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CHAN MAGAZINE

SPRING 2017





Chan

IN CHAN PRACTICE ONE MUST guard against setting one's mind on seeking or anticipating enlightenment. Seeking enlightenment, one will not attain it; anticipating enlightenment, one is merely lost and confused. Seeking and anticipating are delusions, attachments, entanglements, and clinging. Therefore, while true Chan practitioners are aware of enlightenment, they do not covet it as the goal of practice. The thought of being enlightened is appropriate before one begins practicing, but during the course of practice, one must let go of this thought in order to practice well.

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CHAN MASTER SHENG YEN
Common Questions in the Practice of Buddhism, 2017

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CHAN MAGAZINE
Volume 37, Number 2 — Spring 2017

CHAN MAGAZINE

PUBLISHED QUARTERLY BY Institute of Chung-Hwa Buddhist Culture
Chan Meditation Center (CMC)
90-56 Corona Avenue
Elmhurst, NY 11373

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The magazine is a non-profit venture; it accepts no advertising and is supported solely by contributions from members of the Chan Center and the readership. Donations to support the magazine and other Chan Center activities may be sent to the above address and will be gratefully appreciated. Please make checks payable to Chan Meditation Center; your donation is tax-deductible.

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The Place of Women in Buddhism

BY Chan Master Sheng Yen

This article is excerpted from a forthcoming book by Master Sheng Yen titled *Common Questions in the Practice of Buddhism*, which was originally published in Chinese as “學佛群疑” (*Xue fu qun yi*) in 1988. It was considered by him to be a companion volume to his book *Orthodox Chinese Buddhism*, which was published in 1965. *Chan Magazine* thanks Venerable Guo Chan and the Sheng Yen Education Foundation for permission to print this article. The article was translated by Dr. Hueping Chin, with bilingual reviews by Dr. Jerry Wang and Dr. Wei Tan, and English editing by Ernest Heau. The research cited in this article is a bit dated, but Master Sheng Yen’s message is still highly relevant today.



Chan Master Sheng Yen DDM Archive Photo

QUESTION What is the view of women’s place in Buddhism?

ANSWER The most often discussed issue regarding women’s place in Buddhism is the eight deferential rules (Chinese *jingfa*; Sanskrit *gurudharma*). According to the eight deferential rules, nuns cannot be independent, and must rely on the assistance of monks. Nuns cannot reside in the same place as monks, nor can they reside too far from them. Twice a month, nuns must invite elder monks to deliver sermons, to be cautioned and admonished. They are not allowed to be ordained directly by other nuns, and must obtain monks’ approval and certification. By tradition even a nun who has been ordained a 100 years, should still respect and bow to a newly ordained monk.

Therefore, today nuns still lack equal status with monks, especially in places where Theravada Buddhism is predominant like Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand. Women are not even allowed to take the full ordination as nuns in these regions and can only practice as *anagarika* [a lay person who lives a monastic life]. However, since more Western women have been joining the Buddhist sangha, they have been outspoken about gender equality. They feel that nuns do not have status while in the East, and when they return to the West, their life as a Buddhist nun is even more difficult. This is a very peculiar situation. After all, male teachers are still the main force in introducing Buddhism to the West. Although monks do not necessarily discriminate against nuns, the tradition in Buddhism has posed an obstacle. The key is how to overcome this obstacle.

Since 1979, [Deborah Hopkinson and Susan Murcott] in the United States have been publishing a quarterly journal [of the Diamond Sangha], *Kahawai: Journal of Women and Zen*. In Sri Lanka, some women Buddhists have also published a monthly newsletter, *Parappaduwa: Nuns’ Island*. The goal of

these publications is to improve women’s status in Buddhism and to attain gender equality. In February, 1987, a historical world bhikshuni conference was held in Bodh Gaya, India.

In March, 1987, Dr. Ku Cheng-mei, in the essay titled “Buddhism and Discrimination against Women,” in Issue 11 of *Contemporary Monthly* (*Dangdai zazhi*), wrote that gender discrimination originated from the Mahisasaka, an offshoot of the Sarvastivada School. Teachings such as the Eight Deferential Rules and Women’s Five Obstacles were both emphasized by the Mahisasaka. The so-called Five Obstacles are that a woman cannot become a buddha, the Lord Mara, a deva king, a Brahma king, or a wheel-turning king. However, in the later stages of the Mahasanghika School, the Sarvastivada School, as well as the Sunyavadin (Emptiness Sect) of the early Mahayana Buddhism held different views on this.

In the *Buddha’s Sermon on the Girl Nagadana Sutra* (Chn. *Foshuo Longshinu Jing*) of the Sarvastivada School, there are statements which essentially question the claims of the five obstacles regarding women. Volume 22 and Volume 50 of the *Ekottaragama Sutras*, also mentioned exemplary women such as the Buddha’s stepmother and aunt Mahaprajapati, as well as Sumati, both of whom were competent, confident, and proud to be women.

The *Sutra on the Prajna Path* (Skt. *Astasahasrika Prajnaparamita Sutra*; Chn. *Daohang Bore Jing*) associated with the Mahayana Shunyata (Emptiness) Schools touches on the issue of how a woman can become a buddha. Later, many sutras such as *Vimalakirtinirdesa Sutra* (Chn. *Weimojie Jing*), *Sutra on Following Provisional Expedients* (Skt. *Strivartavyakarana Sutra*; Chn. *Shunquanfangbian Jing*), *Buddhasangiti Sutra* (Chn. *Zhufoyaoji Jing*), *Bodhisattva Asokadatta Sutra* (Skt. *Asokadattavyakarana Sutra*; Chn. *Asheshiwangnv Ashudapusa Jing*), *Sutra on the Dharma Gate of Great Purity* (Skt.



Mahaprajapati Art by Chien-Chih Liu

Manjusri-vikridita Sutra; Chn. *Dajingfamen Jing*), *Sutra Requested by Putri Ratna* (Skt. *Mahayanopadesa Sutra*; Chn. *Baonusuowen Jing*), *Buddha's Sermon on Sumati Bodhisattva Sutra* (Skt. *Sumatidarikapariprccha Sutra*; Chn. *Foshuoxumotipusa Jing*), and *Perfect Virtue Girl Sutra* (Skt. *Strivivartavyakarana Sutra*; Chn. *Foshuowugouxiannv Jing*), all advocated the view that there is no difference between men and women [regarding their potential to attain buddhahood].

When examining gender issues during the Buddha's time, we should look at the fundamental aspect of equality in Buddhism. For instance, there was no gender distinction in the status of arhats. In so far as the practice of Buddhadharmā is concerned, there was gender equality among Buddhist practitioners. Furthermore, Buddha proclaimed

that all sentient beings have the potential to attain buddhahood.

The term "buddha" refers to the totally liberated one, the one with complete wisdom who is the ultimate savior. If men can attain it, so can women. However, from the points of view of physiology and psychology, women were traditionally thought to be more frail, soft, and dependent than men. Hence, to protect the safety of women who live a life of practice and encourage them to become leading practitioners in Buddhism, men should put more effort into helping women. This should not be viewed as domination or discrimination. For instance, regarding the first great Buddhist bhikshuni, the Buddha's aunt Mahaprajapati, no bhikshu would disrespect her.

It is stated in the Vinaya that the presence of women could generate sensual desires among monks. Therefore, to prevent temptation, the idea of women's bodies being unclean was taught to monks, and women's bodies were used as the meditation objects of practicing contemplation on the impure (Chn. *bujingguan*; Skt. *asubhabhavana*). This is a precautionary and preventive method used during cultivation, not meant to discriminate against women.

Throughout history there have been women leaders and heroines, but unfortunately their numbers have not been as many as men. In modern times, there are movements promoting gender equality to safeguard women's rights; yet, the results have not always been significant. In the world today, among the great number of nations, there have been only a few women leaders in the last several decades; such as Prime Minister Golda Meir of Israel, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi of India, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher of the United Kingdom, President Corazon Aquino of the Philippines, and President Chandrika Kumaratunga of Sri Lanka. As of globally renowned religious leaders, there was Mother Theresa, who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979.

In the world of business according to the May, 1987 issue of *Forbes Magazine*, there were only three female CEOs among more than 800 companies listed on the New York Stock Exchange. Yet we all know that the population ratio of men and women is almost the same. This brings up the question of why there are much fewer well-known women leaders than there are men. Traditionally, the woman's role has been that of caretaker for the family, thus performing this heroic role out of the public eye. It is also true that in general, men are more dominant than women.

