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CHAN MAGAZINE

WINTER 2017



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Like the Sun Shining in Empty Space

THE SUN ITSELF DOES NOT consider that it is the sun; it only exists in empty space, shining bright and natural. If it thought it was illuminating everything, then it would not be natural. So our mind should be like the sun, very natural. One uses the mind of wisdom to become more aware of oneself and every person, event, and object; not considering the purpose or reason why it illuminates, one illuminates eternally and pervasively.

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CHAN MASTER SHENG YEN
Liberated in Stillness and Motion, 2016

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FOUNDER/TEACHER Chan Master Venerable Dr. Sheng Yen

ADMINISTRATOR Venerable Chang Hwa

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF Buffe Maggie Laffey

ART DIRECTOR Shaun Chung

COORDINATOR Chang Jie

PHOTOGRAPHY AND ARTWORK Rikki Asher, Kaifen Hu, Taylor Mitchell

COVER ART Photo by Jonatan Pie

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS David Berman, Ernie Heau, Guo Gu

CONTRIBUTORS Venerable Chang Ji, Venerable Chang Zhai,
Rebecca Li, David Listen,
Ting-Hsin Wang, Bruce Rickenbacker,
Dharma Drum Mountain Cultural Center

CHAN MEDITATION CENTER (718) 592-6593

DHARMA DRUM PUBLICATIONS (718) 592-0915
chanmagazine@gmail.com

<http://chancenter.org/cmc/publications/chan-magazines/>

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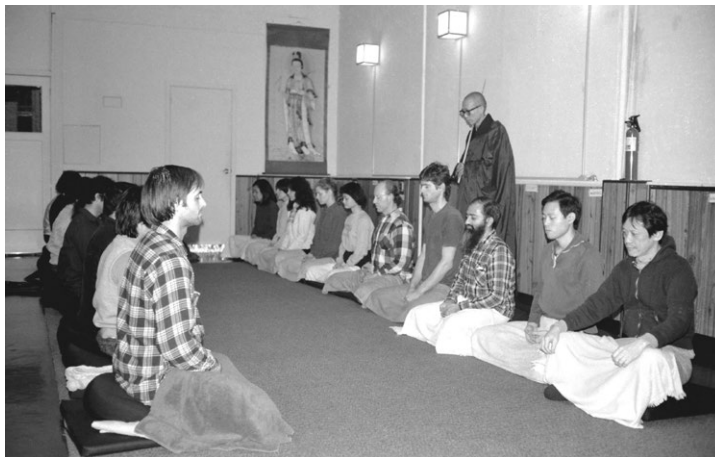
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From the Editor

AS I WAS PREPARING this issue, the two “sharing” articles inspired my own reflections on the experience of Dharma Drum retreats in America. My Dharma brother, Barry Wadsworth, writes about conditions at the original Chan Center in Queens in the early 1980s (not the current location at 90–56 Corona Avenue, but an earlier, smaller location nearby). I myself never did a retreat there, but my old partner Dan Wota attended a few. He told me about one seven-day retreat where his meditation cushion was precisely on the other side of the wall from the neighbor’s television set. The TV was on from early morning until after lights out. It played Spanish language stations, which made it slightly less distracting than otherwise, since Dan did not understand Spanish. Every day at two o’clock, he would hear the “The Dance of the Cuckoos,” the well-known theme song for the *Laurel and Hardy*

show. Then, he would hear the entire episode, dubbed in Spanish, yet comprehensible through the clearly identifiable vocal tones – Hardy’s character bombastic and overbearing, Laurel’s character timid and weeping – a classic representation of endless human suffering.

I did attend a few retreats at the 90–56 Corona Avenue location, which was also noisy. On weekend nights, loud salsa music pounded through the walls until dawn. The building sits on a corner with a stop light; sitting in silence all day one became intimate with the cycle of the traffic light – vehicle brakes squealing to a stop for the red light, then heavy diesel engines idling, then gears grinding and motors growling when the light turned green again. On one retreat in 1997, I was struggling with the breath method. There was a song current on the radio then, Puff Daddy’s “I’ll Be Missing You,” which samples “Every Breath You Take” by the Police. It seemed every radio station played this song incessantly, or perhaps everyone was playing that CD in their car, or maybe it was a lone driver circling the block over and over, always stopping at the red light in front of our center. Every time the traffic stopped, that song would blare into the Chan hall its eternal chorus of “every breath you take, every move you make...” Even when the song wasn’t actually playing outside,



Master Sheng Yen led a retreat at the original CMC in 1981 DDM Archive Photo

it became an earworm, a constant backdrop to my struggles with the method.

One is supposed to treat these aural phenomena like any other wandering thought – notice it, don’t follow it, return to the method – but you can imagine how wonderful it was when we purchased our upstate property, the Dharma Drum Retreat Center in Pine Bush. Here the sounds are birds, or wind, or flowing water.

Of course, there is always snoring – whether in the city or the country. On retreats Shifu always asked us whether we had slept well. There were always people who complained of other people snoring. Shifu suggested that, when we hear snoring, we should tell ourselves, “I’m already dreaming.” He also made sure there were plenty of earplugs on hand. When the new dormitories were built, Shifu designed them with single-occupancy sleeping rooms, quite a luxury for a retreat center. Even so, there are still those who complain of hearing snoring through the walls, or that the heating pipes bang loudly, or that people shut their doors too hard... vexations are endless.

Sleeping conditions at the first and second Chan centers in Queens, and before that at the Temple of Enlightenment in the Bronx, and even in the early days at DDRC at Pine Bush, were pretty much the same. Men and women separated, sleeping bags on the floor. Sometimes it was so crowded there was no way to avoid stepping on your neighbor’s bedding. For most Westerners such crowding is excruciating. Personally, I hated it, but accepted it and tried not to let it distract me from the method. Shifu trained us well – sleeping discomfort, like leg pain, should not be a deterrent to practice. Indeed, with the correct attitude, such annoyances can aid your practice. But I know of some Westerners who were first-time attendees in the early days at Pine Bush; they left the retreat early and never

returned, because of their discomfort with the accommodations. So, I am glad DDRC evolved to have comfortable dorms. Willingness to accept hardship is an important quality for practice, but to attract and keep beginners, maybe you have to coddle them a bit at first.

In those early days at DDRC, before the dorms were built, so many people flocked to Shifu’s retreats, retreatants and volunteers both, that almost every floor space became a sleeping place. Women slept in the reception hall, and men slept in the Chan Hall. One time my friend Paul Kennedy moved his sleeping bag out onto the Chan Hall porch (to escape sounds of snoring in the hall). When he woke in the morning his sleeping bag was covered with snow.

Yes, the Chan Hall used to have a porch, wrapping around the front and the two sides. The tea stations were out there on the side porches. We used paper cups with plastic lids, and learned to weigh the lid down with a stone so it wouldn’t blow away. When the renovation was done around 2000, the porches were enclosed to create what is now the indoor walking corridor. The ceiling was much like it is today, only with darker wood; large wooden wagon wheels were suspended from it as lighting fixtures. If you stayed up sitting late after lights out, you could see bats swooping down from the high ceiling. I was grateful to the bats, because they ate many mosquitoes. The windows were covered with clear plastic for insulation. In the late autumn, hundreds of large black flies would become trapped behind the plastic, so many that they made a sound like popping corn as they tried to escape.

There was no plumbing in the Chan Hall before the renovation. There were outdoor portable toilets, at the back, just behind the porches on either side. If you were on the porch you could clearly hear any sounds coming from inside the toilets. After retreats we’d joke about “the practice of silent elimination.”

There were working toilets in the reception hall, but the well pump ran on electricity, so if the power went out (as it often does in Pine Bush), there would be no running water. Then teams of men would haul water in buckets, from the stream below the spillway, to use for manually flushing the toilets. A few years ago DDRC installed emergency generators for all the buildings, another welcome luxury, so there is no longer any need for the hallowed Chan practice of “carrying water.”

As Barry mentions, on retreats there were no shower facilities in the old Queens Chan center, nor in the second Queens center. In the early days at DDRC, there were three showers for men on the first floor of the reception hall (no longer there), and two showers and a bathtub on the second floor for women. In those days, we might have close to a hundred people on a retreat. Showers were scheduled; you might have a ten-minute shower every third day. The plumbing was not so good back then. In the women’s bathroom, the water pressure in the showers would disappear when the bathtub taps were opened. I was caught, more than once, with only a dribble of water to finish rinsing shampoo out of my long hair. Today, some people find fault with our dormitory shower rooms, citing a lack of privacy, but when I’m on retreat, I luxuriate in the endless, pressurized hot water, and I give thanks to the donors who enabled us to build our dorms with numerous shower stalls and toilets.

