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Emptiness

EXPERIENCING CORRECT VIEW is precisely seeing the nature of emptiness for oneself. It is seeing the self-nature, which is seeing buddha-nature. Within the nature of emptiness there is the function of boundless compassion and wisdom, therefore it is called buddha-nature. However, seeing the nature is not the same as the complete attainment of buddhahood, nor is it equal to liberation. There are still a lot of vexations waiting for one to handle, and a lot of work waiting for one to finish. The difference is that one now clearly knows the path one should take, and one is also capable of seeing clearly how to handle one's problems.

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CHAN MASTER SHENG YEN
Chan Comes West, 2000

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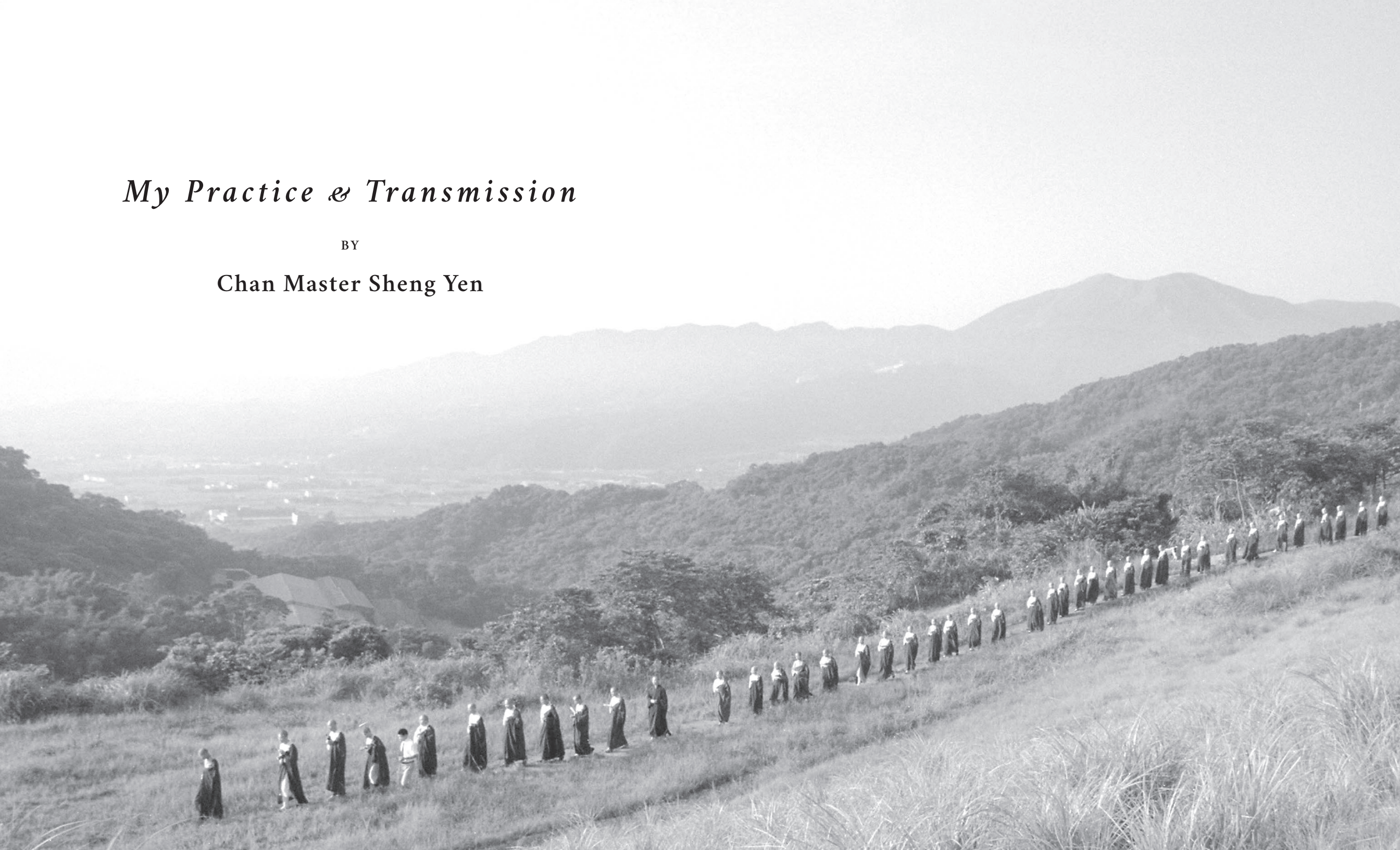
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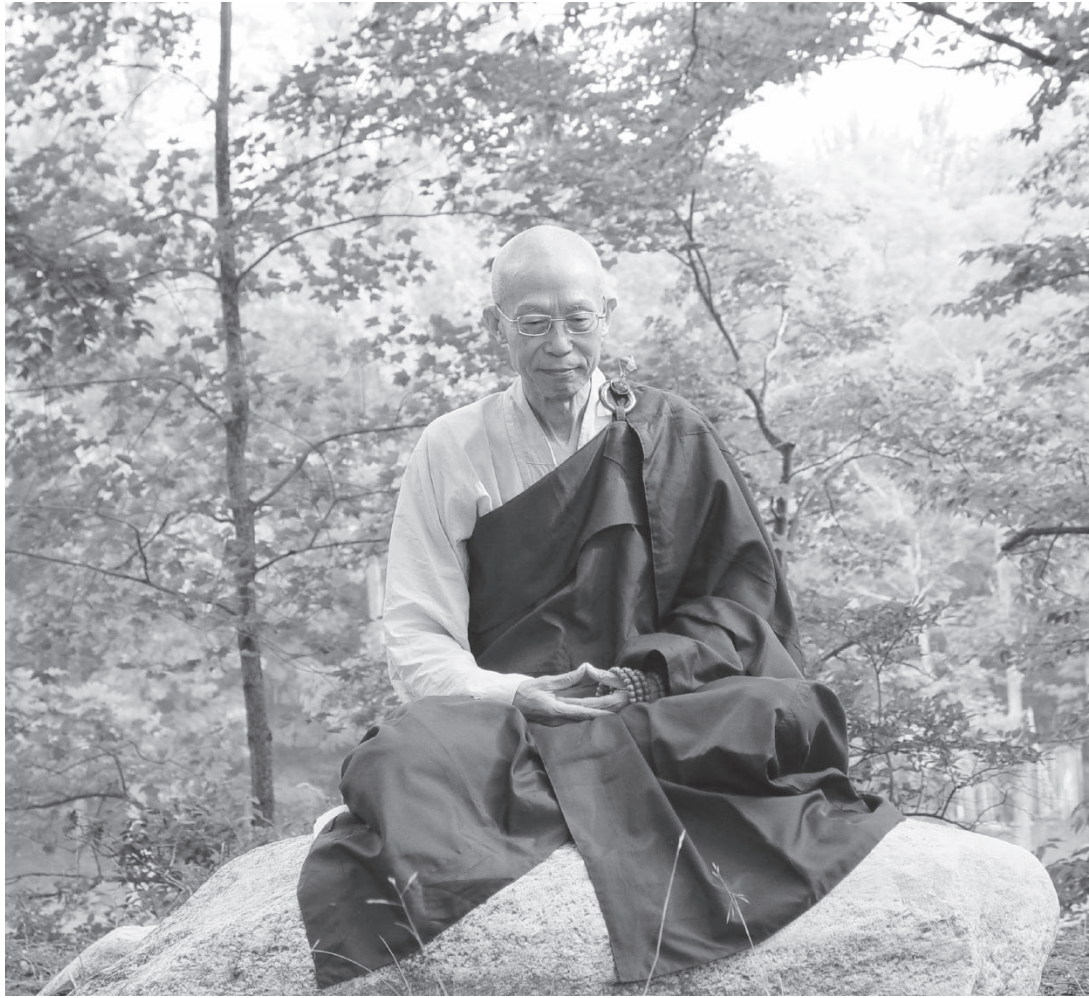
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My Practice & Transmission

BY

Chan Master Sheng Yen





Chan Master Sheng Yen DDM Archive Photo

This article is excerpted from the second edition of *Chan Comes West*, a book which introduces the five lay Dharma heirs of Chan Master Sheng Yen (1930-2009). In this article, Master Sheng Yen shares his experience in the practice and his views on Dharma transmission. Translated and edited by Rebecca Li, with editorial assistance from Ernie Heau. Explanatory endnotes were added by the translator after consulting with Master Sheng Yen.

Introduction

THIS SMALL BOOK IS a collection of articles contributed by my five Western Dharma heirs, in sequential order, John Crook (1930–2011), Simon Child, Max Kälin, Žarko Andričević, and Gilbert Gutierrez. The editor of the book, Dr. Rebecca Li, had asked me to write a piece to describe the process of my practice and my view on transmission for the reference of those interested.

In the West, it seems a teacher's verification and confirmation of a disciple's level of practice and realization are seen as a kind of mysterious behavior. That is because it is a mind-to-mind communication between only the teacher and the disciple, without the necessity of further explanation. Also, based on their research of historical documents, some scholars have raised doubts and criticized the so-called lineage transmission of Dharma in the Chan tradition.

My Vows

From my standpoint, I have always seen that what is transmitted in Chan is just Buddhadharma. Looking at the human world from the perspective of Buddhadharma, there is much vexation because of erroneous views. Erroneous views refer to the habits of seeing what is impermanent as permanent, seeing what is not self as self, not believing in the law of causes and conditions, and either seeing cause as effect or not believing in the law of cause and effect. Because of such erroneous views, from an egotistic and selfish perspective, one protects one's own safety, fights for one's own benefit, and strives to satisfy one's ego. One is either rejecting or craving, with the goal of ensuring that one can possess sufficient and eternal happiness. In actuality, it is impossible to attain this goal. Even though

one can possess some happiness, what is attained will only be partial and transient, similar to a fabricated illusion.