We do not need to emphasize either absolute equality or inequality between the two genders; it is more important to follow the Buddha's teaching that "all phenomena abide in their respective places," meaning that each person has his or her place and standpoint, and roles and responsibilities, and we should develop mutual respect and assistance. For example, in a meeting where the four Buddhist assemblies of monks, nuns, male and female lay followers gather, they should be seated depending on the nature and purpose of the meeting. Women who are representatives and hold significant positions should be seated equally as the male counterparts. In ordinary gatherings or a ceremonial ritual, female and male attendees should sit in separate sections.

I have published several articles dealing with gender issues. Interested readers may refer to the following articles for further reading: "Bhikshunis and the Eight Deferential Rules," "Regarding How to Address Bhikshunis," and "A Buddhist View on Men and Women," collected in my book *Living in Accordance to the Vinaya*, as well as an article "On Women Practitioners in Future Buddhism," in my book *Knowing the Path of Learning Buddhism*. ∞



Photo by maxlkt



Return to Shawangunk

BY

Venerable Guo Yuan

Venerable Guo Yuan, a Dharma heir of the late Chan Master Sheng Yen (1930–2009), is a monk trained in the tradition of Chan Buddhism. Fluent in Mandarin, Vietnamese, and English, he leads Chan retreats in many countries around the world. For over twenty years, he accompanied and translated for Master Sheng Yen in various Chan meditation retreats in the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Switzerland, Russia, and Mexico. In 1992, Ven. Guo Yuan was appointed abbot of both the Chan Meditation Center (CMC) in Elmhurst, Queens and the Dharma Drum Retreat Center (DDRC) in Pine Bush, New York. His responsibilities included attending interfaith services, teaching meditation, and giving lectures on Buddhism. In 2006 he became the director of the International Chan Retreat Center at Dharma Drum Mountain, Taiwan. In 2016 he returned to Pine Bush to become once again the abbot of DDRC. In honor of his return, *Chan Magazine* asked him to share his life story. Edited by Buffe Maggie Laffey, with editorial assistance from Ernie Heau and Harry Miller.

Photo by Ven. Chang Hu

Early Days

I WAS BORN IN 1950 in North Vietnam. In 1954, when the Geneva Peace Accord divided Vietnam into a communist North Vietnam and a democratic South Vietnam, my father moved the entire family to the south to live in Saigon. My father was an elementary school teacher; my mother was a housewife. I had quite a few brothers and sisters. I am the sixth of eight; I had three elder brothers and two elder sisters and a younger brother. I had another younger sister who became ill and died when she was around ten years old.

My mother who is Buddhist, was more religious than my father. I went to temple with her and I was very happy there. As a kid I went to the temple and played around with young people like myself. They would do chanting service but not much meditation; it was probably more Pure Land practice. My mother didn't talk about the concepts behind the practice. Although I went with her I didn't do the chanting, I just liked the feeling of the place. I remember in the temple there were pictures on the wall. I was a little kid so I had to look up to see them. They were very detailed pictures of bodhisattvas, Buddha, all the stories of Chinese Mahayana done by a very famous artist. One attracted me very much, a bodhisattva riding on a lion. At that time, I didn't know this was Manjushri. Those pictures always amazed me. I still remember the colors with their golden tone; they gave me a good feeling.

The war was going on all the time, fighting between the North and the South. We lived in Saigon; on the street everywhere you would see barbed wire and sandbags. But actually, at that time in the city as I was growing up, life was easy-going. It didn't feel like we were at war all the time. Sometimes we would hear bombing in the distance. I remember one night hearing the boom of the fighting, and in the morning

there was a corpse, a very young man lying there in an alley. But the fighting was at the front; not so much in the city. We did our day-to-day work and had enough to eat, and life seemed kind of normal. It wasn't until 1968, with the North Vietnamese New Year attack (*Tet* Offensive), that fighting actually happened where we lived.

In the Navy

As a citizen growing up in Vietnam, like every other male over the age of eighteen, I was drafted. I was allowed to finish high school and then went into the navy. I trained on land for perhaps half a year, and after training I took a test to go to America for



Manjushri Bodhisattva Art by Chien-Chih Liu

training. At that time the Americans were about to hand everything over to the new government of South Vietnam. They had a program where the Americans trained the Vietnamese military on how to use the equipment they were handing over. So they needed Vietnamese who knew English.

At the time I was growing up, there was still some French influence. The authentic Vietnamese schools used French and didn't teach English. But the Chinese schools offered English. When I was in high school, one third of the time we learned Vietnamese, two thirds of the time we learned Chinese, and two hours a week we learned English. I thus learned three languages, English secondary to the other two. When I was in the Navy, I was among the people who had some foundation in English. They gave us tests in English listening and writing, and my scores were good enough to be accepted to the program. I was nineteen or twenty when I was sent to America to receive training, first to learn more English and then to be trained on American equipment.

Trained in America

Being in America was a great joy! I received one month of training at the naval base in San Diego. Then I was transferred to the naval base on Treasure Island in San Francisco, and stayed there a little less than a year. San Francisco was where I received training in electronic communications. I learned basic electronics: transmitter resistance, capacitors, circuits, how to read electronic diagrams, use things like walkie-talkies, and do troubleshooting.

We had weekends off, so almost every weekend we would go into San Francisco. We heard musical groups like the Bee Gees, the Beatles, the Carpenters – I liked that kind of music. After that year was up, they sent me back to Vietnam. The war was still going on but I was lucky; I did not see actual fighting. When

I came back I stayed at the naval base. We would go on field trips with Americans to install transmitters and antennae, and repair equipment.

After the War

The war ended in 1975 and I was no longer in the navy. Everything changed drastically. The communists took over the whole of Vietnam after America lost the war. People who had been in the South Vietnamese military – everyone, from the lowest rank to the highest, had to go through what they called “re-education.” For certain people this was very bad. I was lucky because I was not an officer, only an enlisted man, so I didn't have to go through too much hardship. Those three years when I was back in Vietnam were very difficult. The feeling at that time was dark; the entire society in the South was low in spirit, demoralized.

In 1978 my family had the opportunity to go to Taiwan where my sister lived. We were able to stay there temporarily, and then we went on to Toronto, Canada where our elder brother Paul was already living. Fortunately, we did not have to go through the hardships faced by the “boat people” from that time. Because I had some background in electronics, I went for a course in electrical engineering at George Brown College in Toronto. I was able to take a two-year course as a new immigrant, funded by the Canadian government. So I was trained and afterward, I worked in a telephone communications company, installing intercom systems. I did this work for about two years.

At this time, I started to learn about Buddhism. My elder brother Paul, the one who was already in Canada, had been practicing. So through him I was introduced to Buddhism, by going to meetings and getting to know other people. We had a group that was called the Toronto Buddhist Society. The main

temple we would go to was of the Tiantai sect. We would get together on Sundays; we'd meditate and then have lunch, and sometimes we would have the opportunity to listen to a Dharma talk by the one of the Chinese monks there.

Meeting Shifu

The Tiantai temple didn't offer formal training on how to meditate. Meditation was actually taught to me by my elder brother Paul. At that time some members of the group were looking for a teacher of Chan and they found “Shifu” (Master Sheng Yen) in New York. This was around 1980, when Shifu already had the first center in Elmhurst, at 90-31 Corona Avenue. Some of the members of the Toronto Buddhist Society, including my brother Paul, went to a retreat in New York. Afterwards my brother suggested that I should go on retreat. One week before the retreat began he taught me how to sit. It was funny; I didn't know much but I thought, “Okay, maybe meditation is good.” So I just went.



Shifu at CMC in 1980s DDM Archive Photo

The experience was very refreshing. I didn't know much about it; I just followed whatever everyone did. I didn't even know how to do the breathing method. When Shifu would speak, I couldn't understand all he was saying, because he spoke Mandarin, and my family spoke Cantonese. Half understanding, half not understanding – don't know. At that time I was around thirty, I was okay with just following the routine. I didn't feel it was a hardship. Sitting with crossed legs was okay, I didn't experience much pain. I didn't feel bored, but actually I didn't know much about what I was doing. You could not say that I looked into my mind to see what was going on. I just followed along and I felt okay.

