefore many Chan teachers will introduce this method to their disciples.

## Attitudes Stemming from Erroneous View

Because a lot of people have an erroneous understanding about this method, they acquire a wrong attitude when they apply the method. They believe that the goal is to go to the Western Pure Land and retire. Because of this they are very passive and pessimistic in their practice, and also in the way they conduct their daily life. Things that they should be doing, they are not doing. They don’t care about the current affairs of the world that they live in and they don’t have the attitude that they are responsible for anything. They believe that their goal is just to quickly finish this life and go to Amitabha Buddha’s world and stay there, and that’s it.

They really are not understanding correctly. Understood correctly, the sutra mentions that not only do you have to reach the point of one mind,

you also have to accumulate a lot of virtuous deeds, roots, and merits, and be able to combine these with rigorous practice of the mind. Then you will be able to go to the Pure Land, and then it’s not the end place for you, it is where you continue with your practice.

## Deep and Shallow Virtuous Roots

Many Pure Land practitioners, and further, some teachers teaching this method, have this kind of erroneous understanding. This method is becoming popular among Buddhist practitioners because they believe it’s all very easy – you don’t have to put a lot of effort into practice; you’ll quickly get what you want. As a result this method becomes attractive to those with shallow virtuous roots.

The *Buddha of Infinite Life Sutra* mentions nine different levels of people measured by their practice and virtue. Even those of the highest level still need to practice hard. All levels need to cultivate many merits and virtuous deeds, and practice diligently and continuously. From the highest to the middle and the lower levels, all require these conditions in order to be reborn in that world. Even when they are reborn in the Western Pure Land, they have to continue to practice, and when they finish their studies, then they will serve and deliver all sentient beings. Amitabha Buddha wants to deliver all sentient beings regardless of their level of practice, and of course will help people with very shallow virtuous roots, out of his great compassion.

## Lazy, Inaccurate Practice

The sutra says that before you die, if for ten breaths you continuously think of Amitabha, then Amitabha will come when you die and deliver you to his Western Pure Land. In the sutra the word *nian* (念) in Chinese can be translated as “thought” or “thinking”

but it can also be translated as “reciting.” After reading this part of the sutra many people have an erroneous kind of understanding. They think “Oh, if I just recite Amitabha Buddha’s name ten times, then when I die I will go to the Pure Land” So people actually create this kind of practice method: every morning they wake up and take a deep breath and repeat “Amitabha Amitabha ...” ten times and that becomes their entire practice. So easy, right?

This method creates somebody who is just lazy. They don’t care about what’s happening right here and now in this world. They think they should just quickly finish with this world because their goal is to go to the Western Pure Land and retire. They feel they don’t need to do a lot of work, and if they do things, they are not putting their full effort into it. They spend their time trying to escape their responsibility, hiding away from their involvement with world events. Their appearance becomes not so good, and if they have children they become not very good children. All this erroneous understanding and wrong attitude leads them into an inaccurate way of practice. This is not the purpose Amitabha Buddha made a vow for!

## Amitabha’s Vows

Amitabha Buddha did not make these great vows so that a bunch of people can just come to his Pure Land and retire. That’s not accurate understanding. The fact is you have to practice hard in this world, continuously cultivate your mind so that you can reach the unified mind state, at the same time continuously cultivating your merits and virtuous deeds. Then even when you go to the Western Pure Land you still need to continuously cultivate your merits and practice until you finish, after which you go to whatever world you choose to and deliver sentient beings. *Then* your action and your attitude

will be in accordance with the intention of Amitabha Buddha when he initially made the vow to create his Western Pure Land.

Amitabha made forty-eight great vows to create his Western Pure Land. Some people say “All forty-eight is too many, let me just choose one or two.” No, you can’t do that; if you want to take up this practice method, you have to follow through completely. That’s the actual method of Pure Land here; it is simple but it is not what you imagined. We really need to follow the Buddhas, study them as examples, have the right attitude in accordance with Amitabha Buddha’s vows, and practice accordingly. Don’t look down on this method and arouse this kind of erroneous understanding. Actually it’s a very profound and precious, very special Dharma. So you really need to have correct understanding about it.

## Purifying the Mind

Some of us, when we recite Amitabha Buddha’s name, don’t necessarily want to make a vow to be reborn into the Western Pure Land. Even if you don’t make such a vow, this particular method can help simplify your way of thinking and conducting your affairs. The Buddha’s name has the function of representing all the merits and virtues of that particular Buddha, so by reciting this name we are able to be in accord with those merits and virtues.

By practicing reciting the Buddha’s name we will be able to put down all these distractions and habitual tendencies. By doing that, we simplify our mind from one that is very easily attached to or distracted by things, to one that is clearer and less confused. In this way you can purify your mind to the point that you become completely empty. That’s how this method can help you even if you don’t want to be reborn to the Western Pure Land itself.