Before the renovation around 2000, DDRC’s kitchen was in the reception hall, where the monk’s offices are today. What is now the glassed-in foyer was an open porch, where oatmeal was cooked on an outdoor fire, steaming away in the early mornings. While the Chan hall was being renovated, we used the dining hall building as our meditation hall. We ate in the large rooms of the reception hall, sitting at chairs along the wall, no tables. We ate

with chopsticks from a paper plate balanced on one hand, praying it would not get too soggy and dump the delicious rice and veggies onto one’s lap. My chopstick-wielding arm would bump my neighbor; I so hate being crowded that I would *scream* inside my head. But I kept to my method, and after the first few meals, it was no longer a problem. Still, I am very grateful for the tables in our cozy dining hall today, even if the chairs are sometimes close together.

My personal experience of being on retreat is limited to these few Dharma Drum centers in New York. It is interesting to reflect on what has changed and evolved in my little bubble. But I’ve only been talking about the external, physical environment. What about the inner experience? I’ve served as the retreat coordinator at DDRC for the past twelve years. I attend the sharing at the end of every retreat, to keep in touch with how we’re doing, and learn what might be improved. So I’ve heard a lot of post-retreat sharing. I can tell you, it is timeless and universal. People talk about difficulties, leg pain, back pain, how they wanted to leave but didn’t. At the end, they are always joyful, in awe of some discovery about their own minds, excited about continuing their practice with new understanding. Returned from silence, they recognize themselves in each other’s words, and feel deep connection.

At the end of a recent retreat, I spoke my own sharing to the group: “I’ve been coming on retreats for over forty years. On every retreat, I find myself wondering what excuse I might use to convince the teacher that I have to leave. But I stay, and then I comfort myself by saying, ‘I’m *never* going to do this again!’ Then by the end I don’t want it to be over.” I *always* benefit from being on retreat, and I know I’ll be doing it for the rest of my life. ☯

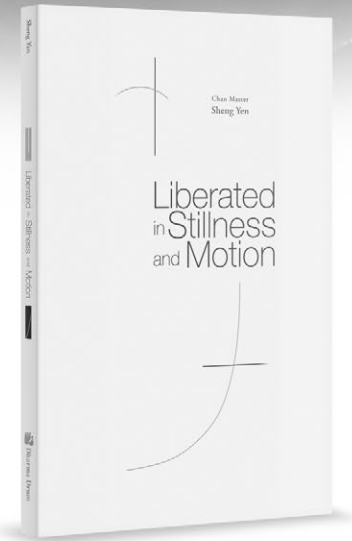
by *Buffe Maggie Laffey*
Editor-in-Chief

Liberated in Stillness and Motion

Chan Master Sheng Yen

“Correct Chan does not use miracles or the summoning of spirits as its appeal, nor does it emphasize other-worldly phenomena. Chan takes simple normal living as its basis, lessening afflictions as its purpose, being relaxed and at ease. One does not regret the past; rather, one actively prepares for the future, moving steadily ahead while being fully in the present. Although I introduce Chan in contemporary language and words, my perspective does not deviate from the teachings of the Buddha and the lineage masters. I avoid the “wild-fox Chan” of some who talk of going beyond the Buddha and the lineage masters, who say outrageous things, scolding as if they were ancient buddhas from the past.”

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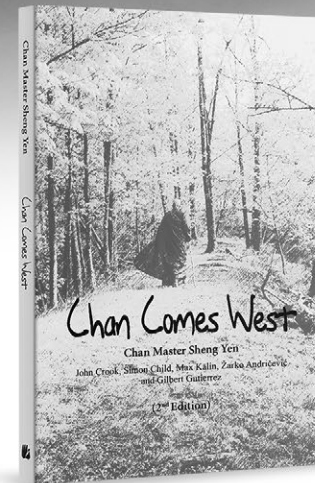
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Chan Master Sheng Yen

John Crook, Simon Child, Max Kälin,
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In this book Chan Master Sheng Yen shares his experience in the practice and his views on Dharma transmission. His five lay Dharma heirs share their stories on the path, including how they came to the practice, their inner struggles along the path, and what receiving Dharma transmission has meant for them. The Master has sown the Dharma seeds, and it is now the task of these Dharma heirs to cultivate the field so that Chan will flourish in the West and benefit people for generations to come. It is hoped that readers will find these stories inspiring and be encouraged to make great vows in their practice.

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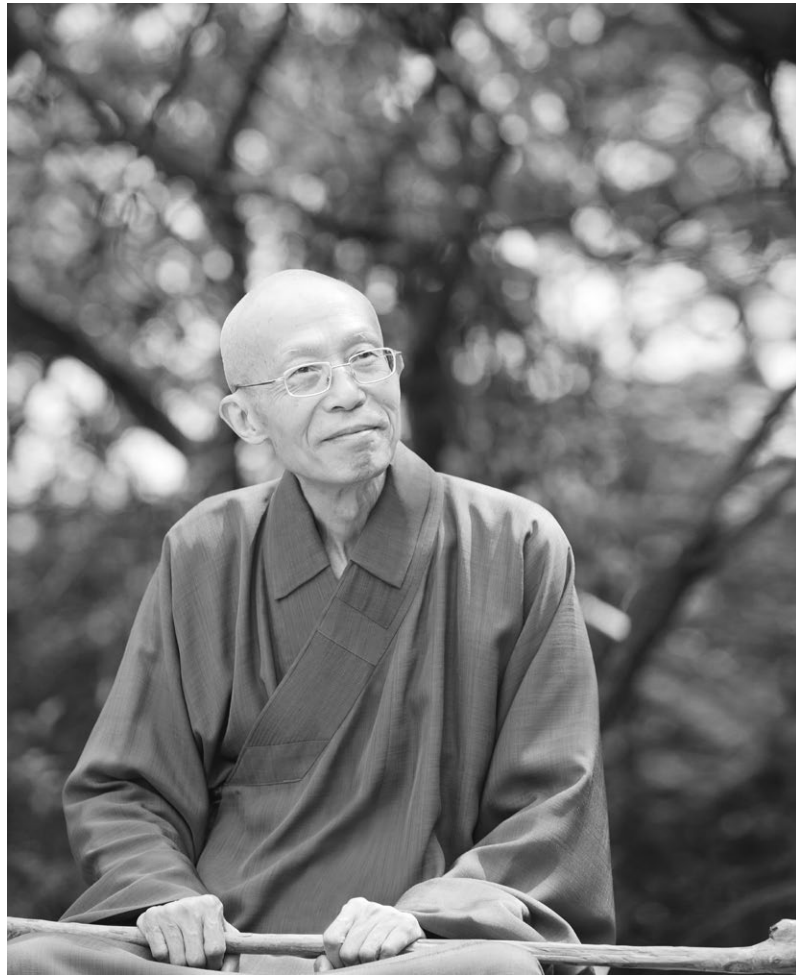




The Mind is Like the Sun Shining in Empty Space

BY Chan Master Sheng Yen

This article 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. The article was translated by Venerable Chang Luo, and edited by Venerable Chang Wu, Ernest Heau, and Xueshan.



Chan Master Sheng Yen DDM Archive Photo

TODAY I WILL COMMENT ON a passage from Chan Master Huangbo Xiyun's discourse, "The Mind Is Like a Shining Sun in Empty Space," from *The Principle of Transmitting the Mind* (Chinese *Huangbo Chanshi Chuanxin Fayao*). This section is also collected in my Chinese book *The Dragon's Pearl: An Anthology of Chan Masters*. Master Huangbo died in the time of Emperor Tang Xuānzong, during the Dazhong Period (847–859) of the Tang Dynasty.