I liked it when Shifu gave lectures. I felt he was someone very pleasant. He didn't seem grave or grim, just a very nice old monk. But I still couldn't understand everything he said, especially during interviews. He'd give me some instruction and I would *think* I understood it. But when I went out to sit in meditation, I didn't know how to do it. The first retreat was seven days. I went again to the next retreat, maybe half a year later. I did better, but I still didn't know how to use the method properly.

When my family moved to Canada, only four of us stayed in Toronto: my mother, myself, my elder brother Paul and my younger brother. Because we were so few, we could make our living space quite simple and more conducive to meditation. For example, in my bedroom, I only had a bed and a small statue on a little tea table. We had time for meditation. Sometimes we had gatherings when the members of the Toronto Buddhist Society would come to visit our place.

I continued to go on retreats, and my practice got a little bit better. I still didn't know how to use the method properly,

but I had a sense of well-being. We received *Chan Magazine* often – when I encountered problems with my workplace I would read this magazine, and find something that said what I could do about such problems. I thought, “Wow, Buddhism is great! It just solved my problem!”

Solitude in Toronto

After graduating from college, I worked in a telecommunications company for about six months. We were already part of the Toronto Buddhist Society. A monk from the Tiantai temple offered me a paid job as the caretaker of a building in Toronto. It was a big, six-story building that used to be a dance club, that the Tiantai temple had purchased to make into a practice center. There was nobody around during the weekdays. I was living there by myself, and the experience of all of a sudden having nobody around was new to me. It was a big building, and going up and down the six floors was a little bit scary. It was kind of odd in the beginning, but very quickly I changed and found I liked the solitude. I was busy all day, going up and down to make sure things were in order. After adapting to the solitude, I felt great being by myself.

One night I dreamed that I was in my country of Vietnam, when all of a sudden I saw a golden statue shining. It wasn't Buddha; it was a deity or a Dharma protector, very bright in front of me. I woke up and felt this was a good dream; I was quite happy about it. Then I went to a retreat with Shifu. I didn't tell him about the dream. I told him about the monk who asked me to take care of that building. That's when Shifu said, “Why don't you come to take care of this center in New York?” I thought, maybe I could try that. So I talked to my mother and my brothers about it. I gave up that job in Toronto after having done it for only a few months, and I went to New York.

Living with Shifu

In the beginning it was just me living alone with Shifu. He went back and forth to Taiwan frequently, to take care of Nung Chan Monastery, which he'd inherited from Master Dongchu – my grandmaster. In the beginning I did not go to Taiwan with Shifu, but stayed at the center in Elmhurst. Then one time he asked me to go with him, and I said yes. I was still a layperson then. This was my first training with Shifu.

The practice that we did at Nungchan Monastery was chanting, with training in playing the Dharma instruments, and meditation on the weekend. I was assigned various jobs to do. It was at that time of adaptation, seeing what it felt like to live in the temple, that I decided I wanted to become a monk. I went to Nung Chan Monastery and came back to New York twice before I became a postulant. As a postulant, I stayed at the center with Shifu; I still had my hair and I wore layperson's clothing – we had not yet developed the custom of a postulant wearing the special gray monastic clothing.



Shifu and young Ven. Guo Yuan DDM Archive Photo

In the postulant system, the probationary period is usually one year. After that some senior monastics will meet to judge whether the postulant is suitable to become a monk. But this system was not in place yet, so for me it was only around nine months. First, I stayed with Shifu, then I stayed in Nung Chan Monastery with other people. At last Shifu asked the senior nun at the Chung-Hwa Institute of Buddhist Culture in Beitou, (also founded by Master Dongchu) for her opinion about me. After receiving her approval, I then was able to become a novice. Being a novice meant that I received the ten precepts, shaved my head, and wore clothing not much different from that of a fully ordained monk. A layperson probably couldn't tell the difference between a novice and a full monk, but a monastic can tell by how many stripes are on the outer robe (Chinese *jiāshā*; Sanskrit *kasaya*).

Ordained as a Monk

Two of my elder brothers were okay with me becoming a monk, because they had already learned Buddhism. My eldest brother didn't seem to approve, but I was thirty-five years old so I did not need his permission. My mother seemed a bit worried. She did not object, but she cautioned “Maybe it's not so easy to live as a monk.” I'd had a girlfriend in Vietnam, but we were separated when my family moved away. With the war and all, things were not stable, so to seek a wife and have children wasn't something I was thinking of.

I received full ordination in 1987. After that I no longer traveled back and forth to Taiwan with Shifu, because I was put in charge of the Chan Meditation



CMC basement before cleaning DDM Archive Photo

Center. When I think back on those times, it was not so easy. We moved from the first center at 91-30 Corona Avenue, to the new center at 90-56 Corona Avenue. And, oh, that was tough! The new building had been a five-and-dime store, and the sellers left their stock behind. The basement was full of sewing notions and household goods. We (volunteers and myself) had to load all of it into dumpsters. We didn't hire anyone to do this, we did it ourselves. Then we had to take down the metal ceilings. All of these jobs were hard labor, but it was good that we were kept busy. In the beginning I lived alone in the little house in the back. At first it was just me, so I was busy all the time, though volunteers did come to help. Later on we had resident nuns, and over time more monks and postulants.

Studying in Thailand

In 1990 I had the opportunity to study Thai Buddhism in Thailand for almost an entire year.* Shifu's organization in Taiwan had a student-exchange program with the Wat Phra Dhammakaya (Dharma Body Temple) in Thailand. The first to go were



Ven. Guo Yuan (center) and Ven. Guo Huei (the second from the left) in Thailand
DDM Archive Photo

Guo Chou Fashi and Guo Xing Fashi, and the following year I was sent along with Guo Huei Fashi, another disciple of Shifu's. For most of the first seven months we stayed in Wat Phra Dhammakaya, learning the Thai language so that we could communicate with people. We had a mentor taking care of us and translating for us. Several teachers taught us the Thai language, some who spoke Mandarin and some who spoke English. We stayed in the temple listening to their Dharma talks and learning their technique

of meditation. The technique is quite different, consisting of contemplating a crystal sphere within your body.

After seven months of training in the Thai language, we travelled with another Thai monk to visit other temples. Some of the places we visited were the Temple of Beautiful Banyan Trees, the Temple of Emptiness, and the Garden of Liberation. We also visited two places founded by the well-known teacher Ajahn Chah: The International Forest Monastery and the Forest Monastery in the Swamp. At all of the places we visited, the monks sleep in huts without electricity.

Relaxation Technique

There were some things I took away from that training. For one, I learned more about how to relax the body in preparation for meditation. Here in our Chan school, in the beginning, we never did what is called "guided meditation." But in Thailand the teachers always guided us in meditation. The way the teachers express this guidance is very gentle, very calm. All one needs to do is stay in meditation and listen to a very nice, warm voice. Even when I didn't understand Thai, didn't know the meaning of what was being said, it was very peaceful just to listen to the teacher's voice.

Later, when we finished training in Thailand and were back in Taiwan, I observed some practitioners

who were being guided by their teacher in the relaxation technique. The students asked the teacher how he did this, so I learned even more by hearing his explanation. Gentleness manifested through the way he behaved, through his way of walking and the way he used his voice. So I learned to imitate what he did; using the voice to facilitate the focus of attention, similar to what Westerners call hypnotism.

Actually traditional Chan also teaches you to relax from the beginning, but it doesn't go into detail, step by step, and it doesn't guide you; you have to somehow do it all by yourself after hearing the instruction. Since we need relaxation as the foundation of meditation, naturally I took away that technique. Now I also verbally guide my meditation students in the relaxation technique.

Moving Meditation

In Thailand I also learned about moving meditation. Walking meditation is very common there. They



Photo by Lê Văn Thông

emphasize sitting meditation, but whenever they walk in everyday life, this is also considered meditation. Their method of walking meditation is different from the way we do it here. It is very concentrated, and can develop a kind of samadhi power. When monks are not walking, for example when they ride on the bus, they have a system of hand movements as a meditation method. In this way, anything they do, is not separate from the practice. I picked up that system of hand movements – being mindful of the movement, so the mind stays where the hands are.