Photo by Andrew Kim

Ordinarily our mind is very mixed up with all kinds of stuff in it. We cannot see clearly and we are constantly adding more things and staying in situations that are not necessary. Each time we are in contact with the external environment we complicate things; this is how we habitually conduct our affairs. The practice of Buddhadharma is quite the opposite. It’s actually going in the other direction helping you to not complicate things, helping to purify and continuously simplify your mind.

## Benefits of Reciting the Buddha’s Name

A good method can be measured by whether it can help simplify your mind, and this method that we are introducing, reciting the Buddha’s name, is such a method. It is so simple; just use one Buddha’s name and every problem can be solved. You might

think that’s unfathomable but this is precisely the power of the method. It is very popular in China among Chinese Buddhists. If they meet someone they will say “Amitabha”; you will hear people use Amitabha Buddha’s name all the time and that is the way they cultivate their mind. So this method is not complicated. But you know what? Because our habits are constantly complicating issues, it’s not easy because it’s not what we usually do.

If you look at many established Chan patriarchs or masters, everything in their mind is just Buddha’s name, and everything they encounter, all illusory thoughts arising and perishing, they just use Buddha’s name to deal with it. If another person says something that’s disrespectful or really rude, just “Amitabha,” one Buddha’s name solves it and there’s no interference or disturbance in their mind. This method has helped them become single-minded in accordance with this Buddha’s name. So this method can help us acquire, and continuously maintain ourselves in, the correct view.

Because you’re just beginners now, it is not easy for you to practice what you’re not used to doing all the time. But when you pick up this method and continuously use it, gradually it will help you simplify your mind so you will not be troubled or interfered with by all these other things. This is a very good method, but how much good effect will you have from it? That depends on how much hard effort you actually put into it.

## How to Recite the Buddha’s Name

So let’s go back to how we practice this particular method. The method is just to repeat Amitabha Buddha’s name. Some people may have affinity with some other Buddha’s name, or with a particular Bodhisattva; these are all okay. You can choose whomever you feel a stronger affinity with. But it

is important to just stay with one Buddha or one bodhisattva, continuously thinking and reciting that name.

We don't emphasize how many times you need to recite the name, as a way to measure how much effort you put in; we have discovered that's actually an interference. Some people use counting as a means to measure their progress – maybe every day they have to recite this Buddha's name one thousand times, and then one evening before bedtime, they realize they haven't reached one thousand times so they have to recite very fast. We don't emphasize that at all. The key point is, when you recite Buddha's name, is your mind clear or not clear?

This goes back to Chan practice as well; when we practice Chan meditation our goal is to make our mind clear, aware, and completely stable. It has the function of illuminating awareness. That is what we want to have when reciting Buddha's name. If you discover, when you recite Buddha's name or the bodhisattva's name, that your mind is not clear, bring your mind back to the name, just the same as you do in sitting meditation. Gradually your attention

becomes more inward. Using our sixth sense organ, which is consciousness, we are aware of what's in our mind. Buddha's name is just a means of holding onto your awareness so that you can discover what's going on in your mind. So it is important that each time you raise the name of the Buddha, your mind is very clear that you are reciting the Buddha's name.

## Techniques and Situations

When we practice this method, two situations can occur. Sometimes we recite the Buddha's name and suddenly the name disappears. This is because the Buddha's name was overpowered by all the illusory and wandering thoughts interfering with our focus. It's the same as we had described when using the counting the breath method – sometimes the clarity of our awareness of breath disappears because our wandering thoughts are too strong. So that's one situation.

The second situation that could occur is, when people practice this method, after a long period of time it becomes a habit. They habitually and

constantly recite Buddha's name so after a while, even when they are not reciting, the sound of reciting Buddha's name will occur, and that becomes a group of illusory thoughts stored in their consciousness. This is an indication that their mind is scattered, their mind is not concentrated when they recite Buddha's name. So that's another situation that could happen.

This second situation is similar to some people who like to sing, and all of a sudden, without them singing, a song just pops up in their minds. They hear the song and they feel very happy about it. This is exactly the same because what's stored in our consciousness will sometimes pop up and become one of our illusory thoughts. Even though reciting Buddha's name is a good thought, not a defiled thought, in this case it is mixed up with these other illusory thoughts, so the power of that recitation of Buddha's name is not enough, it's not strong.

True practice of this method is that when you recite Buddha's name you are very focused, your mind is not scattered. You are reciting Buddha's name and the recitation is not chopped off, it is continuous without stopping. Put your heart into it, clearly know that you are reciting Buddha's name – this is the technique of how you're supposed to practice this method of reciting Buddha's name. This is how you apply your effort so that it does not become just a sort of habit. Right now you are just beginning so you need time to cultivate and correct your habits.