In fact, Buddhadharma tells us that it is only when one can put down one's sense of insecurity and care more about other people's well-being that one can truly feel secure and happy. From the time I became a monk to study and practice the Buddhadharma at the age of thirteen, until now in my seventies, the reason I have been able to consistently move forward in a general direction is that in my youth, I had already discovered that "Buddhadharma is so wonderful, but so few people know of it and so many people misunderstand it." Because of this, I vowed to share the little bit of Buddhadharma I know with others.

With this discovery and vow, I have been a less selfish person since then; whatever benefits I could share with others, I would not keep to myself. However, I was not a zealous religious follower either. I would not force others to accept the Buddhadharma that I knew. Only when others were interested in hearing the Buddhadharma I knew would I introduce it to them. This was my vow of transmitting the Buddhadharma in my early years.

When I was young, although I knew that Buddhadharma was very useful, I still had a lot of vexations in my mind, such as craving, aversion, arrogance, jealousy, discontent, doubt, etc. Because I felt that my vexations were too heavy, my brain too slow, and my learning ability too low, sometimes I would also hate myself.

When one of my early masters discovered that I had problems, he taught me to do prostrations to Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara. Every morning I would prostrate for one to two hours, sometimes longer. After the prostrations, I was soaked in sweat, but besides the exhaustion it did not seem to help



much. Because of my faith in my master, I continued the prostrations. One morning several months later, when I was concentrated on my prostration, I suddenly felt a coolness in my head, and my entire body was relaxed. It was a really joyful feeling. Since then my ability to recite the morning and evening services and chants as well as my memory and comprehension improved significantly. This also

established my faith in the practice of Buddhadharmā.

In 1945 and 1946, because of the civil war in China, the society was unstable and the economy was in shambles. There were no donors to support the monastery and this marked the beginning of a dark period in my life. Following other monastics in the monastery, I could only perform funeral ceremonies of reciting sutras and repentance for the deceased. It was not related to the study and practice of the Dharma at all.

Between 1947 and the spring of 1949, I entered a Buddhist institute in the hope of learning and practicing the Dharma. The scholastic level of this institute was the equivalent of somewhere between middle and high school. I also participated in a few Chan retreats and Buddha's name recitation retreats. Following the success of the

Communist revolution, I went to Taiwan with the military of the previous government. During my ten years in the military, it was difficult to get a chance to read Buddhist sutras and books. It was also difficult to visit teachers for guidance on practicing the Dharma. I could only use prostration and recitation of Amitabha Buddha's name intermittently as my main methods of practice.

Ten years in the military was a long and difficult road. Although I wanted to re-enter monastic life the whole time I was there, no one could leave the military at that time except for serious injury and disability. After much effort on my part and concern from many people, finally at the age of 29, with the help of an influential person, I was able to use my poor health as the reason to be discharged from the military. By the time I could become a monk again, I was already 30 years old.

This was an important lesson in the journey of my life: if there is an accurate and clear goal, one should move in the direction toward that goal with incessant diligence. Once one discovers that one is off the track, then one should rectify one's actions diligently. In this way, one will definitely be able to accomplish the goal.

Teaching Me to Put Down

When I was 28 years old, I had a week's leave from the military and I spent it at a monastery in southern Taiwan. At night, I shared a huge wooden sleeping platform that can sleep more than ten people with just one other, old monk. Since people in the monastery knew that I had been a monk in Mainland China, they arranged to let me share the sleeping platform with this old monk. Because the old monk did not sleep and did sitting meditation on the platform, I did not sleep either. During all those years in the military, I had accumulated a lot of questions that had bothered me. The more these questions accumulated, the more frustrated I got. Some of those questions were: When will I be able to become a monk again? How can I do that? Which teacher should I go to? What should I do after I become a monk? What kind of monk do I want to become? How will I be able to benefit myself and others as a monk? With Buddhadharmā as deep

and vast as the ocean, where should I start? With innumerable methods of practice, which method should I choose? And so on.

I took advantage of such a rare opportunity to ask this old monk for advice on these questions that were flowing like a torrent. Attentively he listened to my questions one after another without getting impatient. At the moment when I finished asking one question, he asked, "Anymore?" Then I continued to ask the next question. I had very high hopes, thinking that by the time I finished asking the questions he would answer them once and for all. Therefore I kept on asking.

Suddenly, the old monk slammed the platform very hard with his hand, making a loud noise. In the same moment he shouted, "Put down! Go to sleep."

In that flash of a moment I was extremely shocked. I felt the cloud and fog of questions dissipating. My whole body felt cool and extremely relaxed. It seemed any further questioning was unnecessary.

That old monk was Master Lingyuan (1902–1988) who was ordained under Master Xuyun (Empty Cloud) (1840–1959). He studied at the Nanhua Monastery in Caoxi where Master Xuyun was the abbot. That was also the Sixth Patriarch Huineng's (638–713) place of practice. Two years later, I became a monk again. When I received the bhikshu precepts, Master Lingyuan was one of seven honorable witnessing acharyas.¹ However, since that night when I was 28, I did not visit him again, nor did I want to get any confirmation. It seemed he also forgot about me; he also did not ask me to go to him for verification.

After leaving the military, I went to study with Master Dongchu (1908–1977). The training with Master Dongchu was very instrumental for the gradual elimination of my attachment to self-view, personality, and habits. I used to always use the viewpoint of ordinary people to approach and

think about problems, and would forget that the teaching of the Buddhadharma is about not using one's own standpoint and pre-existing viewpoints to understand and observe problems. Therefore, when I rested, Master Dongchu would ask me to work. When I worked, he would ask me to stop working. When I recited sutras, he would ask me to do prostrations. When I did prostrations, he would ask me to recite sutras. When I wanted to write some essays, he would scold me and say that these things had nothing to do with the question of birth and death. When I was neither writing, reciting sutras, nor doing prostrations, he would say that I lacked the compassion and bodhi-mind for spreading the Dharma.

He used this method of training on me for two years. Furthermore, on the material level regarding money and tools, he tried not to let me use anything. But at the same time, he would ask me to complete tasks under impossible conditions. It may seem on the surface that he was a very unreasonable person. He was very compassionate to ordinary followers and so they would not believe that he was so "mean," so unreasonable, to me. Those two years were very useful for me. I had a Dharma brother who left after two months of this method of training. I guess I did not do too badly since I survived. As a result of these two years of training, the thorns on my body and the horns of my head were ground away.

Solitary Retreat

Soon after I had received the bhikshu precepts, I started six years of solitary practice in the mountain. During this period, life was extremely poor materially but extremely rich spiritually. It was truly an important stage in my life. It enabled me to establish the foundation of correct views on Buddhadharma and practice. I also had several

experiences of the mind in Chan practice. My program of practice consisted of the following three main categories:

(1) Repentance prostrations: the first half year of the solitary retreat, I practiced repentance prostrations every day. I used the Pure Land repentance of Amitabha Buddha and the Great Compassion repentance of Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara as methods of practice. Following that I did a prostration on each word of the *Lotus Sutra*. There were three reasons for doing this: First, I felt that my karmic obstructions were too heavy, otherwise I would not have been born in the warring period resulting in having to become a monk twice. Therefore, I felt must do repentance prostrations. Second, I was grateful for the opportunity for having the proper causes and conditions to study the Dharma as it was not easy to become a monk. I was also grateful for all the favorable and unfavorable conditions that had helped me on my Dharma journey. Because of these, I felt I should do gratitude prostrations. Third, in the early years I had built up confidence by doing prostrations to Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara. Now I hoped to use repentance prostrations to cleanse my body and mind after ten years of life as a soldier.

(2) Reading the Tripitaka, the three parts of the Buddhist canon: the sutras, the vinaya, and the abhidharma. The main focus of my reading and research was on the vinaya and the early Buddhist sutras (agamas), as well as material on Buddhist history and biographies. During that period, I also wrote several books about the vinaya, the agamas, and Buddhist history. As for documents of various traditions in Chinese Buddhism, I had only used those as references and had not conducted detailed research on them.

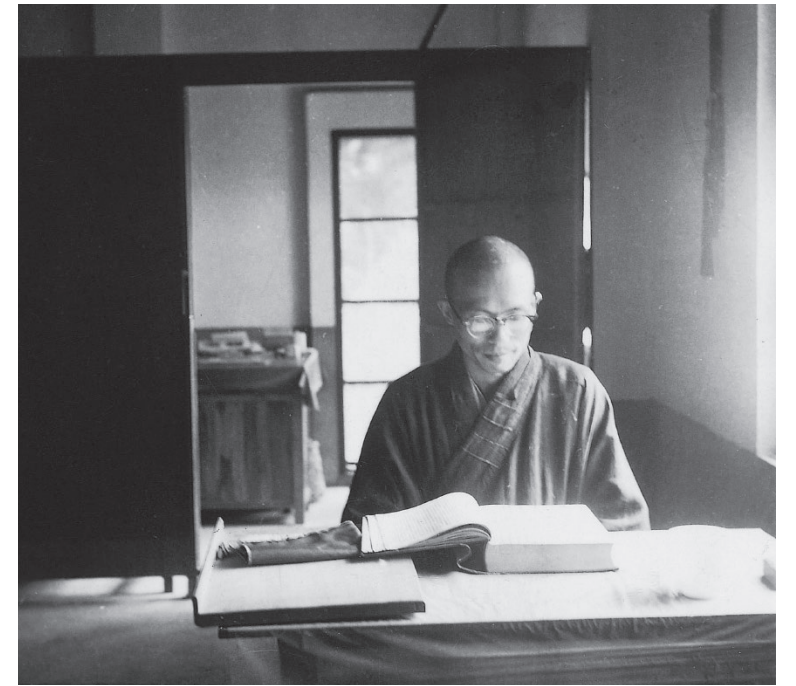
(3) Chan meditation practice: after the first half year, I started doing sitting meditation instead of

repentance prostration. I sat for four to five hours each day. I did not use any particular method. When I found that there were complicated wandering thoughts and queries that were not concentrated doubt sensations, I used the "putting down" taught by Master Lingyuan. When I was concentrated on one question, I then continued to ask, "What is it?" Usually whenever there were thoughts arising and perishing, I would practice "putting down." This led me to discover that asking "what is it?" is similar to the huatou method, whereas "putting down" resembles silent illumination. These methods

correspond to the Chan practice of China's Linji School and Caodong School, respectively.