Begging for Alms

After we finished Thai language school, we started traveling from one place to the other, and we had the opportunity to go begging for alms, for food. That was a very good experience. Prior to going out begging, I did some personal training: Every day for more than a month, after meals I would walk barefoot on the ground of the monastery square. This was to train my feet, to develop hard calluses on my skin, suitable for walking to beg for alms. When I went out begging with the group of monks, I followed whatever they did and tried to apply their kind of walking. I had to pay attention to my demeanor – when people in the market would see me walking, holding a bowl, they should feel that I am truly in the meditative state. The most senior monks are at the front of the line, and usually they received more offerings, while the ones in the back can be forgotten. But I remember one time, I was the last one in the back, and I got offerings too.

Looking for a New Retreat Center

Back at the Chan Meditation Center, we held retreats four times a year. We could only accommodate twenty-six people, so we always had to turn many people away. If we kept turning people away, then after a while they wouldn't apply any more. So in the 1990s we started looking for a larger place in the country, which eventually became our Dharma Drum Retreat Center here in Shawangunk. We looked at a lot of places. Back then it was not as easy as today, when we can simply search on the internet. We spent five years looking for this place. In the beginning it was slow; then after two years we searched harder. I looked at many places in the counties of upstate New York.

There was one place I thought was suitable. It was a camp, the land was nice and flat, and the buildings were in good condition. But this place sold quickly. The process of searching took a lot of time, because once I found a place, Shifu had to come and see whether he liked it. We looked at another place near Chuang Yen Monastery, and this place was very special. It belonged to a church community and was already a retreat center. It was very nice and had large boulders with flowing water. We had help from someone who was knowledgeable in feng shui. He came, looked at it, and said no, something about the way the water flowed was not good.

I remember another place also owned by a religious organization. The buildings were very fine, made of stone. But it also sold quickly. It was about an hour from the city and cost around a million dollars, as places nearer to the city cost more than the places further away. We also looked at a big horse ranch with a lot of land. There were other places where we could see the mountains, very nice views. But Shifu didn't want any of these places.

Pros and Cons

We looked at another place nearer to the city. It was a large building where we could accommodate everything in one place without going outside. The realtor told me that the owner had inherited a lot of money, and an architect or a contractor had talked her into building this huge castle-like structure. Then after it was built, she couldn't use it, so she had to sell. The building was very high, and the inside was completely empty. We pictured how we could accommodate many people sleeping, and we could put the kitchen here, and the main meditation hall there, etc. But the road leading to the property was quite narrow, one had to pass through a small street in the back where all the neighboring properties were very close. There was not much space for parking or expansion. If we wanted to make a better entrance, we would have to go through many neighbors' houses. It would be difficult to have a flow of traffic coming in and out, and one almost had a feeling of being trapped in there. So this seemed not a good choice.

We looked at numerous places. Some I considered to be very suitable, being nearer to the city and having solid stone buildings. But somehow the connection was here at Shawangunk, in Pine Bush, so here we are today. The first time we saw this place, it's as if it was waiting for us. When we saw how the big hall was built it, we thought "Wow, so suitable for meditation!" At that time, it didn't have that section in the back where the interview room is today. Where the Zen garden is now, there was a big kitchen. The hall had been used for wedding banquets, and the kitchen smelled of cooked meat. But the design of the high raftered ceiling was so nice, and the dining hall had a similar design. The price was right too; it was cheaper because it is further from the city. Maybe we're still a little bit far away for people to travel; so it had pros



DDRC Chan Hall Photo by Ven. Chang Hu

and cons. But it also has a lake and we liked that very much. When we first came, we didn't explore the forest, which is actually the largest part of this property. We looked at the buildings themselves and we liked them.

The sangha house was not part of the original purchase. The owner of that house was from Cuba and he liked to play music outdoors at night. When we had retreats we would hear his music playing (which is funny because we had the same problem in Elmhurst, of hearing the neighbor's Latin dance music late at night). So we really wanted to acquire that house. After we had been here for a couple of years, the owner decided to sell, so we approached him and made a quick deal.

Vision for the Future

Since early on, Shifu wanted to make DDRC into an international meditation center. I was the abbot here until 2005, and I was succeeded as abbot by Guo Jun Fashi, a position he held for a little less than three years. After that Guo Xing Fashi was the abbot for not quite ten years, and Chang Wen Fashi was our first director who was also a monastic. I feel grateful to them because they kept this place going. The growth has been slow, and now that I'm back here I want to improve that.

I still have something to learn because nowadays we have different teachers. We have Chi Chern Fashi, Simon Child, Žarko Andričević, Gilbert Gutierrez,

Rebecca Li, and Guo Gu (Jimmy Yu). How do we run this place more efficiently? How do we attract more participants? On the recent retreat I led here, one third of the participants were here for the first time. So people are finding out about this place. We have people contacting us, asking about meditation instruction, or whether they can come to practice meditation on their own for a day. That means this place is suitable for that sort of activity, rather than doing chanting – modern people actually need meditation more. So we have to provide this, make it easier for them to come and practice meditation in our tradition.

Differences East and West

The style of our retreats here is more or less in the same format as retreats that we hold in Taiwan. We try to make it similar. But we could say that in Taiwan there are even more regulations, as retreats are stricter there. One difference here is the environment; here we walk from building to building and that takes time. So we cannot go strictly Taiwanese style because in Taiwan all the retreat activities are in one building – the meditation hall, the dining hall, and the sleeping quarters – the distance to travel is very short. So we have to adjust for that.

The way people receive the teaching here is also different. The attitude here is that they want to practice, and they want to see benefits from it, so they are more rational. They hear the teachings and consider whether it is something good for them, whereas in Taiwan people are more accepting of whatever a monk says. So the attitude towards monastics is totally different. Over there they have a strong foundation and background of respecting and revering monastics. It is part of the culture.

The way they are educated in Taiwan is also different. For example, in Asian schools when the



Venerable Guo Yuan DDM Archive Photo

teacher comes in, the students all stand up and greet him or her. In America it's not like that. Whereas in Taiwan they automatically respect any monastic, in America they have to see the real practice of a monastic before they respect them. Shifu had charisma, so whatever Shifu said they liked, and felt it was good for them. They saw a real teacher with real practice and his behavior was also respectful. Over here respect has to be earned.

Returning now to DDRC, where I started from very basic conditions, I feel very settled, and I hope that this place can provide more activities that bring benefit to more people. ∞

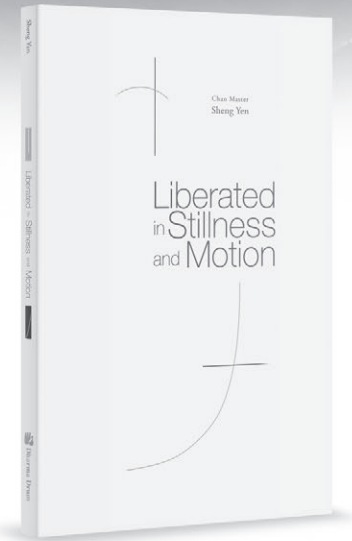
* Abbot Guo Yuan's detailed account of his time in Thailand was published in a four-part article in *Chan Magazine*, Volume 17, Numbers 1-4, 1997.

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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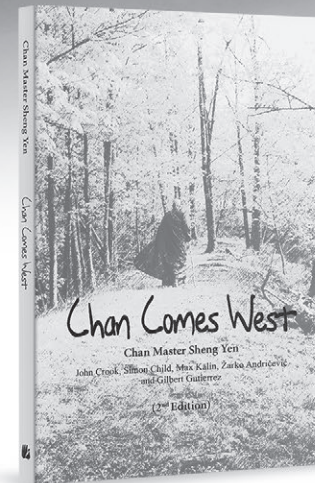
Chan Comes West (2nd Edition)

Chan Master Sheng Yen

John Crook, Simon Child, Max Kälin,
Žarko Andričević, and Gilbert Gutierrez

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Dharma Drum Publications • ISBN 1-890684-04-x



Mindfulness of Breathing as Applied to Advanced Chan Methods

BY

Venerable Guo Huei

Venerable Guo Huei, a Dharma heir of the late Chan Master Sheng Yen (1930–2009), is currently Vice Abbot of Dharma Drum Mountain in Taiwan. He holds a Doctor of Letters degree from Rissho University in Japan, and is Chairman of the Department of Buddhist Studies at the Dharma Drum Institute of Liberal Arts. This article is taken from the concluding dharma talk of a workshop given by Ven. Guo Huei at the DDMBA-NJ chapter on July 26, 2015. It discusses the Buddhist meditation method of mindfulness of breathing, and its relationship with the advanced Chan methods of silent illumination and huatou. Edited by Cindy Toy, Andy Liaw, Mei-Ping Yang and Buffe Maggie Laffey.