## Which Method to Choose?

For those who have a very strong affinity with the method of reciting the Buddha's name, you can make a sincere vow to be reborn in the Western Pure Land, or you may just want to use this method as an expedient means to cultivate your mind. Regardless which intention you have, you need to understand

the accurate way of practicing the method, and then practice continuously so that you can really gain benefit.

In the practice of the recitation of Buddha's name, the pace cannot be too fast. Sometimes people will combine the method of counting the breath together with the recitation of the Buddha's name. In fact in the past some teachers guided students that way, but later on we discovered that the two methods are not complementary; they actually interfere with each other. They are using different sense organs; counting the breath is using the sense organ of the body, to notice the in-and-out of the breath. Recitation of the Buddha's name is using the sixth sense organ, the organ of consciousness, to notice how the mind works. If you combine the two methods, when you recite Buddha's name you will also have to notice the breath coming in and out. If your breath becomes really refined and shallow, then the sound of your recitation becomes very weak. If your breath is fast then your recitation becomes fast and this is also interference. So we suggest that you stay with one method, don't mix the two up.

Some people feel they can simultaneously do well with these two methods but actually that's not a very good way of practice. So simplify things. When you recite Buddha's name, just recite Buddha's name wholeheartedly and focus your mind on that. If you choose the breath method then focus on that one. You can choose whichever method you feel is good for you. If counting the breath is very good for you, stay with that practice. If you feel that hearing Buddha's name will arouse great joy in your heart, then pick that method and start to practice recitation. Regardless of which method you use, if the method has the function of helping your mind become calm and stable, clear and aware, then that's a good method. Regardless of which method you choose, it's all fine. ☺

Photo by Venerable Chang Yun



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

## *Part 13*

BY

**Abbot Venerable Guo Xing**

This is the thirteenth 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 Perpetuation of the World**

WE HAVE TALKED ABOUT HOW sentient beings are perpetuated. Now we'll turn to the discussion of how the world is perpetuated, and how earth, water, fire, and wind came into being. The first is the disk of wind. "Once a light of understanding is added to enlightenment, the darkness of the primary element space appears..." Originally, the enlightened-awareness does not function with the dualism of subject and object. But once the dualistic opposition arises, it becomes, so-called, "a light of understanding is added to enlightenment." Opposite of the enlightened awareness is space, which is characterized by dimness and darkness. These two, the subjective understanding and the objective dark space, continue to interact with each other, thus giving rise to the disk of wind.

The rotation of the Earth is supported by the disk of wind. Outside of the body, the disk of wind is manifested as wind; inside the body, it's breathing. Breath and physical movements are both initiated by wind. All of our actions are initiated by the mind illuminating and grasping to a particular form, which also includes the act of breathing. Breathing is an intermediary between the physical body and the mind. It is of both the physical body and the mind. Therefore, when we experience the breath, ultimately, we will also experience the mind. This relationship of mind and body also encompasses the oft-discussed phenomenon, the movement of *chi* inside the body. When we use our mind to attend to it, *chi* is summoned. As we focus the mind, *chi* begins to gather. Therefore, when people practice *qigong*, they are actually using their mind to practice it. *Chi*

is a trained/cultivated phenomenon; it does not move on its own. *Chi* itself is not capable of cognition and awareness.

After the wind-element, next comes "solidity," which belongs to the element of earth. In the sutra, the earth-element includes grass, trees, and mountains. "Solidity" refers to the characteristic of hardness, anything that blocks and obstructs. "In reaction to the mental disturbance generated by the interaction of the darkness of mental space and the understanding that has been added, there arises a firm attachment to that understanding, and this firm attachment is categorized as solidity. This solidity is the disk of vajra, which is the essence of the primary element earth. This is how, from the firm attachment to the light of the added understanding, the disk of vajra, which holds the world together,

comes into being."\* The disk of vajra is "a firm attachment to the added understanding, and this firm attachment is categorized as solidity." In other words, the mind interacts with the dark mental space, creating obstructions.

During moonlight meditation, we visualize the moon and the moon consequently manifests. However, once wandering thoughts arise, the moon disappears. When we first begin the practice of moonlight meditation, the moon can be sometimes big and sometimes small. But if you are able to sustain the image of the moon thought after thought, at the end, a stable moon will manifest and become an obstruction. This also means, through visualization, we can make the moon appear.