When I came back from the mountain six years later, people asked me, "What kind of monk do you want to be now? Which lineage master do you plan to emulate?" What they were asking was whether I would like to be a Dharma master, a Chan master, or a vinaya master, and within each category, which great monk's style in history would I like to emulate.

Actually before I was 28 years old, I had also asked these questions. When I became a monk at 30, I was also asked the same questions. At this time however, I did not want to think about these questions. I really did not think about which kind of monk I would like to be. There were too many great masters in history; I can learn from all of them, yet I am, after all, not them. I can only say



Master Sheng Yen in solitary retreat at Chaoyuan Monastery DDM Archive Photo

that learning from the Buddha is my goal. As for what I will become and what I will do, it depends on the kind of causes and conditions that will ripen in the future. I will just do whatever they could and should allow me to do.

How I See and Handle Transmission

At that time, because the educational level of Buddhists was not high, especially for the monastics in China as well as Taiwan, it was difficult to get people of the upper social strata and intellectuals to take them seriously. Hence it was very difficult to spread the proper Buddhadharma. This was not only unfortunate for Buddhism; it was an even greater loss for the general public.

Because of this, at 39 years of age with the education I had, I went to Tokyo in Japan to attend Rissho University, and finished a master's and a doctorate in Buddhist literature in six years. During this period, I gained exposure to the most current scholarship in the world and also came into contact with all sorts of international religious activities. Not only did I work hard on my research, I also went all over Japan to participate in and study the methods of practice of different religions and traditions. This included both traditional and newly established religions as well as traditional and newly established Buddhism. Among them I spent most of my time on practice in the Chinese Chan tradition. This allowed me to see that there are differences in the style even among various



Master Sheng Yen holding his doctoral diploma at Rissho University, Japan in 1975 DDM Archive Photo

schools of Japanese Zen. In spite of the differences in style, all the schools in Chan and Zen emphasize the transmission of Dharma lineages.

The topic of my doctoral dissertation was the teachings of Master Ouyi Zhixu (1599–1655) of China at the end of Ming Dynasty. He was a great thinker of that time and had a deep influence on me. The Chan masters of his time were mostly only skilled at smart-talking and chatting about gong'an (Japanese *koans*) and lacked actual practice and understanding. Because of this, he criticized them severely, especially on the subject of transmissions of Dharma lineage in the Chan tradition that had only formality but no substance. He thought that Buddhadharma was not something that can be transmitted with ceremonies; Buddhadharma is not a thing that can be handed down and received. This viewpoint of his is not groundless.

In the agamas, I could find the famous phrase that reads “self-knowing, self-awakening, self-verifying.” Its meaning is that one understands Buddhadharma by oneself, one realizes Buddhadharma by oneself, and one verifies [one's experiences] by oneself. In this way, it is not necessary to ask a teacher to verify and confirm, and of course there is no need for the teacher to transmit anything to the disciple. For example, Master Ouyi Zhixu experienced enlightenment by reading the *Shurangama Sutra*. He also made use of the content in that sutra to verify his experience, and to inform himself that his experience was not yet liberation.

However, there is danger in only advocating “self-knowing, self-awakening, self-verifying.” The danger is that, taking these words literally, anyone could think that they know they are already a buddha, that they have realized buddhahood by themselves, and that they have verified their own buddhahood. They have already known that they have attained buddhahood by themselves, that they

have realized buddhahood themselves, and that they have verified that they have attained buddhahood themselves. This is not correct Buddhadharma.

For a person to be able to take on the mission of transmitting and upholding the Buddhadharma, according to my understanding, this person must possess all the three prerequisites, which are:

(1) Correct view (Sanskrit *samyagdristi*): according to the *Samyuktagama* (Miscellaneous Collection Sutras), those with the enhancement of correct view will not fall into hell. Correct view is the view of emptiness (Skt. *sunyata*) based on the laws of causes and conditions and of cause and effect.

(2) Right action: in the agamas, besides the enhancement of correct view, there are also the five enhancing practices of right faith (shradda), generosity (dana), pure precepts (sila), concentration (dhyana) and wisdom (prajna). Individuals receiving transmission in the Mahayana Chan tradition must use the six enhancing practices described in the agamas as the proper guideline on the path toward liberation. In addition, one must also practice the Mahayana bodhisattva path, such as the six paramitas and the four ways of gathering sentient beings², etc., in order to attain buddhahood.

(3) The vow to attain perfect universal wisdom of a buddha (Skt. *samyagbuddhi*): this refers to setting the attainment of Buddha's wisdom (Skt. *sambodhi*) as one's eternal goal. This is why when one practices the Dharma, we call that emulating the Buddha; one is emulating Buddha's compassion, wisdom, and great vows.

The responsibility of transmitting Buddhadharma thus falls on the Buddhist disciples who possess correct view, right action, and great vows. For this there is a passage in Chapter 35 of the *Ekottarikagama* (*Numerical Collection Sutras*) describing Shakyamuni Buddha handing the mission of transmitting the Dharma to Mahakashyapa and Ananda. The legend of

“seeing the flower and smiling” and “mind-to-mind seal” was not recorded in this passage. In documents of the history of the Chan tradition, such as *Record of the Correct Source of Dharma Transmission* (Chinese *Chuan Fa Zheng Zong Ji*) and *Stories on the Causes and Conditions of the Transmission of the Dharma Jewel* (Chn. *Fu Fa Zang Yin Yuan Zhuan*), there was also no record of mind seal or confirmation (Chn. *yinke*; Jpn. *inka*)³ in the generation-to-generation transmission of the 28 Indian lineage masters. However, by the time Shenhui (668–760), a disciple of the sixth lineage master Huineng in the Chinese Chan tradition, wrote the *Record of the Manifestation of the Origin (of Dharma)* (Chn. *Xian Zong Ji*), there was then the saying of “transmission by the seal of mind (within one's mind); using the mind to experience the mind seal in order to authenticate the original mind⁴.”⁵ From this we can see that the emphasis on confirmation in the Chan tradition is not based on documents of the early period. Furthermore, since Indian culture did not emphasize written history but instead relied on oral history, there are signs of order reversal as well as addition and deletion in the sequence of the 28 lineage masters in the various archival materials on the origin of the Chan tradition that were left behind. This has brought about controversies within recent academic circles, questioning the credibility and reliability of transmissions.

In the Chinese Chan tradition, there is heavy emphasis on the system of transmission of the Dharma lineage. This can be seen in the various volumes of *Record of the Transmission of the Lamp*. For instance, although I do not think that one must have transmission in order to teach, I do indeed have very clear lineage transmissions. There was also no shortage of Chan masters in recent Chinese history. Individuals such as Xuyun, Laigu (1881–1953), and Zhenkong (1922–2009)⁶, etc. were all great Chan masters with very deep and solid practice. It was



Master Sheng Yen at Daihonzan Myoshin Ji in Japan DDM Archive Photo

only because they did not speak international languages that they were not widely recognized in the world.

When I studied in Japan, I visited a number of monasteries: Daihonzan Myoshin Ji and Kenjyo Ji of the Rinza School (Chn. *Linji*), as well as Sohonzan Eihei Ji and Daihonzan Soji Ji of the Soto School (Chn. *Caodong*). But I did my Chan practice mainly at Tosho Ji of the Ryotaku Ji School, which was a new sect established by Harada Sogaku Roshi. When I left Japan for the United States, I did not think of trying to obtain confirmation.

However when my head-shaving preceptor,⁷ Master Dongchu came to visit me in the United States in 1976 and saw me teaching Chan meditation in the Temple of Great Enlightenment in New York, he said to me, “You still have not received transmission!”

He had received transmission through the Jiaoshan sect of the Caodong School. On that day he gave me transmission and ordered me to continue his Dharma lineage, but there was no ceremony. Two years later in 1978, I returned to Taiwan to visit Master Lingyuan, the abbot of the Monastery of Great Enlightenment of Ten Directions in Jilong. I asked him, “Old Master, do you still remember me? I am that soldier who had shared a sleeping platform with you at Gaoxiong, and you gave me a big shout.” He said, “Oh! I remember! The person that I taught to put down has come.” When he knew that I had already been spreading the teaching of Chan and had held seven-day retreats in the United States, he said, “I should give you a name.” So I put on the black robe and the patriarch cloth, and he led me to prostrate to the picture of his grandmaster, Xuyun, and gave

me the Dharma name of Zhigang Weirou.⁸ Within two years I received transmission from two lineages. While it did not mean much to me personally, it is still valuable in establishing credibility when spreading and upholding the Buddhadharma.

Now, the Dharma line I transmit is similar to that of Master Dongchu’s, which consists of both the Caodong and Linji lineages. The Caodong part of my transmission comes from the Jiaoshan system, whereas the Linji part comes from Nanhua Monastery which belongs to the system of Master Xuyun. Combining my own lineage lines, the system of Dharma Drum Mountain will be transmitted from my generation on. The Dharma first name (Chn. *fa-hao*⁹) used for this Dharma lineage transmitted by me will come from the Linji School, and the Dharma name (Chn. *fa-ming*¹⁰) will come from the system of Dharma Drum Mountain.¹¹ Rather than transmitting Linji and Caodong separately, my way of combining and using the methods from both lineages is transmitted through the lineage of Dharma Drum Mountain. My Dharma heirs may be proficient in the use of both the methods of huatou and silent illumination, or they may use only one of the two for their practice. When they can use one method very well, they are encouraged to learn and practice how to use the other method.