Counting the Breath

MINDFULNESS OF BREATHING (Sanskrit *ānāpānasmṛti*, Pali *ānāpānasati*) is a form of Buddhist meditation that uses breathing as an object in the practice of mindfulness. The method is to start with exhalation, followed by inhalation. Number one is the first breath of exhalation and inhalation, number two is the second breath, etc. In the breathing patterns that practitioners usually experience when relaxed, some exhalations or inhalations are longer than others, and some are shorter. This is perfectly normal and represents the natural rhythm of breathing when the practitioner does not control their breath.



Venerable Guo Huei DDM Archive Photo

It is best not to count when just starting the exhalation. Instead, make the count shortly after the exhalation begins, and hold the count until the end of the exhale. During inhalation, remain aware of the breath but do not count it. Continue counting the second breath, the third breath, and so on until the tenth breath, and then start back at one again. For a beginner it may be difficult to complete the perfect cycle of counting from one to ten, due to wandering thoughts and an unsettled mind.

Counting Scenarios

The figure below illustrates the timing and duration of the counting. The gray line represents the breathing pattern, exhalation and inhalation, and the black lines show various counting scenarios.

Scenario 1: Counting starts shortly after the exhalation begins, and the count is held until the exhalation is complete. This is the best timing for counting.

Scenario 2: Counting begins at the same time as the exhalation. This is not the worst timing, but can frequently lead to controlling the breath, which is not ideal.

Scenario 3: Counting begins before the exhalation. This will trigger the most severe controlling of the

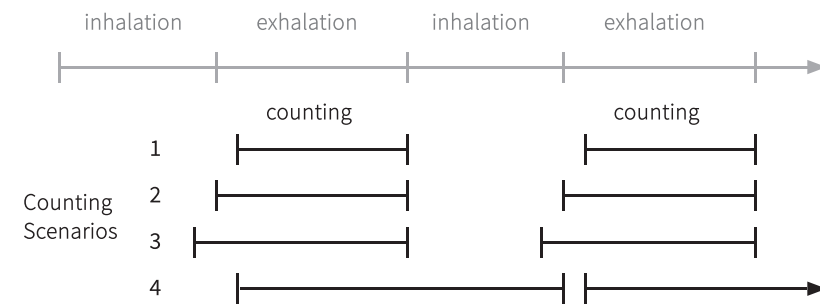
breath. The body can tense up, and the breathing will become heavy and panting.

Scenario 4: Counting starts shortly after the exhalation begins, but the count is held all the way through the inhalation. People do this because they worry that wandering thoughts may arise. But if one counts all the way through, it's not as relaxing as simply maintaining awareness during inhalation. It causes stress and the mind cannot be at ease.

Losing the Count

Between breaths, wandering thoughts may come up which can cause you to be distracted, and to lose track of the count. For example, as you are counting “One, two, three...” a non-related thought comes up such as “What’s for dinner tonight?” “Oh, what number should be next, four or five? Alright, I’ll just use five, and go on.” Then you count “Six, seven, eight...” and another thought comes up: “What should I do for fun tomorrow?” “Oh, I’m not sure which number is next, eight or nine? Never mind, I’ll just use eight.” The mind will keep wandering off to other thoughts instead of concentrating on the breath.

There are two types of distracting thoughts: the grosser form is the wandering thought, the finer form is the scattered thought. There is a subtle difference



between the two. At the grosser thought level, the mind follows the distraction and forms a complete idea of the wandering thought, such as “What’s for dinner tonight?” At the finer thought level, the mind is more alert and is aware of the distraction when only one word pops out, such as “eat”. When you notice that you have wandering thoughts, resume the counting from one. At the finer level of scattered thought, a slight thought emerges and is still in the primitive form; complete awareness is not lost, so you can return to the method immediately and continue on with the counting.

Following the Breath

Gradually, the grosser form of the wandering thoughts will reduce, and subtly, the finer form of scattered thoughts will also subside. Then you can maintain mindfulness for longer periods of time. If you can focus on the breath without losing awareness of it, eventually you will notice that each



Photo by Tong-Yang Lee

breath feels the same. The breaths when you count “one, two, three” are no different from those if you just repeatedly count “one”. When reaching this stage, you don’t need to count any more; simply exhale and inhale while maintaining awareness all the time. This is the stage of following-the-breath instead of counting-the-breath. The body is at ease and relaxed. At this point, if you do not get attached to this enjoyable state, and continue to practice, you can reach the unified mind state. In the state of unified mind, one does not need to pay attention to breathing any more; just maintain awareness that the existence of energy and air fills the body. Since the body, the earth element, is heavier, and the air element is lighter, when one does not feel the body element but only the air element, one will feel the sensation of lightness almost to the state that the body does not exist.

Six Subtle Dharma Gates

Next we will discuss the relationship between mindfulness of breathing and the Chinese Chan meditation methods of silent illumination and huatou. Mindfulness of breathing can be summarized by the six meditation steps mentioned in the *Six Subtle Dharma Gates* of the Tiantai School: (1) counting the breath (2) following the breath (3) stabilizing the mind (4) contemplating on the nature of phenomena (5) returning to the root of reality and (6) purification of insights. In comparison, silent illumination and huatou are two advanced methods of Chinese Chan meditation. In these methods, from the beginning, calming and contemplating are practiced simultaneously. Both of these Chan methods begin directly at the fourth step of contemplating whereas, in the six steps of the Tiantai school, meditation progresses sequentially starting from step one of counting the breath.

Six Subtle Gates	Silent Illumination	Huatou
1. Counting initial level of concentrated mind	calming & contemplation of the whole body	repeating the huatou
2. Following advanced level of concentrated mind	calming & contemplation of the whole environment	asking the huatou
3. Stabilizing unified mind	calming & contemplation of totality and infinity	contemplating the huatou
4. Contemplating Four Foundations of Mindfulness	calming & contemplation with relaxation of body and mind calming & contemplation of Buddhist wisdom	calming & contemplating shattering / initial enlightenment
5. Returning righteous roots	initial enlightenment	watching the huatou
6. Purification first to fourth blooming	advanced practice after initial enlightenment	advanced practice after shattering / initial enlightenment

In Six Subtle Gates, the first three steps are to cultivate calming of the mind:

1. Counting the breath to reach an initial state of concentrated mind.
2. Following the breath to reach an advanced level of concentrated mind.
3. Stabilizing the mind to reach unified mind.

Let us discuss silent illumination first. When we begin, we relax both body and mind. Then we contemplate our body, then the environment. Then the boundary between internal and external disappears. When we practice silent illumination, we practice calming and contemplating simultaneously. Relaxing the body and mind, is accomplished through mindfulness of breathing. In fact, when we relax both body and mind, we are using the method of silent illumination. Therefore even though silent illumination involves practicing calming and contemplating simultaneously, we still have to go through the process of calming.

In the traditional Indian Buddhist system, the practice progresses from concentration to contemplation. By comparison, with the six subtle gates, the practice of concentration progresses from counting breath, following breath, to calming the mind. This is so-called five methods of stilling the mind. When practicing the five methods of stilling the mind, there is also a contemplation component that is part of concentration. However, the object of practice has form (Sanskrit *nimitta*). It is the same with counting breath or reciting Buddha's name. The object of practice for all five methods has its form (*nimitta*). What happens when we succeed in the practice of the five methods and achieve unified mind? We need to change the method of practice. We have to switch from the contemplation of concentration to contemplation of wisdom. This is, in fact, practicing the Four Foundations of Mindfulness (Sanskrit *smṛtyupasthāna*, Pali *satipatthāna*).

Continuing below are the steps following the previous three from the six subtle gates:

4. Contemplating the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, which includes the body, feeling/sensation, mind/consciousness, and phenomena/existence. There are two levels of contemplation:

A. Mindfulness of a Singular Foundation:

In the beginner stage, one can practice mindfulness on one of the four foundations individually and connect it to the insight of the three universal truths – impermanence, no self, and emptiness.

B. Mindfulness of Totality: Since one can relate the three universal truths to each of the four foundations, in the end, from contemplating on the four foundations in totality, we can observe impermanence, no self, and emptiness. At this level, one has to utilize the four noble truths in contemplating. The four noble truths are: suffering, the cause of suffering, the end of suffering, and the path that leads to the end of suffering.