*Now is the Dharma-Ending Age.
People are practicing Chan everywhere,
Yet are mostly allured and attached
to sound and form.*

*Let the mind be as vast as empty space.
Let it be like a withered trunk and still as a rock.
Let it cool like the ashes of a dead fire.
This at least approaches Chan.*

*Let the mind depart
from dharmas of existence and emptiness,
Like the sun in empty space,
Bright, natural,
and illuminating without an aim.
Isn't this effortless?*

*When, reaching this state,
Mind does not pursue, rely, or attach,
Acting as all buddhas act,
Without abiding, Mind manifests.*

*If one cannot understand this,
However much one learns or practices
Arduously in the ascetic way,
Dressing in grass, eating tree nuts,
One will not see Mind,
But practicing heresy on the outer path,
Be kin to Mara.*

This section describes the state of mind of one who practices Chan, illuminates the mind, and sees the nature. Many people think they are practicing Chan when in fact they practice an "outer path." One type of outer-path followers are people who know a lot about Buddhism, who are very good scholars, even eloquent. Others may view them as enlightened or as great masters. Another type practices asceticism, enduring a harsh life that ordinary people would not be able to withstand. If these practitioners are not aware of their own mindset, then they are only practicing heresy, not correct Chan.

What did Chan Master Huangbo say about this? Here is how he begins:

*Now is the Dharma-Ending Age.
People are practicing Chan everywhere,
Yet are mostly allured and attached
to sound and form.*

"Now is the Dharma-Ending Age." Teachings about the Dharma-Ending Age can be found in the *Lotus Sutra* in the chapter on "Peaceful Practices," and in Volume Two of the *Mahayana Sutra of Identical Nature* (Sanskrit *Mahayana Bhisamaya Sutra*). According to Master Huisi (515–577) of the Sui Dynasty, the era in which Dharma abides in the world is divided into three periods: the True Dharma Age (Skt. *saddharma*) lasting 500 years, the Semblance Dharma Age (Skt. *saddharma-pratirupaka*) lasting 1,000 years, and the Dharma-Ending Age (Skt. *saddharma-vipralopa*) lasting 10,000 years. In the nineteenth year of the Kai Huang Period of Emperor Wen (599 CE) during the Sui Dynasty, it was already eighty-two years into the Dharma-Ending Age. Therefore, the Dharma-Ending Age was already well advanced at the time of Huangbo, during the reign of Emperor Tang Zhongzong of the Tang Dynasty. Master Jizhang (d.u.) proposed in Volume Ten of

The Treatises on the Theories of the Lotus Sutra (Chn. *Fahua Xuanlun*) that the True Dharma lasts for 1,000 years, the Semblance Dharma for 1,000 years, and the Dharma-Ending period for 10,000 years.

The True Dharma Age is when right views, correct understanding, faith, and behavior in accord with the correct Dharma are prevalent. The Semblance Dharma Age is similar to correct Dharma, but not very pure. The Dharma-Ending Age is when the correct Dharma is in decline and approaches the brink of extinction. At that time the correct Dharma will be feeble and filled with evil sayings; this means that the power of the Dharma will be weak while the power of the demons will be strong.



Photo by Alisher Sharip

The True Dharma Age is the period when many people hear and practice the Dharma, and many people attain enlightenment and realize the path. In the period of Semblance Dharma, many people still hear and practice the Dharma, but few attain enlightenment and realize the path. In the Dharma-Ending Age, the people who hear and practice the Dharma dwindle, and almost nobody attains enlightenment and realization.

When a pot of freshly brewed tea is hot, its fragrance is strong, it is very pure, and drinking it is very beneficial; this is like the period of True Dharma. After a while the flavor of the tea weakens, its strength and fragrance also decrease; this is like the period of Semblance Dharma. After a long period of time, you can see the color of the tea but there is no longer any fragrance or flavor; however, you cannot say that it isn't tea because it still is, though lacking fragrance or flavor. This is like the Dharma-Ending Age. Our current period is more than 1,100 years after the ninth century Emperor Zhongzong, yet after the Tang Dynasty there were still many who attained enlightenment. Master Huangbo Xiyun and Master Weishan Lingyu (771–853) were two among many great Chan masters who were disciples of Chan Master Baizhang (720–814). Under Huangbo there was the great Chan Master Linji Yixuan (d. 867); up to Chan Master Dahui Zonggao (1089–1163) in the Song Dynasty, there were still many great Chan Masters. Therefore, the concept of the Dharma-Ending Age is to remind us of the need to practice diligently. Living in the Dharma-Ending Age does not mean that one cannot attain enlightenment or awaken to the path.

“People are practicing Chan everywhere, yet are mostly allured and attached to sound and form.” Master Huangbo observed that in his time many people appeared to be practicing Chan and cultivating the path, but most were attached to sound and



Photo by NASA

form. Sound includes all kinds of sounds, and form includes color and shape. “Sound” has two meanings here: first, it refers to listening to the Dharma, as well as seeking the Dharma through listening to it. Second, it refers to a state in meditation where one hears a kind of infinite sound as if it existed since the beginning of the universe. One could call it the music of heaven or the sound of eternity. This sound can be only experienced through the practice of samadhi.

“Form” also has two meanings: one refers to the phenomena and environment that one sees with the naked eye; the second meaning refers to illusions that occur in meditation such as lights, flowers, the Pure Land, heavens, buddhas, and bodhisattvas, and various holy or graceful images. Light itself is a kind of form. In deep samadhi you may see “infinite light” that encompasses the entire universe; you are one

with the universe; you are the light, the light is you, the universe is full of light. One feels very soft, free and at ease, bright and open, because all burdens have been put aside. One feels whole and liberated. But this is only bliss – a light and pleasant state which is not necessarily awakening to self-nature.

The attachment to sound and form can be a shallow and coarse samadhi, or it could be a supermundane experience, or an illusion. Supermundane experiences, like seeing and hearing what other people cannot, may be fascinating and many people seek them. When sitting in meditation many people enjoy seeing the heavenly realms, or the Buddha Lands of other worlds – seeing buddhas and bodhisattvas, gods or deities, that they want to see. Many people also enjoy meditating to see if they can open the channel of the two vessels (Chn. *ren*

du er mai; the two main meridians in the traditional Chinese medicine system) or experience the opening of the middle meridian (Chn. *zhong mai*) or arouse the bindu (Chn. *ming dian*). Some people can see their own internal organs, see the flow of energy (Chn. *qi*), the flow of blood, the coursing of the channels, and even what is happening to other people.

For example, someone in meditation can see people walking in the garden, or what people in America are doing. One time, someone was sitting in meditation and had a vision of an airplane that was about to crash. He immediately called the airline to see whether anyone from his family was on that flight, and it turned out there was. Two hours later, there was a television report that the airplane crashed. Do you believe it? You have to – he saw the flight number and he knew someone on that plane, and he saw it very clearly. Whether this is for real or not, someone with this kind of experience may think they possess the heavenly eye or supermundane abilities. Despite that, he was still unable to prevent the disaster of the plane crashing.

There are meditation groups in Taiwan where they discuss these things, how their body is levitating, how the *qi* is flowing, seeing light, or hearing sounds, etc. They talk about these things with great interest, as if they think that flying without wings is a great accomplishment yielded by their meditation. From the point of view of Chan these are all just images of the aggregate (*skandha*) of form, and have nothing to do with solving the problem of birth and death.

*Let the mind be as vast as empty space.
Let it be like a withered trunk and still as a rock.
Let it cool like ashes in a dead fire.
This at least approaches Chan.*

“Let the mind be as vast as empty space” means letting go of all the vexations in your mind, and

letting it be like the vast empty sky. Space itself is empty, although people think of it as containing clouds, fog, sun, moon, stars, etc. Those things make up the sky but they are not the emptiness of space; indeed, there should be nothing in empty space. The emptiness of space means there is nothing in it, not even light or darkness. So Huangbo says, let your mind be empty like space because emptiness is the true suchness. If one is able to do so, one is in accord with enlightenment.

“Let it be like a withered trunk and still as a rock.” Huangbo gives us two more analogies for the mind of Chan – a withered trunk and a rock. The withered trunk has no vitality and the still rock is motionless; they will not automatically start to function, nor will they have any motive to live, or attachment to life. If that can be achieved, it is like undergoing the “great death,” the death of all illusions.