Encouragement to the Recipients of Transmission

In the course of my studies, I have discovered that in Chinese Buddhist history, with the exception of great translation masters and vinaya masters, great monastic practitioners have mostly been called Chan masters. It was of course the case with great practitioners in the Chan tradition. It was also true for lineage masters of the Tiantai School, the Huayan School, and even the Pure Land School.

Because of this, I have paid more attention to Chan literature. Especially after coming to the United States in 1975, I have been exposed to an increasing number of documents on Chan practice. By 2000, I had published more than 20 books both in English and Chinese on the Chan tradition and Chan practice. I also have several disciples who have received transmission in the teaching of Chan. The following is a brief description of my encouragement to these disciples. They are, in fact, also words I use to encourage myself.

(1) Chinese Chan is the method of sudden enlightenment of the Mahayana practice. In sudden enlightenment, one is awakened to the self-nature (Skt. *svabhava*) of all phenomena, and that is the nature of emptiness. After seeing the nature, one must generate great vows to spread the Buddhadharma with correct view and right action.

(2) Experiencing correct view is precisely seeing the nature of emptiness for oneself. It is seeing the self-nature, which is seeing buddha-nature. Within the nature of emptiness there is the function of boundless compassion and wisdom, therefore it is called buddha-nature. However, seeing the nature is not the same as the complete attainment of buddhahood, nor is it equal to liberation. There are still a lot of vexations waiting for one to handle, and a lot of work waiting for one to finish. The difference is that one now clearly knows the path one should take, and one is also capable of seeing clearly how to handle one’s problems.

(3) An individual given the responsibility of transmission should feel joyful, but should not feel prideful. One should feel happy, but one must not feel self-satisfied. One should always pick up the method one is familiar with, and be prudent in one’s daily speech and bodily actions at all time. By so doing, one will be the person who benefits most and progresses most quickly.

(4) As for the relationship between teacher and disciple, Master Dongchu once told me, “30 percent teacher-disciple, 70 percent companions on the path.” What it means is that the relationship should be like one between learned friends who serve as supporting favorable conditions for each other. The disciple venerates the teacher out of gratitude for the benefit of Dharma received from the teacher. The teacher respects the disciple out of appreciation of the disciple’s carrying on the Dharma transmission. The teacher does not possess absolute authority. For the disciples, the teacher plays the role of a consultant on the guidance of techniques and a witness who verifies one’s level of practice. Between the two is a merging relationship of teaching and learning the Buddhadharma. What the disciple learns from the teacher is the accurate Buddhadharma; one does not necessarily emulate the teacher.

Sheng Yen
Dharma Drum Retreat Center at Shawangunk
Pine Bush, New York
November 27, 2000

Addendum

This addendum to Shifu’s article is based on his meeting with John Crook and Simon Child in November 2006 at Dharma Drum Retreat Center.

When asked how one should identify suitable individuals to give Dharma transmission to, Shifu gave the following response: “There are two ways to go about giving Dharma transmission. The first is when one is getting old, approaching death, and can no longer teach the Dharma. Therefore one needs to find someone to continue propagating the Dharma

and pass on the lineage. At this time, one needs to find individuals who are passionate about Buddhadharma, and who have a relatively good understanding and are faithful to the lineage. It is okay to pass on the responsibility of carrying on the lineage to these people. Maybe they are not enlightened. They may have small realizations but they have not had a great enlightenment experience. Yet they are clearly aware of this fact and have given rise to a sense of humility, and they are enthusiastic about spreading the Dharma. It is okay to give Dharma transmission to this kind of individual. But it would not be suitable if they are young. It is because young people are not stable yet. If you give them Dharma transmission, they may not really want to carry on the lineage tomorrow. So, this is the first way. For example, when I gave transmission to twelve people last year, they were all over forty years old. They are all monastics, over forty, and have been in monastic life for over ten years. So they are more stable. Among these people, there are some who are not enlightened. But they are passionate about teaching the Dharma and are very clear about my methods and teachings. That is why I gave them Dharma transmission.

“The other way is when someone who has been practicing with you has seen the nature of emptiness. After seeing the nature, one becomes even more committed to Dharma practice to the extent that Buddhadharma has become their life. Regardless of their life situation, being in some profession, or still a student, or having a family, for them Dharma is the top priority on their mind, more important than their profession and family. These are suitable people to whom you can give Dharma transmission. You can give them the responsibility of transmitting the Dharma. They need to have self-confidence, stability in life, uphold the precepts purely, possess right view, and be highly committed to passing on the lineage. These people have all the

key criteria: studying, teaching and protecting the Dharma. You definitely can give these people Dharma transmission.”

John Crook followed up with this question: “Can a Dharma heir who has not experienced *kensho* (Jpn. “seen self-nature”) also transmit the Dharma? Or should it be only those who have experienced *kensho* who should transmit to the future generation? In other words, can the administrative monks give transmission to practitioners?”

Shifu answered, “For the Dharma heirs (who have not experienced *kensho*), when they lead Chan retreats, they cannot lead the retreat at a deep level. They cannot verify the experience of seeing the nature for others because they have not seen the nature themselves. For these individuals, when they are leading Chan practice, they need to be upfront with people that they have not seen the nature. They

can tell people this: ‘I do not have any enlightenment experience, but I can share the principles passed down by my master and grandmasters based on their enlightenment experiences. Yet I cannot verify your enlightenment experience. You will have to look for a more advanced practitioner (who has enlightenment experience) to verify your experience.’ In this way, these Dharma heirs can still be ordinary Dharma teachers, but they cannot be Dharma masters.”

John Crook then asked, “Can they transmit?”

Shifu answered, “They cannot transmit the Dharma. They are not qualified to give Dharma transmission. They need to have realized the mind Dharma. Without having realized the mind Dharma, how can you transmit? The meaning of transmission here is ‘verification of mind.’ So they cannot give Dharma transmission.” ☸



From left to right: Simon Child, Master Sheng Yen, Rebecca Li, and John Crook DDM Archive Photo

1. In the ceremony where Master Sheng Yen was ordained as a monk, there was a *heshang* (the precepts master) who chaired the ceremony, an *upadhyaya* (a teacher who teaches the observance of rites and etiquette), a master of ceremony, and seven honorable witnessing *acharyas* (master or teacher). Master Lingyuan was one of the seven honorable witnessing acharyas.
2. *Si-she-fa* (Chinese) or *catuh-samgraha-vastu* (Sanskrit) can also be translated as four all-embracing (bodhisattva) virtues. They are 1) Dana, in order to lead sentient beings to love and receive the truth; 2) affectionate speech, with the same purpose; 3) conduct beneficial to others, with the same purpose; and 4) co-operation with and adaptation of oneself to others, with the same purpose.
3. *Yinke* (Chinese); *Inka* (Japanese). It means the confirmation given by a master to a student who has seen the nature. The person who confirms one's level of practice in the process of practice, and then gives one the responsibility to transmit the Dharma is one's transmission master.
4. In Chinese "*Nei* (internal) *chuan* (transmit) *xin* (mind) *yin* (seal). *Yin* (seal) *qi* (same) *ben* (original) *xin* (mind)." The translation of these two lines is based on Shifu's explanation.
5. To paraphrase, this says that transmission is a "mind seal" (mind-to-mind exchange) between a lineage master and a disciple, in which the master authenticates the disciple's experience of seeing the nature (buddha-mind).
6. Master Sheng Yen was most likely referring to the old master more widely known as Master Foyuan Miaoxin here. He was a Dharma heir of Master Xuyun in the Yumen School.
7. The shaving master is the one who takes in a person when he or she becomes a monk or nun, a process symbolized by shaving one's head and putting on the robe. This is not necessarily the same person who confirms one's ordination.
8. See the lineage chart for details. <https://dharma drumretreat.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/DDM-Lineage-Chart.pdf>
9. The character "*Chuan*" (meaning "transmit") is used for the first character of the Dharma name (*Fa-ming*) of the lay Dharma heirs of Master Sheng Yen. For instance, John Crook (Master Sheng Yen's first Dharma heir in the West) has "*Chuan-deng*" (meaning "transmit lamp") as his Dharma name, whereas Simon Child's Dharma name is "*Chuan-fa*" (meaning "transmit Dharma"), Max Kälin's Dharma name

is "*Chuan-zong*" (meaning "transmit principle"), Žarko Andričević's Dharma name is "*Chuan-xin*" (meaning "transmit mind"), and Gilbert Gutierrez's Dharma name is "*Chuan-hui*" (meaning "transmit wisdom"). Their Dharma heirs will then have "*Fa*" (meaning "Dharma") as the first character of their Dharma names (*Fa-ming*), and the character "*Yin*" will be used for the following generation.