5. Returning to the full wholesome state and retrieving the four righteous roots.

6. Going beyond the concept of subject and object and achieving the first blooming, or stream entry (Sanskrit *srotāpanna*, Pali *sotāpanna*) to the fourth blooming (Sanskrit *arhat*, Pali *arahant*) which is equivalent to the first to eighth grounds (Sanskrit *bhūmi*) in Mahayana.

Silent Illumination

Next, we will discuss the meditation steps of the silent illumination method. It emphasizes the practice of both calming and contemplating, simultaneously and at all steps. It starts from the fourth step directly, but then it goes back to the first, second, and third steps.

As it moves along from the beginning stage to the advanced stage, the level of contemplation deepens.

1. Begin with the relaxation of the whole body from step four.
2. Go back to steps one and two, because relaxation has equivalent calming effects of counting the breath and following the breath.
3. Expand the contemplation of:
 - A. Totality of body and environment, so one can reach the initial state of unified mind.
 - B. Totality of the internal and external, so one can reach the advanced state of unified mind.
 - C. Totality of every thought, so one can reach the still nature of mind (Sanskrit *dhyāna*, Pali *jhāna*).

Silent illumination goes through the progression of calming, but won't stay at samadhi (a unified state of body and mind). One can use the same method through all the steps, there is no need to change the method at the fourth step. Silent illumination is to contemplate the entire body from the beginning, instead of a particular object (*nimitta*). Listed below are the continuing steps of silent illumination.

4. Contemplation is shifted from the body/mind phenomena to reaching Buddhist wisdom. Using silent illumination, one can reach samadhi. However, one does not go to deep samadhi because the element of contemplation is also functioning strongly. From the unified mind, one can reach enlightenment, but needs to deeply comprehend the three characteristic marks: impermanence, no-self, and emptiness. The key point of silent illumination is to let go of all phenomena, and do not give rise to one thought.

5. Enlightenment – steps one to three are techniques for us to polish the meditation methods and to cultivate samadhi. In order to progress to steps four, five and six, one needs right view and a deep understanding of emptiness. Let go of all hindrances, but also let go of all good experiences. Practicing

letting go of all phenomena, and eventually let go of the self. Only by doing this, can one have a chance of entering enlightenment. The first enlightenment is called the initial gate.

6. Advanced practice – after the initial enlightenment, there are many other gates such as shallow gate, deep gate, multiple gate, etc. The final gate is called the prison gate, which is to break through the prison of three realms. In Mahayana, the sixth step is called enlightenment of the first ground, which is analogous to stream entry (Sanskrit *srotāpanna*, Pali *sotāpanna*).

Huatou

Now we will review the meditation steps of the huatou method in comparison to the six subtle gates. Huatou is the doubt sensation, questioning the great matter of life and death. Typical huatou questions are “Where do I come from originally?” “Where do I go

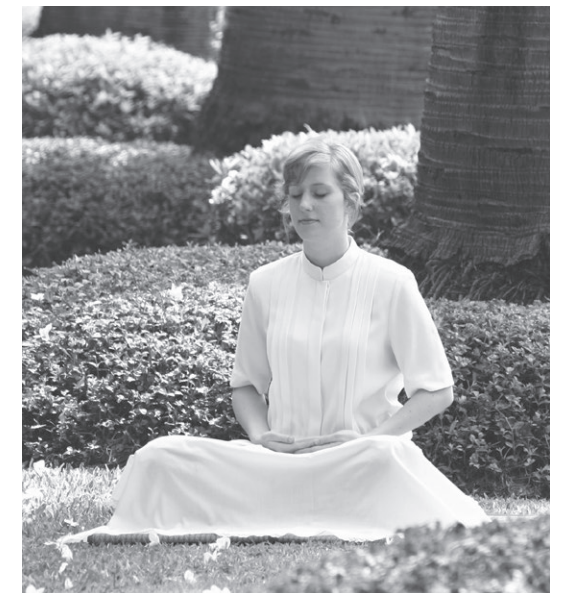


Photo by Honey Kochphon Onshawee

when I die?” “What was my true nature before I was born?” “Who is chanting Buddha’s name?” “What is wu?” “Who’s dragging this corpse around?”

Listed below are the steps of the huatou method. It begins by using the calming and contemplating elements at the same time from step four of the six subtle gates; contemplation is on wisdom, not on samadhi.

1. Repeating the question. This is the early stage of concentrated mind, equivalent to counting the breath. Most people can’t start from unified mind. So one needs to go back to the first, second, and third steps. One has to develop from concentrated mind to unified mind.

2. Asking the question to generate the doubt sensation. This is the advanced stage of concentrated mind, equivalent to following the breath.

3. Step three:

A. Contemplating the question until it turns into a doubt mass. This is the stage of unified mind, equivalent to the stabilization step of the six subtle gates. The elements of calming and contemplating are unified, and both body and mind are unified. The existence of body and mind are almost not felt. One just responds to the daily routines out of natural reflexes.

B. The doubt mass has accumulated to the maximum point, waiting for the right condition for breakthrough. It’s like a hen pecking a hole on the eggshell when the chick is ready to hatch. Or it’s like blowing up a balloon; when expanded to the limit, it can burst at any touch.

4. Shattering/initial enlightenment – as one continues to work on the doubt mass, it will burst suddenly. It is described as if the universe has shattered. What actually shatters is the sense of ego/self. The sense of ego/self is deeply rooted, it

is the cause of suffering, and it is the hardest one to break through. Once the sense of self (Sanskrit *ātman*) is shattered, and one sees the true nature of emptiness (Sanskrit *śūnyatā*, Pali *suññatā*), the initial gate is reached.

5. Advanced practice with watching the huatou after the initial enlightenment. Just as discussed in the meditation steps for the silent illumination method.

6. After the initial enlightenment, there are multiple gates, and finally the break-through of the prison gate.

In our daily life, we encounter life and death all the time. When we step on an ant, we may not feel the significance of it. During our normal life, we focus on career or family, and neglect the big question. However when something happens to our loved ones, we start to ask the question “Why me?” The doubt sensation arises. In our lives, we may have the doubt sensation only a couple of times. Actually, it is a very useful method for us to focus on.

Silent illumination and huatou are advanced methods. Beginners can’t easily reach this level. It’s beneficial to use the mindfulness of breath method (steps one to three) to cultivate calming to the advanced level of concentrated mind. When we count the breath, we are aware that we have many wandering thoughts. By using the method of counting breath, we can effectively reduce the wandering thoughts and gradually calm the mind. It would be easier to pick up the methods of silent illumination and huatou at the step of unified mind. The method of chanting Buddha’s name can also be used in the same way, for beginners to reach concentrated mind. As an analogy: there is a lot of gravel mixed with grains of rice. One needs to pick out the gravel before cooking the rice. If one did not do that, the cooked rice still smells good, but it would be difficult to chew. We can apply the same analogy to the silent illumination and huatou methods. ☺

Entering the Gateless

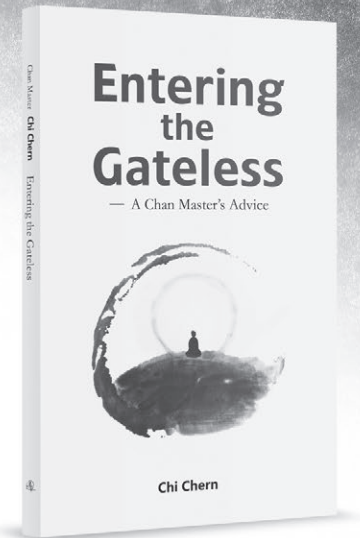
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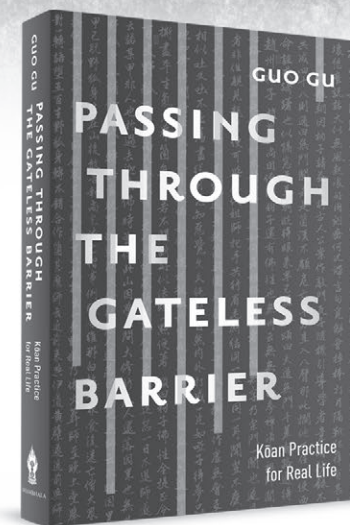
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Buddhism and Race

BY

Rebecca Li

Rebecca Li, a Dharma heir of Simon Child, teaches meditation and Dharma classes, gives public lectures and leads retreats. Some of her talks and writings can be found at www.rebeccali.org. Rebecca is also a professor of sociology at The College of New Jersey. This article is a reflection on the Third Buddhism and Race conference held at Harvard Divinity School on March 3–5, 2017.