When you repeatedly and continuously attend to a particular phenomenon, you will perceive



Photo by Bill Williams

that the phenomenon actually exists, thus creating obstructions. The “firm attachment to that understanding” is interpreted as an operative word here, referring to repeatedly attending to the object of illumination, and consequently creating obstructions. Because you have incessantly illuminated and experienced the objects of your illumination, they become firm and solid. As the result, the “solidity” appears. However, to spiritual beings/ghosts and people with spiritual powers, the illuminated objects are not obstacles. This is because their spiritual powers can transmute physical properties. In other words, all the solid objects we see are the direct result of our mind incessantly illuminating them. That’s how these solid objects appear. If you are able to settle your mind to a certain level, you will be able to actually transform the physical realm. For instance, some people are able to bend and break a metal spoon using their mind. This illustrates

that all the physical phenomena we see are actually creations of the mind.

After the element of earth is the fire-element. “Thus the disk of vajra is generated from the firm attachment to the added understanding, and the disk of wind is generated from the disturbance arising from the interaction of the two complements, the light of the added understanding and the darkness of mental space. From the friction between the disk of wind and the disk of vajra there arises the light of the disk of fire, which is characterized by changeability.”\* The mind that is capable of awareness and cognition interacts with space continuously, and wind is thus created. After that, wind interacts with solid objects, creating friction, and then gives rise to firelight. Fire is capable of transforming myriads of phenomena into different shapes. For instance, fire can turn paper into ashes. There’s a story about a disciple of Master Hsu Yun, practitioner Juxing. He was very diligent

with his method of reciting the Buddha’s name. One day, people saw him sitting in the vegetable patch in the backyard, holding a wooden fish and appearing to be reciting the Buddha’s name. But, when the people walked closer, they realized he had actually self-generated an inner-fire and turned his whole body into ashes. The only thing remaining was his robe. This is an illustration that our bodies are originally a manifestation of our own mind. Therefore, we can also use our mind to turn our physical body into ashes. Practitioner Juxing had already attained arhatship. The fire he generated reached high up into the sky, as he entered *nirvana* and was reborn into the Western Pure Land. In fact, many arhats, when they are about to pass on, use their minds to enter the fire samadhi, generating fire that reaches high into the sky. Their entire bodies transform into the true fire of samadhi, until it exhausts itself and turns into ashes, as they enter Nirvana.

Following the element of fire is the element of water. “Moisture arises from the shining of the disk of vajra and turns to vapor in the presence of fire. Thus the disk of water comes into being and encompasses the worlds in the ten directions.”\* The essence of the solidity can generate moisture. The five metals and the like turn into liquid when they come across heat. The fire element rises upward, vaporizing the disk of vajra, turning it into liquid. Therefore, every type of liquid in the world is the result of vapor and condensation, forming an endless cycle of moisture. After prolonged accumulation, the disk of water is formed. In “Twenty-Five Means to Enlightenment” (Chapter Five of the *Shurangama Sutra*), Candraprabha (Pure Youth Moonlight) employed the water element as his method of cultivation. He turned his body into water. Whenever he contemplated water mindfully, water manifested. Based on this logic, all phenomena are manifested from our illuminating nature. “As fire flares up

and water descends, their interaction brings about solidity. From the primary element water, the oceans come into being, while the continents and islands come into being from the primary element earth.”\* Water, fire, and vajra interact with each other, giving rise to land. The phenomenon of moisture becomes the oceans, whereas the element earth becomes continents and islands.

This is said to be the origin of the concept of the five elements. The five elements are: metal, wood, water, fire, and earth. Here, our focus is on the interaction between these elements and the mind. The mind first gives rise to subject-object, then their cross-interaction creates the elements of earth, water, fire, and wind, then further gives rise to myriads of phenomena.

Human beings undergo birth, aging, sickness, and death, whilst the insentient world goes through formation, existence, decay, and emptiness. Even if we are unable to return to true mind just yet, we can at least aim to return to mental space. In other words, this world is a manifestation of our mind. The mind creates the world, then we become attached to this world. Consequently, the world constantly undergoes the cycle of formation, existence, decay, and emptiness.

When the world becomes disintegrated, does it mean we then become enlightened? Not quite. We’ll move to another place. So, if our world perishes, will we still have a place to live? We simply move to another planet. You must’ve heard people talking about how our world is coming to an end, right? There’s no need to worry. When this planet is gone, we will move to other places. If your life in this world hasn’t been quite a smooth ride, perhaps it’ll get better once you move to another world. From this perspective, yes, the world undergoes the cycle of formation, existence, decay, and emptiness, while our karma will lead to a corresponding environment.



Photo by Robson Hatsukami Morgan

Perhaps we would've never had the opportunity to journey through the universe in this lifetime, but, perhaps, the perishing of Earth would provide just the perfect opportunity for such a journey.