“Let it cool like ashes in a dead fire.” One uses firewood and grass to make a fire for cooking rice and vegetables, and for boiling water. Afterwards, the fire will turn to cold ashes, where there is no possibility of a spark of fire. This is called “cold ashes and dead fire.” If our mind can be like cold ashes and dead fire, then this “at least approaches Chan,” the state of enlightenment. “Approaches” does not mean “is equal to.” For example, one person drinks soda and another person drinks ice water. Does that mean drinking soda is the same as drinking ice water? No, because ice water does not have the ingredients of a soda. Approaching the state of Chan means that if the practitioner’s mind can be like cold ashes in a dead fire, like a withered trunk or like a still rock, and like the sun in empty space, then that describes a mind which is not moving and not functioning. If the mind is not functioning and does not give rise to thoughts, then it would be somewhat similar to enlightenment, but it is not yet enlightened. For example, there is a kind of “withered trunk Chan,”



Photo by Bela Marie

which means practicing as if the mind were like a withered trunk. Would this be correct Chan? That’s a problem, because the real practice of Chan is not like that, so we can only say it has minimal relevance. However, the Silent Illumination (“just sitting”) method of the Caodong Sect of the Chan School is very similar to those described in the above passage.

*Let the mind depart
from dharmas of existence and emptiness,
Like the sun in empty space,
Bright, natural,
and illuminating without an aim.*

When you have stabilized the mind through Chan practice as described in the previous paragraphs, you

then need to develop wisdom. What is wisdom like? Huangbo says that wisdom is like the sun forever shining in a cloudless sky. Nothing can conceal it, and there is always light – it is never dark. This is unlike the sun one sees on earth, which is obscured from sight when it rains.

“Bright, natural, and illuminating without an aim” means that the dynamic wisdom that comes with enlightenment is the ultimate liberation, and is not a brightness that opposes darkness. When it is free from the view and attitude that existence and emptiness are opposing and separate, then the mind will appear like the sun that illuminates, and that is enlightenment. It is very important that Chan practitioners are free from the dualistic view of existence and emptiness. Existence is attachment, and emptiness is also attachment.

“Existence” means seeking things outside the mind, and also seeking liberation from such things – it means seeking enlightenment and becoming a buddha; it means believing there is something called enlightenment and thinking that there is a buddhahood to be enjoyed; further yet, it means thinking that the world is full of troubles and problems – these are all examples of being attached to existence. However, wishing to be liberated from existence and entering the nirvana of emptiness, these are also attachments.

Yesterday, a lay Buddhist asked me: “Master, I have been learning Buddhism for two years, and I realized how stupid I was in the past, always seeking money, and I made a fortune. Now that I have learned Buddhism, what does the Master think I should do with the money?”

I told him, “Money is not necessarily existent or non-existent. A person may be penniless but if he thinks about money, even dreams about money, then he still has money in his mind. Conversely, if someone has a lot of money but has no attachment to it, then there is no money in that person’s mind.” This is how my own teacher, Master Dongchu advised lay

disciples: “People should have money in their pockets and money in the bank, but no money ‘in their mind.’” It is a blessing to have money, and it is wisdom to have “no money.”

Therefore, Buddhism talks about existence, which means having attachments in the mind; and it also talks about emptiness, which means having no attachments in the mind. Emptiness does not mean having nothing, and existence does not mean owning things. That’s not how it is.

“Like the sun in empty space.” The sun itself does not consider that it is the sun; it only exists in empty space, shining bright and natural. If it thought it was illuminating everything, then it would not be natural. So our mind should be like the sun, very natural. One uses the mind of wisdom to become more aware of oneself and every person, event, and object; not considering the purpose or reason why it illuminates, one illuminates eternally and pervasively. When the sun illuminates, it does not choose the time and object; it simply illuminates whether there is any object or not, and it just shines.

“Illuminating without an aim” means to illumine without a particular object in mind, or for any

purpose or reason. The sun never really goes down and it never stops shining. No matter what the situation, whether there is anything to shine on, it is always illuminating naturally. Therefore, when great bodhisattvas deliver sentient beings, they do not think that they are delivering sentient beings. Instead, they think sentient beings are delivering themselves. Everything in the world receives light from the sun, but the sun itself does not think about giving light to everything in the world. The same is true for those who have wisdom. This is illuminating without an aim.

*Isn't it effortless?
When, reaching this state,
Mind does not pursue, rely, or attach,
Acting as all buddhas act,
Without abiding, Mind manifests.*

If one were able to do this, how effortless it would be! Always so natural, and so wonderful! The two Chinese characters *qi* and *bo*, taken together, mean “rely” or “attach.” The character “*qi*” signifies birds resting in the treetop; “*bo*” refers to boats resting on water. The mind’s attachments are like the birds and boats, if they “*qi bo*” and have something to rely on or attach to, then it cannot be liberated and free. People want security. A woman looking for a husband and man looking for a wife may find each other and get married. So there is reliance and attachment, but this also creates mutual dependence. In terms of Chan practice, when one reaches the stage when the mind “does not pursue, rely, or attach,” when the mind is free from all attachments, then one is like the buddhas, liberated and free. *The Diamond Sutra* says: “Abiding nowhere, give rise to the mind.” This means that the function of wisdom naturally manifests in sentient beings. If we give rise to the mind without abiding, then one’s mind is free of reliance and

attachments. Although the mind abides nowhere, one is able to observe with clarity and precision, and be completely and subtly aware of a multitude of things.

*If one cannot understand this,
However much one learns or practices
Arduously in the ascetic way,
Dressing in grass, eating tree nuts,
One will not see Mind,
But practicing heresy, the outer path,
Be kin to Mara.*

“Dressing in grass, eating tree nuts” refers to a practitioner who avoids material civilization and lives a very primitive and natural life. Since one does not engage in growing one’s food, one needs only gather grass and leaves for one’s clothes and forage for seeds and tree nuts as food. This is like Chinese Daoists who live in a hermitage. As their regular routine, Buddhist monks in India would beg for alms every morning, and travel in order to deliver the human world. “Dressing in grass, eating tree nuts” was the style of a few Chan monks, not that of the monks engaged in society. Therefore, Huangbo is trying to express that Chan practitioners should focus on the mind. Otherwise, even if one is learned and practices asceticism, one is still on the outer path, practicing heresy, kin to Mara. Mara and his kin also have accomplishments in practice and supermundane powers, but they do not have wisdom; their minds are attached to samadhi, abiding in meditative concentration, abiding in temporal phenomena, attached to sound and form. Therefore, they are said to be on the outer path practicing heresy.

Huangbo says that if a practitioner cannot understand the meaning of these words, then no matter how much one learns or knows, or how ardently one practices the ascetic way, then one is surely kin to Mara. ☺



Photo by Alice Donovan Rouse

The Arising of Conditioned Appearance from the True Mind

Part 14

BY

Abbot Venerable Guo Xing

This is the fourteenth and final 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.

Karma is Self-Perpetuating

KARMA IS CONTINUOUS AND self-perpetuating because of killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct. The source of killing, stealing, and sexual promiscuity is the notion of subject-and-object. There is a “self,” which is capable of doing the killing, and there’s also an object which is being killed. Maybe you have been unaware of the notion of subject-and-object, or you haven’t truly understood it, or you still don’t know how to operate without subject-and-object – as a result, we have to begin at first talking at the level of “no-killing,” “no-stealing,” and “no-sexual-misconduct.” Then, eventually, we can get back to trying to transcend subject-and-object. Once you transcend subject-and-object, then you reach the state of “non-substantiality of the three aspects of

action” – that there is no object, no self, and no action. When there’s no object, then the precepts of no killing, no stealing, and no sexual misconduct can be implemented

Because of the notion of subject-and-object, we become attached to favorable things/phenomena. Applied to persons, it becomes a form of sexual desire. Directed toward people you dislike, it takes on the form of anger. Once anger is escalated to the extreme, you might wish that the person would disappear from the world. That becomes killing. If you want to take control of other people’s possessions, you might just grab them, and that is stealing. The same logic extends to lying. You perceive that there’s an “I” that had committed a bad deed, and trying to cover up the bad deed, you lie to others.



Photo by Paul García

Generally speaking, “sexual desire” as manifested in the consciousness-karma is called “sexual thought.” Manifested through the body-karma, it is a “sexual act.” There is first a thought or movement of will before the act. For the thought of sexual promiscuity to arise, you first have the wish or desire to be close to that person. In order to do so, you must have mistaken that person’s image in your mind for a real person. The image in our mind is in fact not the actual person, but you insist on seeing it as a real person. As a consequence, the sexual thought is projected onto the physical person, turning into a sexual act.

The fundamental problem is so-called “ignorance” or “confusion.” Having the concept of subject-and-object is precisely this confusion. Because of such confusion, you treat the image of so-and-so in your mind as real. Consequently, you develop the thoughts

of liking this person and of engaging in sexual acts with this person. That’s why we say, first there’s ignorance, then arises the world, sentient beings, and karmic effects.