WHEN I WAS INVITED to return to the Buddhism and Race conference in 2017, I had no idea what I was expected to talk about. I agreed to go because I learned a lot from participating on the panels the year before and the experience transformed my Dharma practice and teaching. While I felt honored to be invited back and excited to see my friends, I was not sure what I would contribute to the conference this time. I wondered if I was being invited to

speak on behalf of Asian American Buddhists who remain relatively invisible despite their important contributions to Buddhism in the United States. Whatever the case, I told myself that I would make good use of the opportunity to contemplate this important issue and would not be too worried about what was expected of me.

Serendipitously, prior to the conference, I was invited to participate in a documentary project in

which Asian American Dharma practitioners and teachers shared their experience. My experience during filming allowed me to explore my experience as an “Asian American,” and to examine why I had hesitated to engage in discussions of race even though I knew, at least intellectually, that race issues are central to much of everyday life here in the U.S.

At the opening panel of the conference, titled “What is the Conversation?,” I mentioned that I had shied away from discussions of race because I felt unqualified since I did not grow up in this racialized society. But I also came to realize that my experience growing up in Hong Kong, a relatively un-racialized society, and of having my perspectives shaped unconsciously by living here allows me to appreciate how powerful the social forces revolving around race in America have been in shaping my being and the way I relate to others. I recounted the recent experience of filming for the above-mentioned documentary on Asian American Buddhists. To begin the filming of my segment, I was asked to say “I am Asian American, and my people are ...”. What the director assumed to be a straightforward process ended up taking much longer because I had trouble saying that phrase. I felt like I was asked to introduce myself with someone else’s words. It was important to me for my sharing on that video to be heartfelt, and I thought it necessary to voice my objection to introducing myself that way. Struggling with identifying myself this way in the presence of others helped me to investigate my feelings about this subject matter more deeply.

I asked myself if I was ashamed of being Asian American. After all, I have read accounts of Asian American children who grew up here feeling that way due to internalized racism. I didn’t believe that was causing my reluctance to introduce myself as “Asian American,” but instead felt my reluctance was resistance to having an artificial label imposed upon

me. The category “Asian American” is the result of an effort to categorize individuals with Asian ancestry as neither black nor white. I often told my sociology students that I became “Asian” when I came to this country, referring to the point that before I moved to this country, I was not seen through preconceived notions of how “Asian” or “Chinese” are supposed to be. People related to me as a student, drama enthusiast, so-so tennis player, etc. In other words, I was treated as a person with my own idiosyncrasies, passions, and flaws. Here I have often been seen only as Asian or Chinese and was forced to identify myself almost exclusively with my ancestry and to be judged accordingly.

One of my first interactions in graduate school was someone commenting on how I did not act like a Chinese. When I asked her how many Chinese she has met, she was unable to think of one. Here I was, being forced to defend my self-worth based on pure imaginations she had in her mind about how “Chinese” are supposed to behave. I was disheartened by the fact that I was seen only as part of this category called “Chinese.” I am ethnically Chinese, yes; but that is not the only thing I am. The experience left an impression because it left a rather deep wound. Since then, many times, I was either “too Chinese” or “not Chinese enough.” The question of whether my being Chinese will become an issue in an interaction always lurks in the background. I could be having a fun casual conversation with someone, and out of the blue, my individuality would be erased entirely by a passing remark where I am thrown into a pile of faceless “Chinese.” This makes fully trusting someone difficult, as I never knew when this might happen. When it does, I feel completely alone, since no one acknowledges that this is, or even might be, hurtful. This is what living in a racialized society does. In those moments of my resisting saying I am Asian American on camera, I realized that I have experienced this

Photo by Matt Popovich

label as a form of violence, of being thrown into a box that does not capture who I really am, and feeling the pain of isolation that accompanied that experience.

Investigating my mind through Chan helped me become more clearly aware of the subtle mental processes created by being seen only as a category. Despite the absence of outright discrimination or bigotry by and large, and very often with people really trying to be nice, I came to understand the pain I experienced from these instances over the years as that of not being seen as a full human being. For the nice people who insisted on seeing me through their abstract category of “Chinese,” the parts of me that do not fit into “being Chinese” were either disallowed or ignored. As painful as this has been, I have also learned not to allow myself to recognize the experience in racial terms. Looking back, I realized that I picked up the racial vibe very soon after moving to this country, and realized that thinking and talking about race makes people uncomfortable. In my effort to survive in this country without a single family member or close friend at that time, it did not feel safe to do anything to make other

people uncomfortable. So my instinct compelled me, without my being aware of it, to steer clear of recognizing my experience as an issue of race, even though there was no shortage of such experiences.

On the panel, I also shared when I started to have an inkling of my unwillingness to recognize the role played by race in my life. Years ago when I was still working out my difficulties with Simon Child, my current teacher and one of Master Sheng Yen’s Dharma heirs, in intensive retreats, as I penetrated layers and layers of conditioning and vexations, I felt I was blocked by an invisible wall in my mind. Looking back, it was not so much that it was invisible as I was reluctant to face it. At the time, I wondered if my sense of alienation and feeling undeserving, which became more acute after I moved to the U.S., had to do with racism and I remember wanting to explore it but feeling a very strong resistance to pursuing it. Even though I fully trusted my teacher, the instinct against bringing up race was so strong that I held back over and over again. At that time I noticed that the resistance was so strong that I shied away from the inquiry when I asked myself why I hesitated to bring up the issue in interviews. Now that I recognize my resistance, the inner work I did preparing for the conference illuminates the emotional dynamic underlying the resistance.

While I would not wish it upon anyone, I am glad that I went through this process of hurt and alienation and the inner struggle to recognize my resistance and pain. I now have a better sense of how difficult it is to cut through the layers of self-views and beliefs that obscure us from clearly seeing the power of cultural conditioning and social control. They are so ubiquitous that it is difficult to notice them operating in the mind. This

process of self-exploration also helped me explain the question “how is the discussion of race connected to Chan practice?”

Intellectually I understand that race is an important social force in American society and any engaged citizen should try to understand the issues and be part of the solution. Hence, it is a topic that an engaged Buddhist practitioner ought to be familiar with. I have been wondering, however, whether it, and if so how it, is important for every Dharma practitioner to make a serious effort to investigate the role race plays in their being? I came to the conference wanting to work on this question. Throughout the conference discussions, I kept discovering very important things about myself and the practice. Even though it was a conference, it felt more like an intensive Chan retreat for me, and by the end of the conference, the connection became clear and I was fully convinced that looking at race needs to be part of Chan practice in American society. I look at race as a starting point, which will help us learn to examine other mental categories that may separate us from other human beings, such as gender, sexual orientation, social class, lay/monastic, political orientation, or religious affiliation. Practicing this way will deepen our understanding of our mind and its myriad conditionings by the social world so that, if we want, it is possible to be free from them. Looking at race highlights the fact that understanding ourselves only at the psychological level is not enough. We need to also understand ourselves as social beings who interact and act out beliefs and worldviews promoted by various social institutions that are often unbeknownst to us, or unacknowledged. Cultivating a clear awareness of how social structure and cultural beliefs about race shape our mind and actions is crucial to reducing suffering to self and others and achieving liberation at the individual and collective levels.

The practice of Chan is to cultivate clarity of what is actually going on. Our sense of reality is often distorted by filters we apply in our mind, leading us to view reality in ways that confirm our existing beliefs and worldviews while ignoring the inconvenient facets of reality that contradict them. This is the main mechanism through which we maintain a sense of self with a coherent narrative. We come to understand ourselves as a fixed entity rather than recognizing that it is, like everything in the universe, a conditioned process. This is the fundamental ignorance of the true nature of self that Shakyamuni Buddha talked about. The cultivation of total awareness and the questioning of entrenched beliefs and self-views in Chan practice cuts through layer upon layer of conditioning or self-attachment. The moments we remember to practice, we can see everything, including ourselves and other human beings, in their totality. In these moments, we cannot help but feel deeply connected with everyone, allowing unconditional love to arise naturally. With that understanding we are inevitably compelled to refrain from causing suffering, and strive to bring joy to self and others.