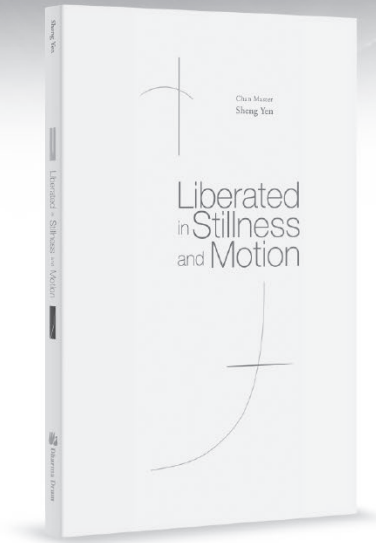
10. For the practitioners receiving transmission from Master Sheng Yen, the second character in this thirty-two word verse "*Jing*" (meaning "pure") is used as the first character of their Dharma first name (*Fa-hao*). For instance, John Crook's Dharma first name is "*Jing-di*" (meaning "pure truth"). Thus, his full Dharma name is "*Jing-di Chuan-deng*" (meaning "pure truth, transmit lamp"). Simon Child's Dharma first name (*Fa-hao*) is "*Jing-hong*" (meaning "pure greatness"), making his full Dharma name "*Jing-hong Chuan-fa*" (meaning "pure greatness, transmit Dharma"). Max Kälin's Dharma first name is "*Jing-chan*" (meaning "pure Chan"), making his full Dharma name "*Jing-chan Chuan-zong*" (meaning "pure Chan, transmit principle"). Žarko Andričević's Dharma first name is "*Jing-hui*" (meaning "pure wisdom"), making his full Dharma name "*Jing-hui Chuan-xin*" (meaning "pure wisdom, transmit mind"). Gilbert Gutierrez's Dharma first name is "*Jing-jian*" (meaning "pure sword"), making his full Dharma name "*Jing-jian Chuan-hui*" (meaning "pure sword, transmit wisdom"). Their Dharma heirs will then have the next character in the verse "*Zhi*" (meaning "wisdom") as the first character of their Dharma first names (*Fa-hao*). This means that their Dharma heirs will receive full Dharma names that read "*Zhi-something Fa-something*".
11. Master Sheng Yen has two Dharma names. Master Lingyuan, who gave him transmission of the Linji line, gave him the name *Zhigang Weirou*. Master Dongchu, who gave him transmission of both the Linji and Caodong lines, gave him the name *Huikong Shengyen*. This name comes from the Linji line and Master Sheng Yen, while having received transmission in both lines from Master Dongchu, does not have a Dharma name from the Caodong line. This will be the case for those receiving transmission from Master Sheng Yen along the Dharma Drum system. While they will receive transmission in both the Linji and Caodong lines, their Dharma names will come from only the Linji line.

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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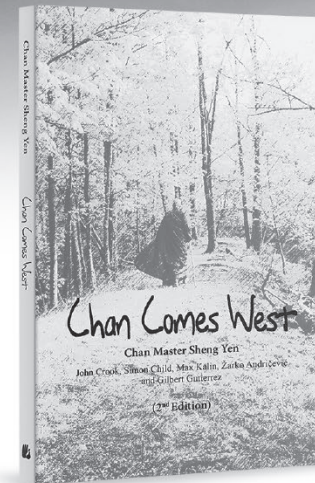


Chan Comes West (2nd Edition)

Chan Master Sheng Yen
John Crook, Simon Child, Max Kälin,
Žarko Andričević, and Gilbert Gutierrez

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.

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



Explaining the Mission of Transmitting the Dharma

BY

Chan Master Sheng Yen

On September 2, 2005, at Nung Chan Monastery, Master Sheng Yen held a Ceremony for Transmitting the Dharma to twelve of his monastic disciples. This article is taken from the talk Master Sheng Yen gave at that ceremony. It was translated into English by Chiacheng Chang, and edited by Ernie Heau and Buffe Maggie Laffey.

The Meaning of Transmitting the Dharma

DEAR VENERABLES AND DHARMA FRIENDS: Today is a great good day and happy occasion for Dharma Drum Mountain, as this is the first time we are holding the Ceremony for Transmitting the Dharma. Besides the resident community of monastics, postulants, and students, also present to witness the ceremony and share the joy are the Dharma supporters of our organization, who have been with us throughout the years.

What is the meaning of transmitting the Dharma? At the age of seventy-six, Sixth Patriarch Master Huineng (638–713), summoned ten of his disciples and assigned to them the mission of transmitting

the Dharma. Now, also at age seventy-six, I too am transmitting the Dharma to altogether twelve disciples of mine. Why these twelve and not others? The twelve monastics present today are the ones who have long contributed to our Dharma Drum Mountain organization, by giving much effort and time for the operation of our sangha. Some of them have a deeper foundation in Chan practice, while some have contributed more to Buddhist studies, education, and culture. Nevertheless, they all share one characteristic of having a stable personality and perseverance. This is very important.

This transmission does not imply that these twelve persons are my only Dharma heirs. As we know, when Master Huineng transmitted the Dharma to ten of his disciples, it seems that only



Master Sheng Yen (sitting) and his twelve monastic dharma heirs – Front row: Ven. Guo Yi, Ven. Guo Guang, Ven. Guo Jing, and Ven. Guo Zhao. Back row: Ven. Guo Jun, Ven. Guo Pin, Ven. Guo Yuan, Ven. Huimin, Ven. Guo Ru, Ven. Guo Huei, Ven. Guo Xing, and Ven. Guo Dong. DDM Archive Photo

two had left a legacy in Chinese Buddhist history: Shenhui (688–758) and Fahai (d.u.), who recorded Master Huineng’s teachings as the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*. Other Chan masters who made an impact on Chinese Buddhism in later times included Shitou Xiqian (700–790), Qingyuan Xingsi (660–740), and Nanyue Huairang (677–744). Though not among the original ten disciples, these masters contributed much to the later development of the tradition of Chan Buddhism. Even though Master Shenhui’s lineage had contributed to the Buddhist teaching in northern China at the time, it is a pity that in the end he did not find someone to whom he could transmit the Dharma lineage to be upheld.

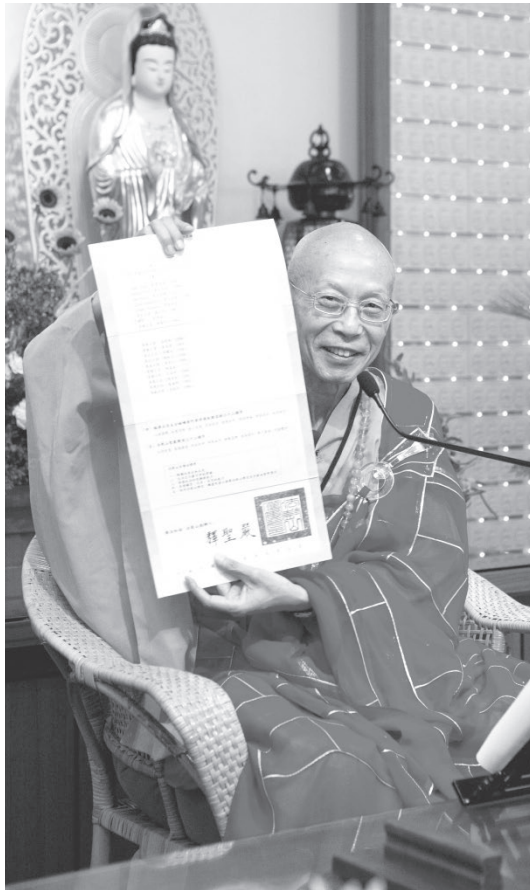
Therefore, transmitting the Dharma to be upheld is essential to keep the bright light of the Dharma

shining, to enable Chinese Buddhism to inherit the past and inspire the future, and to spread the ideas and practices of Dharma Drum Mountain. Today is our first occasion to actualize the mission of transmitting the Dharma, and we will hold a similar ceremony in the future when needed.

Receiving the Dharma Lineage

Who will receive the Dharma transmission this time? The people here today have met at least one of three requirements:

First, some have had a fundamental awakening to the Dharma of mind, as well as the compassion and ability to propagate and promote the Dharma of mind.



The Certificate for Dharma Heirs DDM Archive Photo

Second, others have received the aspiration to uphold the correct Dharma, to propagate and promote the correct Dharma, to pass down and inherit the correct Dharma, to continue the Buddha's life of wisdom, and to have the ability to maintain and develop the Chan teaching which characterizes the Dharma Drum lineage.

Third, others are already able to independently propagate and share the Dharma as taught at Dharma Drum Mountain in a certain part of the world, or to have a separate practice center.

First of all, a fundamental awakening to the Dharma of mind – meaning to illuminate the mind and see one's true nature – is a requirement for receiving mind-to-mind transmission. However, not all awakened people are necessarily well-suited to receive Dharma transmission. For instance, I have confirmed several others from Taiwan and the West as having seen their true nature, but did not give Dharma transmission to all of them. Why is that? It is because some did not have the requisite level of compassion and skills to propagate and promote the Buddha's teaching. This requirement is extremely important. So illuminating the mind and seeing one's true nature are not a guarantee that one is ready to receive Dharma transmission. Please understand that.

The second requirement is that they should have the aspiration to uphold the correct Dharma, to propagate and promote the correct Dharma, to pass down and inherit the correct Dharma, to continue the Buddha's life of wisdom, and to have the skills to maintain and develop the Chan teaching characteristic of the Dharma Drum lineage. When Sixth Patriarch Master Huineng transmitted the Dharma to his ten disciples, they asked him what teachings he was going to transmit, and what other things they should pay attention and adhere to. Master Huineng told them that it would be sufficient to simply uphold and promote the *Platform Sutra*, without actually indicating other instructions. When Shakyamuni Buddha transmitted the Dharma to Mahakashyapa and Ananda, what did he want them to transmit to others? He wanted them to transmit the treasury of the true Dharma Eye, or the sublime Dharma Eye. We see that all show this kind of compassionate aspiration, the commitment to promote and continue Shakyamuni Buddha's teaching, and that is the reason for receiving Dharma transmission.

The third requirement is that they should be skillful enough to independently propagate and share the Dharma as taught at Dharma Drum Mountain in a certain part of the world, or that they already have a separate place of practice. We also aim at these people for transmitting the Dharma. When at least one of these three requirements is met, we will transmit the Dharma to that person.

Complementing Chinese Buddhism

What will be their mission after receiving the Dharma lineage? To receive the Dharma lineage is to accept and absorb the advantages of the various schools, sects and lineages. We often talk about the Theravada tradition, the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, and the eight major schools of Chinese Buddhist tradition. We should try to integrate the strong points of each and every school and sect, and incorporate them into our Chinese Buddhist tradition; this is to correct its shortfalls and complement its shortcomings, thereby connecting to the Buddhism as practiced throughout the world as a whole, into the future.