There was once an arhat who dreamed at night that he engaged in sexual activity with a prostitute. After he awoke from the dream, he realized that he had not gone to the brothel, neither had the prostitute come into his bed, yet he still experienced the pleasure of the sexual act. Finally, as he asked, “With whom did I engage in that sexual act?” he realized, “With my prior thought!” and that all is illusory and empty.

It’s easier to understand why we need to cut off subject-and-object by analyzing our thoughts. In other words, we must cut off attachments. There had never been a real person to begin with; it was

only an illusory form created by your prior thought. Then your present thought treats it as a real person. It's your present thought grasping onto your prior thought, but you mistakenly think that you are interacting with a real person. Once subject-and-object arises, there arises an "I" that is aware, and the object of this awareness. Operating on this dualistic basis, we fail to recognize that the object of our awareness is merely a dream in our own mind. To be engaged in sexual activity with another is in fact your own later thought and prior thought engaging in this sexual act.

When this misconception manifests at night, it's a dream. But during the day, it's also the same! When lovers call each other on the phone, they ask, "Oh, did you miss me?" "Of course! I missed you!" The guy thinks that he's missing the girl. In truth, the person he thinks he misses is not even a real person, but he thinks that she is, doesn't he? A practitioner once told me that the first time a girl broke up with him was after they've been together for a few years. Afterwards, he reached the conclusion that, actually,

he had never been in love with that person. He had been in love with an idealized person in his own mind. So he actually didn't have his heart broken; he'd only loved mistakenly. Well, that practitioner still couldn't understand "no-self." After all, he didn't love even a person; he had loved just his prior thought. Isn't that so?

It's not a real person. It's only your prior thought. Even so, every time you think of her, that thought would surface. The more you think of that person, the more frequently that thought would reemerge. Generally, when we think of a person, it's not only that person's image that arises – it's connected with all sorts of feelings. "The twelve links of dependent arising" lays out "contact, sensation, desire, grasping, and becoming." Whenever you think of her, it creates feelings both physically and psychologically. Those feelings then lead to even more thoughts. It's interactive, so, whenever you recognize, "Oh, that's just an image," it's still quite useless. By the moment you recognize it's an image, your body has already undergone a bunch of sensations and changes.



Photo by Frank McKenna

Therefore, if you have all these various thoughts, then you have to go beyond dealing with these images and see through the fact that they are merely images. Furthermore, you must have the ability to see through the fact that the various sensations and feelings you have are also illusory and false. They are also just thoughts. Even if you undergo all sorts of feelings, you should neither favor nor reject any of them.

We have just talked about sexual misconduct, and now we'll turn to killing. The sutra talks about animals killing other animals in order to survive. The root of this is greed. Animals grasp onto the desire to survive, to continue living, so they kill and eat other animals. It is the same with human beings. Isn't the act of eating based on the desire to live? Isn't our killing of chickens and ducks due to greed or desire? Only one of the reasons for our killing is because of survival. Another reason is simply for taste.

Next, let's talk about stealing. The sutra discusses this from the perspective of animals. People eat lambs. The lambs die and become humans, while the people who ate the lambs become sheep. We call this cause and effect, and karmic retribution. You kill animals. Are those animals willing to be killed by you? It's against their wishes, naturally. So, this is stealing. It's something you took away without the consent of that being. When you kill an animal, you simultaneously commit stealing. Even if that animal was purchased by you, you still commit stealing.

Question: people from 1980s and 1990s tend to eat pork, beef, lamb, and chicken as a staple diet. Does this mean they will all become animals in their next life?

Abbot: For instance, when someone takes your things without your consent, wouldn't you want to take them back? Of course! So, if you ate me without my consent, then in our next lives, I will turn around and eat you up. To escape this cycle, if someone

has stolen your life, then it's best to just let it go. Otherwise, if you try to steal it back again by killing that person, then next time around, that person will try to steal yours again. It gets all tangled up, not knowing who or what initiated the whole ordeal. You will end up stealing from each other, back and forth, in an endless cycle.

In the sutra, it is said that, initially, there was one thought that grasped onto "illumination." What this means is, that first thought had grasped onto the object of illumination. There had not been subject-and-object originally, but, by falsely engaging in illuminating an object, there arose subject-and-object, and, from that point on, there will always be an object of illumination at all times.

Therefore, to avoid committing killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct, we have to stop the desire to illuminate. For example, when you feel bored, you should attend to the state of feeling great, instead of looking for something else to entertain you. Regardless of what karma you commit – killing, stealing, or sexual misconduct – there must first exist the subject and object of illumination. This subject and this object of illumination are called "delusion" or "ignorance" ("non-illuminating").

For example, a mosquito bit you without your permission. You killed it. Did you obtain the mosquito's approval before killing it? Not only have you broken the precept of killing, you've also violated the precept of stealing. The mosquito might have sucked a little blood from you, but it really hasn't owed you all that much. But you killed it. Later on, it'll come back to steal your life. When you say that you've killed the mosquito, has it really been killed by you? If it's really killed, then it would not be coming back to claim the debt. Following this rationale, we know that it's the mosquito's body that has been damaged by you, similar to its car been stolen by you. Isn't that so? ☺

Shared Retreat Experience

BY

Bufe Maggie Laffey

The Dharma Drum Retreat Center (DDRC) in Pine Bush, New York has a tradition that is probably common, in some form or another, at most American Buddhist meditation centers – a group sharing at the end of a retreat. At DDRC this can take a few different forms. For shorter retreats it can be a simple talking circle. But for longer retreats, especially ones with numerous participants, it can be more structured.

At the end of the longer retreats, practitioners are given a period of time to write a letter about their experience. Noble silence is still in effect while the letters are written. When writing time is up, the practitioners are grouped into several small circles, and noble silence begins to lift in a gentle and gradual way. Within the small circles, each person in turn reads from their letter, or speaks about their retreat experience (or keeps silent if they wish). After everyone has had their turn, the talk evolves naturally into a group discussion.

One person is designated as group representative for each small circle; their task is to take notes on the main points expressed by each person in their group. When the time is up for the small talking circles, everyone returns to the main hall for a large group sharing. Each representative then presents, to the entire gathering, a summary of the statements from the small groups. In this way everyone is given a chance to express themselves, and also to hear a wide sampling of the experiences of their fellow practitioners.

This article is a collection of anonymous quotes transcribed from the large group sharing of a recent Silent Illumination retreat. Because of the structure of the sharing as described above, some of these are direct first-person quotes. Other quotes are in the third-person because they come from a group representative's paraphrasing of statements that were voiced in their individual circle.

We hope that the candid sharing of these practitioners will offer insight into the benefits of intensive retreat, and may inspire others to try the practice for themselves.



Photo by Taylor Mitchell

“THIS IS MY FIRST RETREAT; I’ve never done anything like this before. I’ve only been meditating for about a year, so this was really intense. But it was good. I think I’ve been doing pretty well. I’m still here and I’m still alive and I haven’t disappeared or anything. These ten days have been like a birth. I’ve been the mother, the baby, and the midwife all at the same time. Now the end product is really great, but I don’t know what to do with it yet.”

“A couple of people commented on the way in which (particularly because this was a ten-day retreat, but maybe something about the way that the retreat was structured) it quickly felt like this *was* your life. It wasn’t just a retreat, it wasn’t just something that you were going on for a couple of days to have an experience, but it felt like this was actually your *life*. It

was the totality of it. That was a very powerful thing, and we were very grateful for that.”

“A few of us had bad dreams; one said he had a dream of this little white creature that wasn’t quite a rat or quite a mouse. But it was running all over, and every time he would look at it, it would close its eyes. Then when he looked away, he could see out of the corner of his eye that it would be opening its eyes and looking at him. He thought maybe it was the mind, like the idea of the ‘monkey mind.’”

Understanding the Methods

“The teacher started with asking us to relax. No other teaching, no other teacher had made that the starting point. No wonder I was slipping all over the place! I



Retreat Teacher Ven. Guo Yuan Photo by Ven. Chang Hu

finally felt like I found the foundation and from here on I can start again.”

“We talked about the different methods. We talked about the body scanning, a technique of relaxing the entire body for sitting meditation. That was new to people, but we all found that very useful.”

“One person said that this particular retreat taught them how to relax, and particularly the teacher taught her how to relax in a way that she had never experienced before, and that was a unique thing.”