The United States had spent eight or nine years on research and now it's possible to get to Mars. Do you know that, actually, we don't need to spend any money and we can get to Mars in a matter of seconds? But when you go, you cannot bring anything with you except your karma, so, you must start accumulating positive karma. Although all you can bring along is your past karma, once you decide to embark on intergalactic travel, you can transport yourself within one single thought. If you have accumulated good karma, when you get to your destination, positive results will naturally come about.

Is our coming into the world the result of our mind? Do we use mind when we eat? Do we use mind to practice meditation? Do we use mind to get dressed? Do you believe that everything we do and own is the manifestation of our mind? Yes! Furthermore, do we use our mind to interact with the external world, which, on the surface, appears to be independent of mind-power? In actuality, all phenomena are interactions between the objects of the illuminating mind. The external world may appear to be independent of the mind, but the truth is, the external world is indeed created by the mind. Take subatomic particles as an example. It's been said that these particles are a type of vibration; they are not solid objects. Vibration is precisely our mind's continual movement between subject and object, creating kinetic energy and this illusory world. The root of all of this is thoughts, which is the mind.

The *Shurangama Sutra* explains that, originally, there was no space, no world, no sentient beings, and no karmic consequences. The arising of subject-object eventually led to the manifestation of space,

the world, sentient beings, and karmic consequences. This is the central problem, that's all.

The thoughts that you are creating right now are nothing but your own creation. Afterwards, you interact with these thoughts non-stop. Isn't it true that we exercise selective memories and then interact with them? Consequently, thoughts will continue to be perpetuated and they will not decrease.

Most people are not very adept at dealing with experiences that are very difficult or painful. They resort to not-thinking about these experiences. Stopping thinking about them means there'll be no more interaction with these thoughts. Gradually, the memories will fade and be forgotten. This is how most people deal with undesirable experiences and memories, which is not to interact with the thoughts. The more you arouse and interact with unpleasant thoughts, the more frequently will they resurface.

Once you start practicing the Buddhadharmā, your approach should become one of accepting. You must accept or change your own attitude. Once you accept your painful experiences, the pain of them will lessen. Much of the pain is due to an unwillingness to accept. Actually, there's an even higher plane of thinking beyond accepting or not accepting your pains. It's recognizing that they are merely memories. You suffer because you've taken the memories as "the self." You've taken them as real.

The most fundamental way of resolving suffering is to see through the illusory nature of the phenomena manifested from the mind. They are all due to the functioning of subject-object. Memories are not real; they are merely phenomena. Once you have this understanding, you'll be able to transcend all suffering and see that all five aggregates are empty. ☸

*(To be continued)*

\* *The Shurangama Sutra: A New Translation* (Ukiah, CA: The Buddhist Text Translation Society, 2009), 146.



## *A Bridge from the East to the West*

BY

Janusz Kuras

IT WAS MORE THAN TWENTY YEARS ago when I first met Shifu (Chan Master Sheng Yen). I was living and practicing Zen in Toronto at that time. But first let me go back thirty-six years to Poland where my Buddhist journey began. One of my friends had given me a copy of an unofficially published book about Zen written by Phillip Kapleau Roshi. This friend was involved in an underground anti-communist movement. He said that his involvement wouldn't allow him to practice meditation, but if his political activities put him behind bars, then he would have time to practice. I didn't want to wait! When I first read this book I knew immediately that I had found a solution for all social, political,

and personal problems. I felt I had found the most precious treasure. I was so excited that I wanted to start practicing right away.

I heard that the first Zen group already existed in Poland but in another far away city. (These were the people who translated and distributed the unofficially printed copies of the book by Phillip Kapleau Roshi; at that time in communist Poland all these activities were illegal.) I started sitting right away. To my surprise I was able to sit unmoving for thirty minutes, for the first time in my life. This gave me even more confidence. Somehow I knew that I didn't need to search any further. I had found my path; all I needed to do was follow it.

Photo by Modestas Urbonas

Then mysterious things started to happen. Auspicious circumstances followed me wherever I went. I started to meet the right people in the most unexpected places. At that time I had some health problems, which normally would require prolonged treatment, but in the hospital I met someone already associated with the Zen group. He became my first Dharma brother and shared with me a lot about practice, Zen, and Buddhist community. It fueled my interest even more. From doom and gloom and lack of direction, my life was being magically transformed. My health condition improved very fast. Following the book's guidance, I became a vegetarian and haven't had any problems with this since. The path was revealing itself and as I followed it with the strong conviction awakened in me, it unlocked new sources of energy and vitality I never knew I had. For a few years I was involved in building

an experimental Buddhist community with a retreat center in the mountains, in the south of Poland. It was a vibrant, exhilarating time.