What are the differences between Dharma heirs and other disciples? Actually, the only difference is that the Dharma heirs have been assigned to their mission. Other disciples may not have been transmitted the Dharma, but I also hope that everybody can take up this weighty task and great mission. Whether he or she has been transmitted the Dharma is actually not a problem.

Receiving Dharma transmission represents a duty. As Shakyamuni Buddha said, those who are able to apply the Dharma, pass down and practice the Dharma, propagate and promote the Dharma and take up the mission, can be Dharma heirs. Dharma heirs are “born out of the Buddha's mouth,” and have

obtained the “share of the Dharma,” meaning that as long as one's state of the mind is in accordance with the correct Dharma, he or she is a Dharma heir. In this sense lay practitioners can also be my Dharma heirs too, as long as they're willing to accept this mission and achieve this standard.

Bodhi-Mind and Renunciation

Dharma heirs need to generate bodhi-mind and embrace the mind of renunciation. With the mind of renunciation, they will have no affliction, and with the bodhi-mind they will give of themselves to sentient beings. If they have taken up the task in the Dharma and still have afflictions and unwholesome habit tendencies, then they should constantly correct themselves, repent, and feel shame. By doing so they are then qualified to spread the Dharma for the benefit of sentient beings. In our sangha there may be different positions and levels of duty, but there is no differentiation in status. If one receives the Dharma only to become arrogant and haughty, then he or she is not actually living up to the transmission of this lineage.

We should treat our elders with reverent respect, treat people with friendliness, treat younger generations with care and compassion, and require ourselves to be frugal. If we have the power and position, and thereby enjoy more than others do, then departing from the above standards represents a degrading of the transmission. When I was your age, we didn't have cars for transportation, but only relied on bicycles and motorbikes, and sometimes we took mini-trucks. And we didn't have amenities like private offices; we just made do with any randomly available desk. We lived like most other people did. It's only that now I am getting old, so I need people to look after my diet, but that doesn't mean I'm eating better than anybody else.

I still remember Ven. Zhiguang, my teacher's teacher. He washed and mended his own clothes, and never asked someone else to shave his hair. If we want to motivate and influence others, we need to be able to endure hardship and hard work, and do our best to serve others. It's certainly good to be learned and capable, but if one lacks virtuous deeds, then it will hurt the reputation of Buddhism. In the *Platform Sutra*, a disciple asked Master Huineng to whom he was going to assign the "treasury of the true Dharma Eye." The Master then said, "The one with the Path will attain; the one of no-mind will understand." Whether these were really Huineng's words would need verification, but what it means is correct. That is to say, as long as one does virtuous deeds, one will have obtained the treasury of the true Dharma Eye. And how does one penetrate to the essence of the treasury of the true Dharma Eye? One has to let go of attachment to self-centeredness; that is, by letting go of various forms of jealousy, suspicion, discontent, greed, and hatred, one will accord with the treasury of the true Dharma Eye.

Teachings Accessible to the People

Actually, the teachings of Dharma Drum Mountain are not particularly special; they simply reflect the teachings of Chinese Chan Buddhism. The Chinese Chan tradition is different from the Theravada tradition and the Tibetan tradition. What is wonderful about the Chinese Chan tradition is that it is accessible to the public, easy to popularize, and applicable in daily life. Chinese Chan teaching is not separate from the fundamentals of Buddhism; while it doesn't negate intellectual inquiry, it doesn't really require one to engage very much in intellectual study. If it were always talking about intellectual learning, and if spreading the Dharma were all about dealing with academic studies, then the Buddha's teaching

could not really become popular. Why Chan became dominant in China, and other schools and sects weren't as widespread, is precisely because the deep philosophies and theories of the latter accommodated mainly the intellectual elite, and did not really speak to and connect with the general public.

For instance, the Chan practice as taught by Master Baizhang (720–814) or Master Mazu (709–788) was characterized by simplicity and practicality. Whether one was intellectually learned, knowledgeable, wealthy or poor, most people were able to apply Chan to their daily lives. It is precisely because the Chan they were taught was so straightforward, simple, and practical, that it became popular and endured so long.

I stress this because we should not rely on courting the powerful and rich, in the hope they will support the Dharma. Always seeking favor from them might work for a while, but in the long run we will lose the support of the people as our foundation.

However, that doesn't mean we should decline the help of the powerful and rich; indeed, we should hope to receive their help, as well as for them to become Buddhist practitioners and supporters. But we should not try to court and connect to the powerful and rich; otherwise, we will fail to help Buddhism endure, prosper, and become popular. This is why there is a Buddhist expression: "a bowl that embraces a thousand households." It requires us to start with the general public, equally receiving people of all social strata, being of service of them, caring for them, and enabling them to benefit from the Buddha's teaching according to their needs. By doing so we can then help Buddhism perpetuate in the world. Buddhism actually relies on the public. Shakyamuni Buddha was born into a royal family, and he might have delivered royalty, officials, and elders, but the people he encountered were mostly ordinary people. So we should bear this principle in mind.



Sangha as the Core

For the past two years, Dharma Drum Mountain has been seeking to improve and perfect its system and organization. Regarding the system, it has to start with our sangha. In the future, our sangha will be the core of our group. The twelve monastics who are receiving Dharma transmission today are important executive leaders within our Dharma Drum Mountain organizational structure. Although some of them are not resident monastics here, they all interact closely with each other and share the same direction. When encountering controversial problems, they are supposed to confer together. In discussion, they should act in accordance with the standards pertaining to Dharma Drum's transmission of the Dharma, as well as the meaning and mission of our transmitting the Dharma.

As a practice center, what is the nature of Dharma Drum Mountain? As I have said to our sangha before, in Buddhism we regard Shakyamuni Buddha's original teachings as the highest, and then

it's Indian Buddhism, Chinese Buddhism and within that, Chan Buddhism. In terms of Chan Buddhism, the teaching of Dharma Drum Mountain is based on the Protecting the Spiritual Environment movement. And when we look at the future, it is the Buddhism practiced in the world as a whole. This is the principle under which we will operate and move forward.

Now everybody please repeat after me the Dharma Drum Mountain's five criteria for receiving transmission of the Dharma, as follows:

First, to have right knowledge and right view of the Buddha's teachings.

Second, to live, speak, and act in strict accordance with the precepts for purity and codes of conduct.

Third, to have the compassionate vow and skills to spread the Dharma.

Fourth, to embrace people, transform them, and bring peace to their minds.

Fifth, to identify with and promote Dharma Drum Mountain's vision and ideas, as a dedicated duty throughout my life. ☸

The Circling Birds: Openings to Insight on the Path of Chan

BY

John Crook

In *Chan Comes West*, Master Sheng Yen's 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. It is hoped that readers will find these stories inspiring and be encouraged to make great vows in their own practice. Here is John Crook's chapter from that book. Edited by Rebecca Li with editorial assistance from Ernie Heau. British conventions of spelling have been preserved, though American style punctuation is used.

Early Years

ONCE UPON A TIME, and a very long time ago it seems too, I was a teenager living in a forest in southern England. World War II was raging. My hometown, the port of Southampton, had been devastated by German air raids. My father was in charge of the "Air Raid Precautions" section of the Civil Defence in a district near the docks. Among other things, he walked through railway tunnels at night with a torch looking for unexploded bombs. In 1940 the family, except for Dad, had moved out into the New Forest for safety. England is an old country and the forest was first "new" in the twelfth century when the king had set it apart for hunting. We were



DDRC Archive Photo



Photo by Sven Lachmann

all expecting a Nazi invasion even though things seemed to go on more or less as usual while the RAF shot the German planes out of the sky above our heads. The Battle of Britain was at its height. My Dad wrote to me at boarding school. "Whatever happens," he said, "Never forget these words – NIL DESPERANDUM."¹ I suppose that was my first mantra.

As the war gradually went our way, I explored the beautiful forest and the moorlands around our home. I had become a small but ardent bird watcher. Since I had no binoculars, I had to move very quietly among the trees and undergrowth. I learnt solitary field craft the hard way and an ability to still the mind in focussed attention undoubtedly developed at that time. One day I saw a squirrel pop out of a hole in a great beech tree. It looked at me from a few yards away and we gazed, motionless, at each other. Suddenly I was overcome by an extraordinary joy,

all my concerns seemed to disappear and I found myself fallen to the ground uttering words of thanks to Jesus, tears falling from my face. That experience became a turning moment for my whole life: I had come across something that was altogether "other."

I went to school and studied biology, learning about Darwin, evolution, physiology and physics. A deep suspicion arose as I did so. All the truths of my childhood Christianity seemed untenable before this fascinating new knowledge which eventually led to my career in biology and anthropology.

Scepticism was not new to me. When I was very small, my sister and I were visited every Christmas by Father Christmas, who came down the chimney and filled our socks with goodies. I began to suspect this was a bit of fun for my parents but I did not want to disclose my doubts because then of course I wouldn't get the presents. All I learnt from their kindness was a sort of deviousness. I continued to



Sooner or later the word God would inevitably arise. I would put up my hand. “Excuse me,” I would say, “You have just used the word ‘God.’ What does it mean? Without a definition I cannot see how your argument follows.” Never did I get a reasoned reply. I must have been an insufferable student.

Reading Plato, especially *The Symposium*, began to offer me some helpful perspectives. From a love of small things one could grow to understand absolute beauty itself.