“Actually I didn’t do it that well, the relaxing part. Because even though I’m trying to relax, I’m still using force, going ‘Relax! Relax! Relax!’ And I realized that counting the breath or following the breath, I’m not actually following the method; I have to go back to the very beginning. So this retreat, I’m actually learning how to relax.”

“A number of us have been doing breath-counting practice for a while. The instruction of letting go of thoughts is common and well understood, but [the instructions given on this retreat] took it to another level. The idea of really relaxing, of not trying to let go of the thoughts but more, letting them subside

instead – kind of seeing them and dismissing them. Some of us found this to be really helpful.”

“This one is actually my second silent illumination retreat. Last time I thought I did pretty good, and I was quite confident when I came in this time. And the first thing I realized was, ‘Oh my God, I can’t even do the breathing method, I need to go back to the relaxing part!’ That’s a big take-away for me.”

“One person shared that it’s very important to go back to the foundation, to use the breath method. She shared a little story about another retreat she had attended. Before that retreat, people were asking each other ‘What method you use?’ and most people would go for some advanced method, like silent illumination or huatou. But after the retreat they came out saying ‘Oh, now I’m going to stick to the breath method.’ I felt that resonate with me a lot this time, too.”

“In our group we had several people who have been practicing huatou, so we had some pretty interesting discussions about the difference between the methods, and how the effort required in huatou is really completely different from this [silent illumination] practice.”

Making Progress

“Our group shared a lot about dealing with the pain. One person asked the teacher, during the personal interview, whether after practicing a long time maybe the pain goes away? And the answer she got was, maybe the pain never goes away, but you become more tolerant and it will cause less suffering for you. She felt a little disappointed but, okay, that’s a good attitude towards the pain.”

“In the beginning, the sittings were very, very difficult. But at the very end, she was able to make it through the forty-five-minute sitting periods without a lot of pain or difficulty, and she feels very proud of herself.”

“I tried to count the breath, and I’m a scientist, but for the first time I realized counting is a difficult job for me. Because once I feel peaceful, with fewer wandering thoughts, I almost immediately go into this resting state, and then counting becomes very difficult. In one session I tried so hard that I felt like I was underwater; I could not see, I could not hear, I felt really scared because I felt I could not breathe. Then I asked the teacher during personal interview what should I do in that situation? And he told me, ‘You should relax. Your body keeps telling you, “Go to sleep, go to sleep!” Then, go to sleep.’ I didn’t know how counting could be so difficult, but he said, ‘It’s only because you don’t know how to use the method.’ Then I realized, yes, that’s my habit. I strive too hard for everything – for work, for life, for family. But I had not learned to be diligent while relaxed. So I think that’s the most important thing I learned this time. Every retreat I make some improvement, but this time, this is the thing that I learned the most.”



Photo by Christopher Campbell

“I definitely notice, very strongly this time, that the idea of trying to push something away has the opposite effect of what you really want. I notice myself trying hard to get somewhere, and exerting lots of effort in a very aggressive and not gentle way. Today I’ve tried just letting go. There’s a point in the meditation where I tell myself, ‘And this too is okay, and this too is okay...’ For a concrete example, in the dining hall I would think, ‘I shall eat mindfully, because it is good to do so and I will make big progress by eating mindfully.’ Then I would notice I’m rushing, and I would get anxiety and say, ‘Oh no! I’m not being mindful!’ It becomes a cycle, and it doesn’t help to say, ‘Be more mindful.’ But today I kept understanding that there is *acceptance*. Today I said, ‘I’m not being mindful, that’s okay.’ The answer to everything in life is that it’s okay. I’m so relaxed and everything is okay. I had all these questions trying to figure out what the answer was; today I realized, there may be many questions, but I don’t need any answers.”

Trying Variations

“We had different approaches. Some of us were a little more progress oriented, while some of us were more exploratory.”

“One woman took this opportunity to kind of explore what it looks like to allow herself to have wandering thoughts, and has been able to sometimes not have the wandering thoughts. So that was one thing she played around with.”

“One of the biggest personal take-aways for me is the value of trying different variations of things, little experiments. For example, the teacher taught us the body-scanning technique, how to do it, part by part. Then he said, after the part by part, you could observe your head, or observe your entire chest area or stomach area and come back to that if you needed

it during the practice. What I found really helpful was maybe doing that body scan first, and then doing the breath meditation, and then other times doing the breath first and then doing the body scan right after; just trying different variations like that. I found that helped me find what worked best for me. So that was very helpful.”

“This is my first retreat here. I come from Soto Zen and Insight [Meditation] backgrounds, and it was difficult. I was noticing that I’m really good at the ritual, on being on time and doing everything perfectly, but I don’t necessarily go very deep or very still in the Soto Zen context. So this was interesting, to see how that would work out. I found a lot of resistance, but I just accepted the resistance and didn’t stress too much about the wandering thoughts.”

The Style of DDRC

“The teacher has told us the retreat center here [DDRC] is very lenient and casual as compared with, say, the one in Vancouver or Taiwan, where it’s a lot more strict. So apparently we have it very easy.”

“I practice in the Vipassana tradition, so this is the first time I sat at a different kind of retreat. It was really interesting to hear about how we were all here together but had such different experiences of the form and of the rules and everything. I found it to be strict, but then everyone else in my group said no, it wasn’t strict at all! It was so gentle!”

“One person has been at the Shanghai Dharma Drum center, and she said that, in China, they have to do it [hold a retreat] kind of ‘on the sly’ – they have to rent a building; that the government is kind of keeping tabs on things, which is too bad. But at least it’s open enough that they’re doing something there now, so moving in the right direction, hopefully.”

“We had people from Vancouver, from Los Angeles, and from North Carolina, but this is the only

Dharma Drum retreat center I’ve been to, and we talked about how, apparently, this is one of the best centers, especially for the sleeping accommodations. The single rooms are pretty amazing.”

“Our complaint is that the food is too good; we may gain a few pounds after this retreat.”

Moving Meditation

“We talked about the fact that stretching and physical exercise is part of what happens here. I find that it’s very helpful to integrate the two because the body and the mind are two sides of the same coin. What you do to one, you do to the other. You really have to integrate both, especially in a retreat setting. So I thought that was great.”

“I’ve done some Zen retreats [at other centers] and very much missed that element of being able to stretch the body, because that’s so helpful for your sitting practice. At other retreat centers there’s no emphasis on that at all.”

“We really appreciate all the different exercises we learned. There were new ones all the time, and people had not experienced that before, just so many exercises.”

“The program is very well balanced between the sitting and the exercise.”

“The walking meditation was very beautiful in the snow. It was glistening like crystals or diamonds. The practice of the walking meditation, especially when you are noticing your still foot, was very calming, and that was one of the highlights of my experience at the retreat.”

“We found the walks in the forest very exciting. There was the feeling that we could die at any moment! And maybe that was good!”

“One participant particularly liked the outdoor meditations; perhaps put that a little bit more into the program in the future.”



Walking meditation in the snow Photo by Ven. Chang Hu

I took a different approach to teaching Chan in the West, adapting it to the lives of my followers, laypeople who could only stay in retreat for a few days. [...] My approach is different from the approach used in China’s Chan Halls. In Chinese Chan, there is no exercise other than periods of fast walking to break up longer periods of still, silent sitting meditation. I have combined in my teaching this Chinese technique of fast walking with the Theravada practice of slow walking. I also use yoga from India and Taiji and massage from China in my teaching. Westerners seem to like and respond well to this variety and the mix of stillness and motion.



CHAN MASTER SHENG YEN

Footprints in the Snow, 2008

Teachers and Volunteer Support Staff

“First of all we are very grateful for the monks and the volunteers. We want to say thank you for the volunteers, who did an excellent job shoveling the snow and moving the umbrellas. I saw people who brought umbrellas from one building to the other so we were being taken care of very well. Thank you for that.”



Photo by Ven. Chang Hu

“I think our two monks are good examples. I have been noticing their way of walking, talking, moving in a very relaxed and quiet, calm manner. I feel, wow, I need to practice that part more.”

“Something that really came through in the group was our deep appreciation for the teachers and their kindness and caring, ‘tenderness’ was the word that was used the most.”

“We felt that the supervisor was really looking carefully at what we needed, to try to help our bodies and our energy so that we can sit better. So we really deeply appreciated that.”

“I read the writing by Master Sheng Yen on silent illumination almost every day during the past two months. I didn’t realize how hard it is to actually do it, that I did nothing according to what was written. I think this retreat, and also talking to the teacher through the interviews, helped me a lot with knowing myself better. I realize that the teacher actually knows me better than I do, and I feel really grateful.”