Still, I felt that my practice was immature and that I needed more guidance from a competent teacher with whom I would have a good affinity. This wasn't too easy to find back then. Zen teachers were coming to Poland only sporadically and all of them spoke only English (which I didn't speak at all). I realized that to get better access to a Zen teacher I would need to leave the country. So, when the causes and conditions were right, I left for Germany and a year later I immigrated to Canada. I knew that there was a Zen center in Toronto led by one of Roshi Kapleau's Dharma heirs, with whom I had practiced before. I joined the Center and started to adapt to the new environment and culture. My wife and two young daughters followed me soon after. It was a tough

time for all of us but we experienced lots of support from the group members and the teacher. After a number of years of working closely with the group, a scandal broke out concerning improper conduct of the teacher.

Some people in the group already knew about Master Sheng Yen because a few years earlier Shifu had visited Roshi Kapleau's Zen Center in Rochester, New York. His visit made a lasting impression on many people there. I read the transcripts of his Dharma talk from that visit; what struck me was his humble attitude and the emphasis he put on the importance of closely following the instructions of your teacher. I was also very interested to meet a "real" Chinese Chan Master, so I signed up for the retreat in his New York Chan Center. Some things there were very different and new to me; the food, the atmosphere of the retreat, the settings of the center

I felt I had found the right place and that all I needed to do was relax and practice. But this actually was the hardest thing for me to do. I was already conditioned to treat practice as a sort of struggle; the war you fight to defeat your "ego." With this silly attitude I was confronting Shifu in our interviews, just to be told "You are too anxious, relax. Use your breath to settle the mind." At the time I was a master of controlling my breath to generate strong energy to fight my ego. To be told "just sit" was something new, too simple for me to understand at the time. I was trained to be a Zen warrior, not to just sit and do nothing. What I didn't know was that a Chan warrior defeats enemies before they even appear. That there is nothing to win over because there is nothing to lose either. That's why it's "just sit"! Shifu for me was like that – no need to be a super human, to maintain the image of a great master. Just being honest, open, and completely dedicated was enough. Add to this his superb knowledge of Buddhism and finally I had found someone I could completely trust. Now I could fill in the gaps in my understanding. So I learned to listen with my complete attention to what he had to say, and apply it, even if it felt impossible to do so. Shifu was the second, even more important, treasure I found in my life. I could only wish I had a stronger affinity with him. I started coming regularly to his retreats and visiting the Chan Center whenever I could. I was never really interested in making some professional career, but I started to notice that Shifu was emphasizing good education and sound social status. So, I began to improve on that aspect of my life. At some point I even explored the possibility of joining the monastic sangha. But, causes and conditions weren't ripened for me yet, or I wasn't trying hard enough, or both.

Still there was one aspect of Shifu's style that I could not quite grasp. At the end of the closing talk of each retreat Shifu encouraged monetary donation

*There is nothing to win over  
because there is nothing to lose.*

————— ” —————

and my first exposure to the monastic sangha. There was less attention paid to details than we were used to in the Zen style. Shifu, with his relaxed attitude and soft voice, was always at ease and dignified. Giving instructions at the meal table, beaming with the attitude of unshakable conviction, he was to me the catalyst and instant reference point to what was new and unfamiliar. I thought to myself: I have been here before, I have already eaten this food, I have already listened to these teachings. Everything unfamiliar become instantly familiar. In melodic lines of Chinese chants I could sense the atmosphere and fragrance of far-away and long-ago places; I knew I had chanted them before.

Photo by Sasin Tipchai



and spent some time briefing us on the progress of Dharma Drum Mountain, the center he was building in Taiwan. Shifu didn't hide how happy he was with those achievements as people applauded. I applauded too and was happy as well, but somehow it felt odd to me. Maybe there was an intuitive sense that Shifu's strong commitment to revive and promote Chinese Buddhism in Taiwan would take him away from his other commitment, to bring Dharma to the West. While I could clearly see his wholehearted dedication to both commitments; somehow I felt that only one could be accomplished. But now I know that Shifu was only responding to conditions, and that I selfishly wanted him to just stay in the West. I was looking at any opportunity to stay closer to him at the center in Queens and later when the Dharma Drum Retreat Center was purchased, to stay there, but this wasn't working out. From my personal perspective I felt that to fully benefit from Shifu's guidance I would have to learn yet another language and culture. Mysterious help came in an unexpected way.

In Toronto we used to conduct one day meditation retreats in the public library auditorium. A group of practitioners from a Pure Land temple joined in one of these retreats. Afterwards they invited me to lead meditation sessions in their temple. Thus began my long term relationship with this group and temple, which carried on for several years. One of the practitioners went to attend a winter retreat in Gaomin Temple, famous for its strict discipline and harsh conditions. This was the place where Master Hsu Yun attained enlightenment. Contemporary to Master Hsu Yun, great Master Laiguo was an abbot of this monastery. Master Laiguo was the one who revived the monastery and reestablished purity of Chan School style of practice.