Perhaps that was what I needed to comprehend, I pondered. I had been sent to a British public school, all male, firm discipline, a lot of sports especially rugby football which I came to love, good academic class work and military training. I hid the pain of separation from parents and home from both others and myself. On Sundays I would gaze along the railway lines and count the days. British public schools in those days taught one how to cope with a special sort of existential doom in which we all participated. Lonely boys, gradually finding in each other the meaning of friendship, had problems with emotional understanding, their sense of loss and family betrayal, and the storms of sudden love. Yet it stood one in good stead when enrolled into the army for National Service.

The Quest

I read widely and discovered that there were such things as mystical experiences. I thought I knew exactly what that meant because I had had a firsthand experience myself. But I failed to find anyone else who had known what I had known. As a university student I went to lectures by priests.

Hong Kong

It was the time of the Korean War and I reached the giddy rank of Second Lieutenant within a year. Soon I was on a troopship, an artillery officer specialising in radar, bound for Hong Kong. On the way across the rolling wastes of the Indian Ocean I read Christmas Humphreys’ book *Buddhism: An Introduction and*

Photo by Pam Caley

Guide. I found that here there seemed to be some themes I could not instantly rubbish through the reductionist scepticism of which I had become not a little proud. In Hong Kong, I sought out Chinese friends, which was an adventure in itself, and finally I was introduced to a Mr. Yen Shiliang, a merchant who had “sat” with the great Master Xuyun. He welcomed me to his evening classes held once a week in a traditional Chinese doctor’s surgery.

Of my meetings with Mr. Yen I have written: “Here I am up against a very different interlocutor. I can argue with ability and precision, the premises and inferences tidily related, and Mr. Yen will follow me, give a partial answer along the same lines and then suddenly, with a look and a few deft phrases of equally clear reasoning, he sweeps all my contribution to one side. Lo and behold, the conversation has entered another dimension, still the same subject, still logical, yet in a realm in which only he is master and in which I can only hover along behind trying to follow his fluent discourse and the extending reach of his mind. It is all very good for me!”²

What is new for me is the way he calls on the intuitive as well as the intellectual intelligence. It is this which gives his words such added power and makes them fly.

These Buddhist ideas do not rest on logical reasoning alone. Reason only “circles about and about forever more,” bringing us back in through the door through which we went. He seems to speak justly when he says, “One either knows or one does not.” So far this knowing is however only within his dimension not mine. It is as if he suddenly uses an entirely fresh verbal ‘conjugation’ which shifts the whole context of a conversation into another register.”³

Soon I found myself exploring the world of Chinese monasteries. On first visiting Baolin Si (Precious Woods Monastery) on Lantau Island we

had to pass a small stone gateway. “On rounding a shoulder of the mountain and approaching the high point of a col, we came across a great stone arch silhouetted nakedly against the darkening sky. Solitarily placed among rocks and scree near the top of the pass, it gave the location a powerful atmosphere. Coming close we could see it was painted white and that there were great black Chinese characters incised upon it. We stood below it listening to the wind and gazed up, puzzled, at the writing. Then, to my surprise, we found near the bottom of one column an inscription in English. Three terse phrases lay one above the other:

*To the great monk Sing Wai
There is no time
What is memory?*

The words were so unusual, so unexpected, that on reading them I was shocked. There was a momentary gap in my thinking and feeling as I tried to fathom their paradoxical power. This was my first confrontation with a text that summarised Chinese Buddhist insight and the question it asked not only perplexed me deeply but was to go on rankling under the cover of my daily activities for months to come. It came as a revelation to realise that here was a perspective that asked the very questions that seemed to have been deliberately avoided in my religious education, questions which in recent years had concerned me more and more and would not go away. A sudden silence was filled with the sound of the light wind and below the mists parted to give a momentary glimpse of a small junk heading out to sea.

Later, near the end of that first visit, I found one room off the courtyard that particularly intrigued me. “It seemed to be a kind of small hall or study, for there were hassocks on the floor and, around the walls,

ran a stone pew upon which, at intervals, cushions were placed. As I passed the window I noticed what appeared to be a life-sized image sitting just out of the light coming in from the window. I looked more closely and realised that it was in fact a young monk. He was sitting with his legs crossed, the soles of the feet upturned upon his thighs and his hands resting together lightly between them. His back was upright but not rigid and his head inclined slightly forwards. His eyes were shut and his face completely relaxed, expressionless, serene. I watched him closely, strangely drawn to him with an emotion akin to awe. His breathing came and went so slowly, so slightly, that he seemed not to move at all. The Buddha posture gave him an air of detachment, of distance, of separateness from the world of men, from life even. He seemed most like the mountain itself filled with an impersonal, unengaged, power meditating upon its own centre. The words on the gate came back to me, "There is no time. What is memory? What indeed could memory be without time? What could time be without memory? What was memory? What was time? Was this the way to find the value of emptiness within the vessel? The questions spun in my mind and I pondered over them near the window for some time before I drew myself away."⁴

Leaving the mountain that day to return to the rigours of the army camp: "As the clouds drifted alone and serene over the hills my eyes followed them; I felt that everything in my life and in the world around me had fallen still; that it had always been so; that nothing had ever happened nor would happen and that it would be thus from everlasting to everlasting."

Searching Among Teachers

These experiences became the foundation for my life-long love of Buddhism and especially for Chan. As the years rolled by, I explored many themes with a number of great teachers. There was but little Zen in the West after the Korean War, and I began by following Mr. Yen's advice to meet Krishnamurti. Years later, I lived in Poona and was able to attend a small weekly class with him. I still regard him as a great bodhisattva and from him I learned much, although the brahminical social background to his teachings seemed to keep some aspects of his life remote and mysterious. Later I began to "sit," teaching myself meditation first at Samyeling Tibetan Centre in Scotland founded by Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche and then receiving instruction and interviews of great value with the monks at Throssel Hole Priory in Northumberland. One retreat was led by Roshi Jiyu Kennet. In an interview she remarked on the erratic nature of my practice. "One two three four five," she said "Not one eight three two five!" There was something so total about the way she prostrated before the Buddha that it



Photo by Andreas Berger

brought tears to my eyes. I began to understand that wordless teaching could be the most profound.

The teacher I came to love most, even though my contact with him was slight, was Lama Thubten Yeshe. I had attended many Tibetan retreats and taken a number of higher initiations.⁵ In Italy the lama was teaching the Five Yogas of Naropa. Really we only got as far as an introduction to Tumo but it was the lama himself who fascinated me. He would go into meditation in front of a huge audience and somehow I felt drawn deeply into a most profound silence. He had a rare almost magical charisma and a way with Westerners that I have never seen equalled in an Asian teacher. From him and other Tibetans I learnt the power of mantra and certain tantric practices that remain a profound resource to which I turn in times of distress.⁶

Eventually, I decided I would like to renew acquaintance with my original love, Chan, in Hong Kong. I returned there and met my old teacher. By the 1980s he was very old and extremely deaf and, although I had some wonderful conversations with him, it became clear I needed a further teacher. In a Hong Kong Buddhist bookshop I came across just one English book, *Getting the Buddha Mind*, by Master Sheng Yen. When I read this, I knew I should cross the Atlantic and sit with him in New York. This was important because I was already leading Western Zen Retreats in the UK⁷ and felt the need for support from someone who knew so much more than I.

Transmission

I have sat many retreats with Master Sheng Yen and I have written up my retreat reports into an article "Working with a Master."⁸ Shifu has become what the Tibetans call my "root teacher." It is difficult to describe what I owe to him. "Everything," I might say, but perhaps the most important thing has been the

growth of Dharma Confidence. Without his faith in me, which I feel I can never justify, I could not now do the work of Dharma that I do.

During my life I have had several experiences of which the meeting with the squirrel was the first. When Shifu came to England for the first time, I decided to ask him about those experiences. Intuitively I already knew what they were but I needed the response of a master.

"With a mind quietened by meditation I felt free to review my life in the Dharma and I resolved to tell Shifu of those rare experiences which had appeared as if by grace several times in my life since boyhood and which I have always been reluctant to share with anyone because of their incomprehensible nature.

I gave him a straightforward account of one event that had followed a retreat at the Maenllwyd, Wales. I had been down the lane on the point of departure and had returned from the car on foot to a gate which I had forgotten to close behind me. As I swung the gate, I saw two Red Kites wheeling overhead in the frost-clear air of the sunny, winter day. Red Kites I had never seen near the Maenllwyd before so I exclaimed to myself with joy "Oh look at that!" As I gazed at the circling birds my mind suddenly fell empty, I was no longer present within "my" experiencing. There was only the landscape and the circling birds, a sense of wonder and amazement. I stood gazing for about twenty minutes as the birds gradually withdrew and I felt the experience slowly fading as thought reappeared and "I" returned to "myself." This was a reawakening, a joy to have found "it" again, for such an experience has only rarely appeared, often with years between.

I also told Shifu of another occasion when I was visiting Naropa's cave at Dzongkhul Gompa, in northern India. With three companions, I had spent three days in July 1977, crossing the immense ice fields of the 18,000-foot Umasi-la pass through



the Himalayas into the Zaskar valley of Ladakh. As we were being given tea in the upper hall of the little monastery I had glanced out of the window. The mountain side opposite was falling away as ice-laden water rushed down in a massive waterfall from the glacier above. Again emptiness of self came over me and the great space of the mountains seemed to fill me with itself. I wandered alone for half an hour up and down the flat monastery roof until I felt myself again gradually returning as though once more created self-concern.⁹

I asked Shifu what, from the point of view of Chan, was the meaning of these experiences. Without hesitation he told me that this was “seeing the nature” (Japanese *kensho*). I was overjoyed to receive his confirmation of what I had suspected but never been able to test in a direct meeting with a Zen master. Shifu also said that, from what he knew of me, he had already understood that I had had such experiences. He then said “Congratulations,” and told me to make three prostrations before him, which I did with profound feelings of awe, joy and liberation. He also said that from now on he wanted

me to run Chan retreats with his blessing and, as it were, as his representative.¹⁰

While I experienced a great freedom, I also perceived immediately the responsibilities that this recognition implied for me. I also felt bewildered, for what did congratulations have to do with simply experiencing the most basic nature of myself? I felt an odd shyness too for, while I was happy at Shifu’s recognition, I did not want anyone else to know. In sharing with others minefields of potential miscommunication loomed before me.”