“We really enjoyed the Dharma talk from the teacher. One participant said that he has been to several retreats, but this time he really got some clarity about the meaning of stillness of the mind. The examples that the teacher gave are very clear for him to understand.”

“Another person was really interested by the focus that the teacher had on the word ‘vexation,’ which apparently is a word that he hadn’t heard used much before but that seems to really capture something. So the language was also very well chosen here.”

“Another person mentioned that the prostrations we did for vows and gratitude were extremely powerful. She was very grateful for the timing of those prostrations; it seemed like the teacher knew exactly when in the retreat those were necessary to give them the power they had.”

Young People

“One thing got me right off the bat, that’s how many young people are here, and how hopeful it is that young people are practicing.”

“One young woman who is here, her dad was with Master Sheng Yen way back at the beginning, but he didn’t ask her to sit when she was younger. I thought that was probably a good idea, because I know some people that try to get their kids to do it, and they feel pushed, so they won’t do it.”

“My cousin’s kid is here with us. He was on a five-day retreat before, and he said the pain was intense, so he didn’t want to do ten days, he thought it would be too much. I told him ‘You know it’s intense for the shorter retreats, but on a ten-day, it gets easier.’ Then, by the second day here, I was dying with pain and I was thinking, ‘Oh, what did I tell him? He’s going to kill me! He’s not to talk to me anymore!’ But of course it did get better, for both of us.”

“We’ve been coming to Family Chan Camp every summer since five years ago; it’s a treat for our family. I have two sons, they’re grown up to be teenagers now; very challenging years. Every time I go back from retreat I try to share the Dharma with them, and then, when they are here every summer, they really can connect, they understand a lot of the things that I tried to tell them. It serves as a nice foundation and background. So we schedule our holidays around the summer camp because it benefits our family tremendously. I just want to urge that, if you have young kids, hopefully you will find a way to bring them here.”

Group Support

“One person said that, when she arrived, she was very fidgety, but she could see the person sitting in front of her who was so still. She was deeply inspired to be

more still and to try and rise to that level of practice, and she did.”

“In general, we were all really amazed at the power of the sangha (community of Buddhist practitioners); we felt that this was maybe the most impressive group of people that we had sat with. The power of everyone’s practice and dedication and especially the stillness – a lot of people were impressed by just how still everyone managed to be.”

“I have such gratitude for this group of people that surrounded me while I fiddled around and stretched and fiddled some more. What great practitioners each one of you are. Wonderful, wonderful support. Very inspiring to sit with you guys, thank you.”

The strength, the stillness that was in this room is something that will stay with me forever.

”

“My darling husband is also here; we practice every day together at home, we meditate with our little puppy. I have done many retreats at home by myself, and I used to always tell my husband, ‘I don’t need a sangha.’ After coming here, I realize the strength and the support of sangha. Thank you for leading me to that teaching.”

“I personally thank you for supporting my practice. I’ve been to many retreats, none quite like this. The strength, the stillness that was in this room is something that will stay with me forever. I touched silence. And I’m almost finding it difficult to use words, having touched that silence. Still I know, tomorrow morning, I’m going to have to let that silence go and take on whatever life will bring. But some things will stay with me from these past few days: the energy that I’ve gathered from you all, and the inspiration that you’ve given me for my practice to continue.”

Completing the Circle

BY

Barry A. Wadsworth

I FIRST MET SHIFU, Master Sheng Yen, when I was living in Taiwan in 1984. I was a vegetarian, and, while working as an English teacher at a private high school in Taoyuen County not far from the Shimen Reservoir, I used to walk down the hill from the school to a Buddhist temple to eat lunch. One day, I asked the bhikṣuṇī cook, Ven. Xinyuan, why no one ever practiced sitting meditation there. She explained that her temple was of the Pure Land school, and that they recited the Buddha Amitābha's

name as their practice, so that, when they pass from this world, they will be reborn in Amitābha's Western Paradise. She said that, if I were interested in sitting meditation, I should go see Chan Master Sheng Yen in Beitou, Taipei. Soon after, I moved to Taipei and began attending Master Sheng Yen's Sunday lectures at Nung Chan Monastery.

At that time, I had been practicing Transcendental Meditation and the "TM-Sidhis" program for about nine years. I felt very comfortable with the practice

and very reluctant to try any other method of meditation, yet I found Shifu fascinating. When he spoke, everyone in the room seemed to feel that he was speaking directly to them, that he was tailoring the Dharma talk specifically for their benefit. When I chatted with Shifu, he had an uncanny ability to intuit what I was feeling and would directly address it in his friendly, light-hearted, yet pointed way. I began to wonder what it might be like to be a monk and train with him. Many of the monks and nuns at Nung Chan Monastery were college graduates, and sharp. Though the monastery was quite rustic and located in the middle of farm fields, it was the center of Chan practice in Taiwan.

In 1985, after returning to the United States for six months and after reading Shifu's first book in English, *Getting the Buddha Mind*, I asked Shifu if I could attend the upcoming retreat at the original Chan Meditation Center (CMC) in Elmhurst, New York. I specifically asked him if I could attend and continue to use my TM method of meditation. I also expressed interest in becoming a monk. He must have had a good laugh that I wanted to become a monk, yet was unwilling to let go of my TM practice, but he told me it wouldn't be a problem, and to come to New York and then return to Taiwan from there. He said he would be returning after the retreat as well, and then we could talk about me becoming a monk.

So it was that I attended my first *Chan Qi* (seven-day retreat) with Shifu in New York. Ven. Guo Yuan, a novice at the time, was the timekeeper at that retreat.

On the second day of the retreat, Shifu had each of the participants come into a small room for an interview. After I prostrated three times, Shifu asked how I was doing. I told him that, during a meditation session, I had a very clear experience of a place where everything glistened. There was a brook running there and the trees along the bank were gem encrusted. Even the leaves seemed to be made of tiny



Nung Chan Monastery in 1980s DDM Archive Photo

emeralds that sparkled in the sunlight and the rocks in the brook were all polished gemstones. The sound of flowing water mixed with an enchanting, celestial music unlike anything I had ever heard here on Earth, and there was a fragrance wafting through the air unlike anything I ever smelled. I became completely absorbed in the sensual beauty of this place, oblivious to the Chan hall.

I then told him that, in a subsequent sitting, I had the exact opposite kind of vision. Hellish, demonic figures of rotting flesh appeared before me, and I could smell an overpowering odor of sulfur. Yet I had no fear.

Shifu smiled and just said, "Why don't you try just counting your breath for awhile? You've been meditating already for nine years, surely counting your breath from one to ten should be easy for you, right?" He didn't mention either of the visions. He just explained that, if I can pick up a method, I could also put it down. And if I can put it down, I could also pick it back up again, if I choose, later. So, I agreed to put down the method I had used without fail twice a day for nine years, in order to respond to Shifu's challenge. He knew just how to get me to let go by



Photo by Ashley Batz

using my ego's pridefulness. Even then, he seemed to know me better than I knew myself.

The retreat progressed without further visions, but I was surprised and a bit ashamed and humiliated by how difficult it was to simply follow my own breath without wandering thoughts. Jet lag got the best of me once and I started nodding off. Ven. Guo Yuan took care of that by whacking me with the *xiang ban* (incense board). Unfortunately, he hit my right shoulder bone and the incense board cracked in half. I wondered if that was an auspicious sign or bad omen. Evidently there were extras, and it wasn't long before others were getting whacked as well; the crisp "whack! whack!" sound was enough to keep most of us from nodding off again. Finally my mind began to quiet down, and I developed a clarity during activity that I had rarely known in all the years I had practiced TM, even though I was getting little sleep in a retreat of such rough amenities.

Back then, there were no dormitories with private rooms or bathrooms with private shower stalls. There was just one small washroom for the men to share, and a bathroom upstairs for the women. There was little time for washing since people were waiting to use the toilet each morning before the exercises Shifu led at 4:30 AM. Shifu told us not to be concerned with these "*chou pi nang*" ("stinking skin bags"), to just focus on practice like our lives depended on it, or like our heads were aflame.

In the evening, the tone of the retreat mellowed as Shifu read Chan poetry and gave his commentary, applying it directly to what we were experiencing during that day.