As I investigated race in my own experience, the fact that race is socially constructed became more than a theoretical concept taught in sociology. It helped me make sense of my experience. While we want to believe that race is biologically-based, scientists have found that people from different racial groups can be more similar genetically than some of those put in the same racial group. Furthermore, how racial groups are defined changes over time and varies across societies. In other words, racial categories are not independently, inherently existing entities. They are empty! These categories are made up by humans according to the historical and cultural contexts in our society. Race is an idea we have created to put people into different categories which



Photo by rachelf2

are often ordered hierarchically. Though empty, the idea of race is, nevertheless, very powerful and sticky. People believe in and identify with race very strongly, often without being aware of all the ways it impacts their thinking and actions. While racial categories are socially constructed, being put into these categories, and putting others into them, has real consequences.

As I observed how the idea of race affects my experience of reality, this is what I discovered: when I see another person through these categories, I am seeing the ideas associated with that person's race fed to me by society – through my parents, teachers, friends, and the media – rather than seeing the person in front of me. I see issues that I have read to be associated with that racial category coming through my mind. All of this shapes my assumption about this person, creating the impression or illusion that I already know who s/he is. With this thought in my mind, the next thought is “there is no need to talk to or pay attention to what s/he is saying.” I then respond to my idea of this person based on these assumptions instead of the reality of the person. When this happens, we are mistaking the thoughts and ideas that flow through our mind for the person right in front of us. Not being aware of this confusion is fundamental ignorance (literally “no clarity” in Chinese). That is how we can blurt out things that define an individual entirely based on his/her race without even knowing it. When the hierarchical order of racial categories is also in operation and if the person belongs to an “inferior” category, we may not even hear what this person has said because we are so habituated to tuning people of that race out. Yet we are offended or confused when we are called out on our actions because we are completely unaware of the operation of these ideas in our mind.

We have essentially dehumanized another person, reducing him/her into certain preconceived notion, rather than recognizing his/her full humanity.

Because we are convinced that these preconceived notions are the person, we cannot see the person as someone with a story to which we can relate with an open heart. We have reduced this living, breathing human being into a lifeless object, a racial category, and this can lead us to not thinking twice about diminishing, dismissing or even demonizing the person. When we are not aware of such tendencies in our mind, we respond in ways that cause suffering for self and others. The experience of not being seen and feeling invisible, not to mention any unfair treatment one may receive, is very painful and contributes to one's feeling undeserving of love and respect as a full human being. Hence, every time we treat someone as a category instead of really seeing them for who they are, we are causing great suffering.

Sadly, we also cause suffering to ourselves since we are often unaware of how we ourselves are dehumanized in the process. Since racial categories are defined relative to each other (e.g. black vs white, white vs non-white, etc.), when we only see someone as white/black/Chinese and therefore as different, we can only see ourselves as not-white/black/Chinese in that moment. We lose touch with the rest of ourselves. Hence, when we see others through, and relate to someone only as, a racial category, we reduce ourselves to a category as well and cease to see ourselves as full human beings. We deny ourselves the full range of our experience as a human that can happen only when we allow ourselves to connect fully with others as fellow human beings.

When we become aware of how the social structure of racial hierarchy is superimposed on our thinking, we begin to realize how our being and our ways of relating to others have been conditioned by this structure. Hopefully through practice we can also discover that we need not choose to see people through the lens of these categories. The habit is so entrenched that it may not feel like we have any



Photo by Goashape

choice. But we do. Each moment, we can choose to follow our habits that cause suffering for self and others, or we can choose not to repeat those habits even though they are familiar and give us the illusion of comfort. We can choose to see all others as fellow human beings like ourselves, free from such categories. I am not talking about ignoring the difference in our experiences, backgrounds, worldviews, beliefs, or the fact that this person may not even like me. We can be keenly aware of all these differences but still choose to listen to and feel for others as fellow human beings trying to cope in this world of suffering. When we do, we connect with ourselves and others more fully, and we are more able to empathize even though we may disagree.

Powerful conditioning may compel us to hold onto the categories and the hierarchical order of the

categories, especially when we occupy a position of privilege. Voluntarily deciding to share power and privilege that humans have spent a lifetime accumulating and/or protecting is no easy task. We should commend anyone, including ourselves, for even considering doing so. We may find ourselves not yet ready to tackle every category. One may be more ready to give up one's privilege that comes with one's race but not with one's gender, for instance. Nevertheless, we accept that this is where we are right now. The practice will afford us the clarity to recognize that we are, in this moment, choosing to retain our privilege. At least we know where we are and are clear about the work that is still ahead of us. Practicing in this way, perhaps we can limit the harm done to ourselves and others in the meantime.

Paying attention to how race conditions our being and our relations to others is only a starting point. There are many other hierarchies and categorizations in our social structure based on gender, sexual orientation, social class, age, political orientation, religious affiliation, body shape, to name a few, that can be used to generate and perpetuate a sense of separateness from others. We also have a tendency to use these categories to put others down in order to elevate ourselves as a way to cope with our suffering. As a practitioner, when we feel inferior to others or see others as less deserving of love and respect than ourselves, we can check to see if we are seeing others through one or a combination of these categories, and how they are embedded in hierarchies. We can practice seeing how we are overlooking aspects of their humanity. No less importantly, we practice remembering that we always have a choice and we do not have to go down the path that causes suffering.

Chan practice is precisely about investigating our mind's very entrenched habits. Diligent practice allows us to see more clearly how social forces condition and perpetuate views of our place in social structure and how they compel us to relate to others based on these categories. The practice is about seeing clearly how the structure works in shaping ours and others' views and actions so that we know whether the thoughts and actions we choose every moment are perpetuating this structure, or dismantling it to free ourselves from the bondage of unhelpful and harmful thoughts and beliefs. As we practice this way, our mental, emotional and behavioral responses begin to

change and we can better contribute to the liberation of all people from the bondage of the unjust structures that live and operate in the mind.

I love the way Reverend Angel Kyodo Williams reminded us that we gain our humanity when we are able to let go of our privilege and leave others' humanity intact. She also insisted that we must engage in this conversation out of love for everyone involved. If we cannot do it out of love, perhaps this particular group or moment is not the right one. I also appreciate Lama Rod's emphasis on the need for healing from the pain we have inflicted on each other, intentionally or unintentionally, as a result of living in this racialized society. I am grateful to Jan Willis who brought up Shantideva's teaching of "do no harm, practice good" repeatedly throughout the conference. It sounded simple, but diligently checking to see if we are indeed practicing good instead of doing harm will bring profound transformations to our heart and our actions, rendering us a contributor to this project of collective liberation. ☸



The Third Buddhism and Race conference Archive Photo

Chan Meditation Retreats

<p>3-Day City Chan Led by Venerable Chang Zhai September 2 – 4, 2017 Chan Meditation Center · Elmhurst, NY, USA CONTACT chancenter@gmail.com www.chancenter.org</p>	<p>9-Night Silent Illumination Led by Simon Child September 8 – 17, 2017 Maenllwyd, Wales, UK CONTACT admin@westernchanfellowship.org www.westernchanfellowship.org</p>
<p>7-Day Silent Illumination Led by Žarko Andričević October 14 – 21, 2017 DDM Vancouver Center · Richmond, BC, Canada CONTACT meditation1@ddmba.ca www.ddmba.ca</p>	<p>49-Day Intensive Chan Led by Venerable Chi Chern July 18 – September 5, 2018 Dłużew, Poland CONTACT budwod@budwod.com.pl www.czan.eu</p>
<p>Faith in Mind Intensive Led by Venerable Chi Chern September 16 – 23, 2017</p> <p>Western Zen Led by Rebecca Li, Simon Child, and Hilary Richards October 13 – 18, 2017</p> <p>Silent Illumination Intensive Led by Guo Gu (Jimmy Yu) October 21 – 29, 2017</p>	<p>Thanksgiving Chan Led by Rebecca Li November 21 – 25, 2017</p> <p>Investigating Huatou Intensive Led by Abbot Guo Yuan December 23, 2017 – 1 January 1, 2018</p> <p>Dharma Drum Retreat Center · Pine Bush, NY, USA CONTACT apply@dharmadrumretreat.org www.dharmadrumretreat.org</p>

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