After the member of the Pure Land temple came back from the monastery and shared her experience, I was so impressed that I really wanted to go there.

First the group tried to discourage me, pointing to my lack of Chinese language skills and unfamiliarity with the culture. But finally my enthusiasm convinced them and then everyone in the group was trying help me the best they could. They offered basic Chinese language classes and shared lots of information about culture and basic survival skills. At the end of the year I went on my first trip to China.

Gaomin Temple is located in the southern outskirts of Yangzhou city, the capital of Jiangsu province, north of Yangtze River. Only shortly before the trip did I become aware that this was Master Sheng Yen's province and his home village was somewhere close to the north shore of the river. And there I was, crossing the Yangzi river from Zhenjiang to Yangzhou not far from where Master Sheng Yen was born. I took a deep breath. Somewhere within industrial pollutants I could taste the same air as Shifu did, when he as a young boy was crossing the same river in his first life-changing trip to the Buddhist monastery. At that moment I realized that this would also be the first Chan Monastery I myself would enter. I could not contain my emotions. Tears of joy and gratitude filled my eyes, and the brisk gusts of the wind from the great, patient river quickly dried them out.

*Everything is  
Like it always was  
Just the great river flows  
There is nothing right  
There is nothing wrong  
Simply let go...*

Now I could truly relax. Thank you Shifu for all the encouragement and guidance. For all the obstacles and difficulties as well.

Gaomin Temple is one of the most prominent Chan temples in contemporary China. Despite its



Chan Master Hsu Yun Painting by Chien-Chih Liu

size and fame among Chan practitioners, it does not advertise itself through modern media. In Chan circles in China and beyond, it is still considered the best place to practice Chan on the mainland. During the winter retreat the Chan Hall is always filled way beyond its capacity of five hundred people. I went there to practice Chan in its most traditional form, preserved until today. This is the style of practice which was used in Master Hsu Yun's time and what our Shifu experienced when he entered monastery in his youth. The method of practice in the Linji School is over three hundred years old. From our Western perspective it might feel rough on the

edges, but that's exactly why it is able to preserve all the elements important for effective Chan training.

Since that first visit I have traveled there many times to attend the winter meditation retreat, or as it is called there, *da chan qi* (打禪七). This name translates as "strike Chan seven" and the meaning is sometimes explained in this way: the use of huatou generates the doubt sensation to smash the seventh consciousness; our vexed, self referencing, confused mind. This effectively cuts off access to the eighth consciousness, *ālāya-vijñāna*, the storage of our karmic seeds, allowing us to transform consciousness into pure awareness, *jue zhao* (覺照). Cultivation of this awareness is called "upholding the mind" and can lead to spontaneous disintegration of our illusory attachment to the sense of self and to a direct experience of our unborn mind.

For me Shifu was like a bridge from the East to the West, but I have to cross it myself. He was like an endless ocean of free-flowing Dharma, but I have to swim in it myself. He challenged my complex and confused mind with his down to earth attitude and practical compassion. I remember when Shifu said: "I never attempt to do what I am not capable of. But what I am capable of I do to the best of my ability." Now I can better understand that to bring Dharma to the West is not about tinkering with it, trying to find analogies in the other culture, or blending it or reinventing it. It is enough just being truly honest and open with unshakable conviction. After all, Chan was not born in China and Chan never left the West. ☸

# Lessons from the Acharyas

by Ernest Heau

I

There is a need at last  
to be rescued  
from an impoverished mind  
tired of its aura of need,  
reaching at a table  
laden with fattened fruit,  
finding there  
a forlorn gem  
rough-cut and unpolished,  
reflecting only  
what was once there.

II

Weary of hide-and-peek  
with the saintly ones,  
gazing at gathering clouds,  
cirrus, cumulus, and the like,  
towering, threatening  
finally giving way  
to golden auras not seen  
since bodhisattvas of old  
flashed their diamantine swords;  
thus humbled, turning  
to hide a torrent of tears.

III

Shadows tilt and waver  
as they weave among  
dying embers of thought  
as if in a dream;  
the old pilgrim  
by the heat of a fire  
finding solitude  
and cessation,  
stroking a wispy beard  
as tiny moths scatter  
in the emptiness of time.

IV

Time oozes by  
honey dripping off the spoon  
soothing the bitterness  
of fresh brewed herbs;  
little else remains  
in a singular time,  
a singular place;  
only the taste  
in the mind's eye,  
seeking suchness  
in the diligence of bees.