At night, the back room was divided by hanging blankets between the left and right sides of the room – women slept on the one side and men on the other, producing a strange cacophony of beastly guttural snores and wheezing sounds. The nights were punctuated by street noise and sirens. In the days,

boom boxes blared periodically as youths walked down the street with the volume cranked. Yet there really were no obstructions. The group dynamic under Shifu's direction seemed to produce a kind of field that was impervious to outside distractions. And to overcome the snores, many of us stayed up past 10:00 PM to meditate until we were overcome with sleepiness, then to sleep soundly until the morning board was struck at 4:00 AM.

During meditation sessions, Shifu would come into the room and stand there looking at each of us, feeling, sensing, intuiting. He was incredibly sensitive, always seemed to know just what was needed. During walking meditation, he told us to walk as though we were walking on lotus blossoms, ever so lightly, mindful not to let them submerge. Toward the end of the retreat, when doing prostrations, light filled my head and seemed to radiate outward to infinity in every direction each time my forehead touched the floor. I was reminded of the expression from the sutras about the Buddha of infinite light and life. Shifu came over and stood beside me, watching intently. I could feel him there, feel his focus. I'm quite sure he could sense what I was experiencing.

After the retreat, I flew back to Taiwan. After I got hit by a bus while I was riding a bike in Taipei, Shifu paid for the hospital bill and insisted that I accept an apartment next to the Chung Hwa Institute of Buddhist Studies that he ran, and that I eat breakfast and lunch there. All he asked in exchange was that I teach his students English twice a week.

Shifu was like a father to me. At the Bodhisattva Precepts retreat in 2008, the last time I saw Shifu, I shamefully told him I had forgotten my Dharma name and asked him if he remembered it. He said that he also didn't remember it, but he wrote on my certificate, "Chang Sheng," giving me his name. This brought tears to my eyes, and I felt so ashamed that I had let him down years before, when I told him I

had become engaged to become married. He sternly told me to write her and tell her I'm sorry. But I told him I couldn't, that I had already promised. He told me he knew I was a wishy-washy one from the beginning. I have no regrets. I have two kids that I love. Yet I don't feel at all worthy to have "Sheng" in my Dharma name.

When I saw that Ven. Guo Yuan would be leading the recent silent illumination retreat, I had to attend. It has been thirty years since we had last seen each other in 1986. This retreat seems to have brought me full circle back to the beginning. Although it was to be an "intensive" retreat, it was nowhere near as intense as that first retreat back in '85. And because so many had never practiced silent illumination before, it wasn't until the eighth day that the method was discussed in any detail. So, it was very much a

"beginner's mind" retreat for me, bringing me back to the roots of the practice I began with Shifu, with Ven. Guo Yuan as the timekeeper so long ago. But, a very rewarding retreat just the same.

During the interviews, I could see how deeply our abbot has matured. I could see from his responses to my questions he truly lives from the fruit of the practice. So good to see him again, and to see that Shifu's teaching will live on through him and others like him. Dharma Drum Mountain was not at all Shifu's greatest accomplishment, but the transmission of the depth and clarity of pure Dharma that lives on through his Dharma heirs. I left the retreat center very much at peace that Shifu's essence lives on for a new generation of practitioners. There is hope for the world as long as this light and clarity continues to pass from generation to generation. ∞



Master Sheng Yen (front center) and Ven. Guo Yuan (front right) with retreatants at CMC in 1980s DDM Archive Photo

Making Friends with Discomfort

BY

Anonymous

IT CAN BE UNCOMFORTABLE and painful to sit without back support [if you are not conditioned to it – Ed.]. After the first day, I had thoughts of giving some excuse so I could leave the retreat. Luckily I decided to stick it out, as I knew there would be some benefit to my practice. But I had to do something about the pain. I knew that trying to ignore it, or to just power through it, would not work for me, so I thought I must become friends with it.

The first step was to try and understand what pain is, from a technical perspective. My thoughts are: some part of the body is stressed. Electrical nerve signals are sent to the brain from that part of the anatomy, and the brain recognizes what the anatomy is trying to tell the brain. The brain and ego then manifest suffering. Suffering from pain is the interpretation of electrical signals sent by the body to protect itself.

Knowing this, I took the next step: just *experience* the actual sensations, and try not to label them as suffering. My task was to bring all my attention and awareness to the sensation of pain, instead of trying to run away from it. In this way, suffering is transformed into a direct contemplation of sensation. Through this investigation one can feel the intensity, texture, depth, and

location of a sensation, all of which change with time. Even making small micro-movements can change all of the above.

Sometimes the sensation would just cease. The only constant was the changing of the sensation –impermanence. When my suffering became stronger, I could tell I was losing my focus, losing the clarity of my awareness on the sensation. This whole exercise helped me not only to deal with the pain, but to be more comfortable in my sitting. I believe it deepened my practice. I realize the suffering from sitting meditation is minor, but I truly hope that understanding this minor suffering may help in some way with bigger suffering. ∞



Photo by Dimitris Vetsikas

Volunteering on Retreat

BY

Anonymous

I HAVE PARTICIPATED IN several retreats in Dharma Drum Retreat Center (DDRC) over the past two years, including a ten-day silent illumination retreat. I have read the book about silent illumination written by Master Chi Chern. When I came on retreat this time, I felt confident about my practice. I considered this retreat to be more of a review, rather than to learn something new. But to my surprise, I found that I did not yet have the solid foundation needed to really understand and apply the method, that I was actually just about to begin on this path.

The first few days, Guo Yuan Fashi did not talk about silent illumination, but instead took time to teach how to relax the body and mind, and how important relaxation is as the foundation for practicing any method. Relaxing is not as easy as it sounds. When I tried to relax my tensed-up shoulders, I caused even more tension. When I asked Fashi how to deal with this, he suggested to not try to relax them at all, to just be with them and observe. That helped for a while, but after a few days, my shoulders hurt more due to bad sitting habits since childhood. The pain became so unbearable that my body and mind could not be still any more. So I went to ask Fashi for more suggestions. He suggested that I listen to my body, stop sitting meditation, get up and do other forms of meditation. I was expecting some tips to help me sit, but the wise Fashi instead told me that sitting meditation is not the only way

to practice. If the body is sending such strong messages, I should listen to it and help it rather than force it. I realized I could be compassionate towards myself, too.

I arrived early to the retreat, since this year I came as a volunteer. I felt like I was coming home. I was greeted by a wonderfully festive Christmas hot-pot party; I felt so welcome. We volunteers had a special opportunity to talk to the Fashi about our meditation practice and received many answers to our questions. We even were led by the Fashi in guided meditations, and had personal interviews!

However, the benefits of a volunteer didn't stop at deepening our meditation practice. Being with the monastics, I felt really inspired by their way of being, cooking together or doing chores in such beautifully creative ways as we fixed and decorated things. I learned how to do these little things, which I once felt were "such a chore" with ease, acceptance, peace, and, most importantly, fun. Not only did I learn from the monastics, but from the other friendly volunteers as well. We were like a family taking care of each other as we prepared for the arrival of the retreat participants. This experience really took my meditation practice off the cushion, and gave me the understanding to translate it into my everyday life, from cooking, cleaning, and even writing this essay. I can't wait to come as a volunteer again for upcoming retreats. ∞

Entering the Gateless

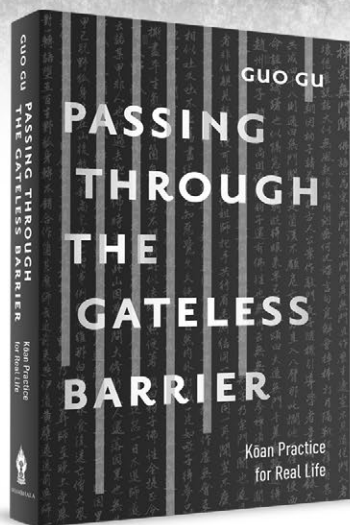
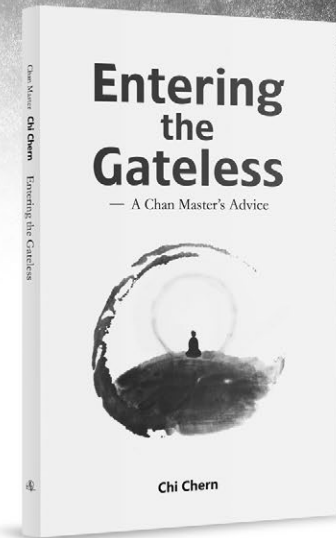
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