Acharya (Sanskrit, *ācārya*): in Buddhism, a learned teacher who has attained the Way.

V

*What passions remain  
when the fire dampens,  
shamans may read in ashes  
a better demise;  
but knowing better  
the owl blinks at the heavens  
believing that stars  
orbit at leisure;  
no destiny in mind,  
returning to origins  
and ancient rites of renewal.*

VI

*Too late now  
the deceased departed,  
crops needing tending,  
clouds of crows  
fattened to satiety  
raucous among  
sun-dappled branches;  
in the plains and cities  
untold sentient beings  
gathering, jostling, meandering,  
seeking deliverance.*



VII

*Long past time  
when even devas must sleep,  
all hope abandoned  
without despair;  
thoughts meander  
in no known pattern;  
therein is saving grace;  
nothing to cling to,  
leaving sainthood to acharyas,  
settling into winter  
leaving traces in the snow.*

Photo by Ernest Heau

# The Past

from CMC, DDRC, and DDMBA worldwide

## DDM Toronto Participates in Book Festival

ON SUNDAY SEPTEMBER 25, 2016, the DDM Toronto Centre participated in *Word on the Street*, Canada's largest book and magazine festival, a national celebration of literacy and the written word. DDM Toronto hoped to attract newcomers to Dharma Drum Mountain and promote Master Sheng Yen's teachings, in the spirit of letting others know about the precious teachings of the Buddha under the Dharma Drum lineage. It is also an opportunity for DDM Toronto to show its pride in being a Canadian organization dedicated to the propagation of Chan Buddhism in North America. DDM Toronto is a champion of "Chan Literacy" in the Greater Toronto Area, thanks to the tireless efforts of the volunteers and supporting DDM monastics.

The festival took place at Harbourfront Centre, the downtown core of the city of Toronto, from 11 AM to 6 PM. It was a little chilly that morning, but the first shift of our volunteers had arrived well before 8:30 AM to set up and decorate the booth. Warm coffee, conversation, and laughter allowed the volunteers to complete the set-up in a relaxed manner. There were free books and books for sale, along with free beads made by our volunteers as gifts to form affinities with people. A raffle drawing was held to attract people to our booth, with a meditation mat and cushion as a prize.



Throughout the day, many volunteers offered their efforts in the administrative work of book sales and donations, as well as in promoting our DDM Toronto Centre to newcomers. The booth had a lot of traffic, with people coming from all directions to look at books and ask questions. The visitors expressed a great deal of curiosity about Buddhism and spirituality; their questions ranged from what makes Chan unique and different from other Buddhist practices, to which specific practices were being promoted. Some visitors had previously practiced other Buddhist paths, most particularly Tibetan schools, and had some experience in mantra recitation. Others were completely new to meditation, and wanted to better understand what meditation does in addition to its many health benefits. The volunteers shared with the visitors literary materials most suited to their tastes, interests, and individual questions. At day's end, the volunteers managed to give away the majority of free publications for DDM. More importantly, DDM Toronto made some new friends! We look forward to attending future events like *Word on the Street*, and especially hope to see new faces in our Centre, as well as at our affiliated University of Toronto Chan Meditation group. ☺

Text by Keith Brown • Photo by Nikki Ye

## Entering the Gateless

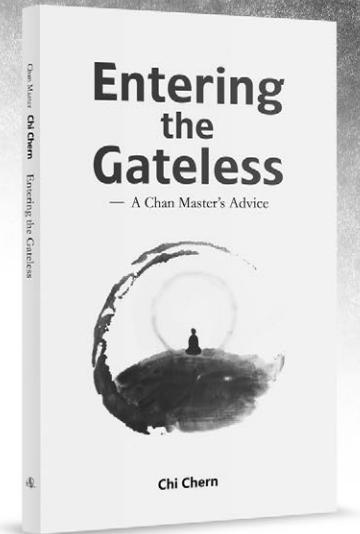
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Chan Master Chi Chern

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Candlelight Books • ISBN 978-0-9970912-1-2



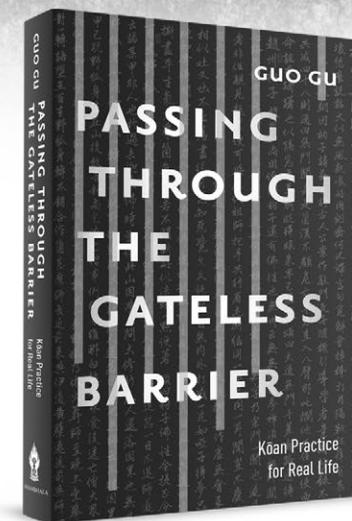
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Shambhala Publications • ISBN 978-1-61180-281-8



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