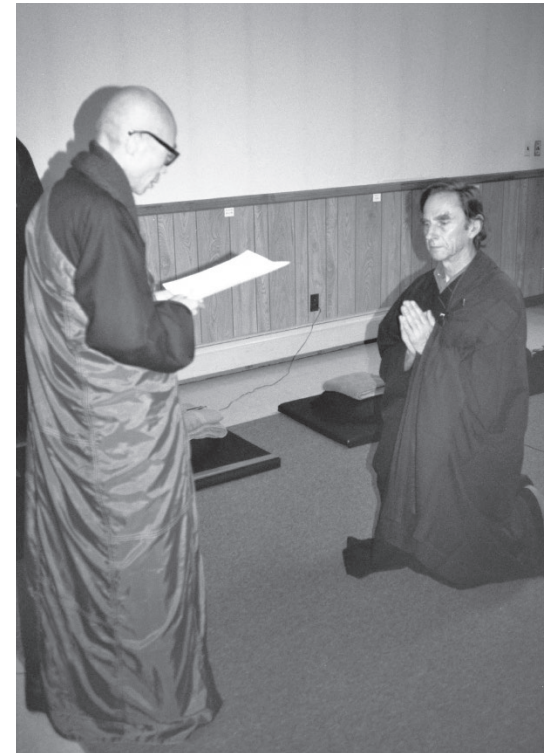
Later, after I had sat further with Shifu and had run several retreats in the manner taught by him, I went to New York for further training in May 1993. Without any consultation, Shifu told me he was going to give me transmission, thereby confirming me as his second Dharma heir in the Linji tradition descended from ancient times through Master Xuyun. I was really surprised by this, for I was not Chinese, I was not a monk, I was not a speaker of Chinese languages nor could I read characters. Furthermore I knew my own vexations, neuroticisms if you like, only too well. There are

Photo by Patrick Witke

many *samskaras* in my personal life, some of them very painful and difficult. I was sometimes subject to considerable depression. I felt totally unworthy. Yet I also had faith in Shifu. If this was what he wished me to do, then I would try to fulfil his trust.

After he had passed the transmission to me, Shifu gave a most useful talk to the assembly. In it he explained exactly what was essential for transmission. Shifu said: “We should be joyful because we can witness today that Buddhadharma is something alive. Despite these changing times it is not something that has died, but continues and with vigour. When such Dharma lineage might be passed to any one of us – that, nobody knows. As practitioners we do not seek to attain or gain anything. We do not seek the affirmation of others; a lot of conditions are necessary. Firstly you must have the correct understanding of the principles of the Dharma. Secondly, you must have your own experience of practice. Thirdly the right conditions must exist in space and time; the circumstances must be appropriate. Fourthly, help must be given to all people wishing to learn. Without all of these conditions being fulfilled, then even if the lineage were to be passed on to you, the transmission would not be fulfilled.”¹¹

Shifu later made his meaning precise. For a transmission to be fulfilled there must be people wishing to receive teachings; the teacher must know how to teach and have a place in which to do it. Some constancy in the teacher-student relationship needs to be established. He had seen my work in running retreats at the Maenllwyd, and this formed the basis for his decision in my case. Shifu has made clear that while an experience of *kensho* is required for transmission as a Dharma Heir, it is not completely essential for those wishing to teach. There are times when a Dharma descendant of a master may not be available. Nevertheless, one who has not



experienced *kensho* and had it confirmed, cannot evaluate such an experience in another, and this is essential to the transmission of lineage.

In private, Shifu told me that there was nothing to be proud about in these matters. Everyone has his or her inadequacies, so that any pride would cause a downfall. Furthermore, he remarked, at any previous period in Chinese history, when there were great teachers around, I could not have received any recognition at all. Only in the present era, when, in spite of superficial brilliance, the darkness of the mind is so thick, is it possible for those with attainments as thin as my own to be considered valuable, indeed essential as teachers.

I was deeply touched by the radical nature of Shifu’s action. In passing transmission to me he

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was putting his own reputation on the line. I was amazed that he should consider me worthy to carry this task back to Britain and Europe. Yet his faith in me gave me a feeling of certainty that this was indeed what I wanted to do and I determined to do it to the best of my ability – in spite of vexations, self doubt, periods of depression and a certainty of my basic unworthiness. I found the extent of his trust remarkable. When I asked him how I should teach Chan in Britain, he simply said, “I am Chinese. You are British. That is something for you to find out!”

Shifu tells the story of his own doubts before coming to America to teach. He had told his teacher he was concerned because he knew no English. “Bah!” his teacher had said, “Do you think Zen is taught by language?” I felt that Zen concerns itself with matters of the human heart wherever that may be. We are all at a base level very much alike irrespective of our cultures and histories. While we need to understand the cultural background to the forms of Buddhism and the complex relations between thought and experience, in the end it is heart teaching that makes a difference.

Teaching

In recent years, while continuing to train in Chan, I have worked together with my colleagues in England to create and develop the charitable foundation of the Western Chan Fellowship, taking great care to provide in its constitution the rights of its members to criticise the teacher and even dismiss him or her if required. I have also favoured critical discussion of teachers’ and practitioners’ ethics as a modern way to understand the precepts. There have been terrible failures in the transmission of Zen in the West. Both the sanghas to whom I teach in continental Europe came to Chan after disasters with immoral and unethical teachers. These scandals have been a

source of deep distress for many and I have had to try to heal such wounds.

I have also worked hard to understand the problems of lay Zen in the West. Few of those interested in Zen/Chan are likely to become monks. It is a lay practice that has to be developed here. Links with Western thought, science, and psychotherapy are all important as also is the paradoxical relationship with Western capitalism itself and the ruination of world ecology that is resulting from it. In common with a number of mostly American scholars, I believe that the excessive interest in enlightenment “experiences” generated by the one-sided approach of the great Dr. Daisetz Suzuki has been based in the highly individualistic nature of the Western self. This has given an odd twist to Western Zen, making it almost competitive. Who has had the deepest experiences? Who has the best Master? These are seriously faulty paths.

I am beginning to see that we Westerners need a different emphasis from that generated by Dr. Suzuki. In brief, we need to seek wisdom more than enlightenment and to get to know the presence of enlightenment as a basis to our lives – a form of knowing rather than short-lived ecstasies. I mean that, although enlightenment experiences provide the opening insights of Dharma, few of us can attain them – simply because the natural egotism of the average Westerner gets in the way. Such experiences cannot be attained through desire or any kind of wanting. Usually they crop up almost accidentally, or when one is surprised while in a highly focused state and the ego happens to have dropped its guard. It seems clear that one cannot train directly for such an experience. One can however train in wisdom. Meditation practice, retreat experiences, self confrontation and encounters with teachers, the problems of life and our quest to manage ourselves all yield wisdom if one cultivates mindfulness of

their meanings. Silent illumination is, I believe, an exceptionally useful method for Westerners devoted to the path and for cultivating a quieter, better balanced approach to “seeing the nature” than more dramatic ways. In such a context, kensho may or may not arise. Such an experience may be life changing but there are other ways too. Whether or not one can cultivate selfless kindness and compassion is what matters. Whether one can manage one’s life wisely, that also matters. Whether such understanding can be used in wise judgements in worldly affairs, that too is what matters. Can we train to bring about a difference? I do believe so; not by meditating in thousands in the trouble spots of the world. That is mere superstition; but in our own hearts, our own relationships and our own communities.

One day I was discussing advanced practices with a Tibetan geshe. We were very enthusiastic and getting carried away by exciting topics. Suddenly he stopped and looked at me, “John,” he said, “when were you last kind?” Here was a fine teacher bringing his interlocutor back to earth, to the nitty-gritty of our hearts’ failings. Yes, wisdom first. Maybe enlightenment may follow. Maybe not.

A few words in another register, a perspective on sitting Chan, to conclude:

*Silence in my head
sweet sunshine and the jackdaws calling,
dew on the autumnal grass
muddy puddles and fallen leaves
scarlet on the lawn.*

*Silence in my head
nothing doing there,
the morning hour, mists dissolve
in grey-green hills, the rocks
show through the soil.*

*In the silence of the world
nothing ever moves
the wind-drift stillnesses
the circling birds.*

John Crook
October 2001 ☞

1. It means “Never despair!”
2. Paragraphs within quotation marks are quotations from diaries or other published materials by the author as quoted.
3. Quotation from: John H. Crook, *Hilltops of the Hong Kong Moon* (London: Minerva Press, 1997).
4. Ibid. Chapter 8.
5. Two forms of Avalokiteshvara with Ratung Rinpoche and the Dalai Lama, Heruka with Lama Thubten Yeshe, Kalacakra with the Dalai Lama, Padmasambhava, Vajrasattva and some Dzogchen yogas from Lama Dudjom Rinpoche, Yamantaka, Red Tara and an introduction to Powa from Chagdrug Rinpoche. I was given a rare Mahamudra text of Tipun Padma Chogyal from Khamtag Rinpoche while in the field in Ladakh.
6. For detail concerning my work in Tibetan Buddhism see John H. Crook and James Low, *The Yogins of Ladakh: A Pilgrimage Among the Hermits of the Buddhist Himalayas* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1997).
7. In the late 1960s I had been a fellow at the Centre for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, a think tank of Stanford University. While there I became acquainted with the Esalen approach to encounter groups, sensitivity training, gestalt psychotherapy, etc. On my return to Bristol my students asked me to present these new methods to them and this led finally to the creating of the Bristol Encounter Centre in the city. The Western Zen Retreat originated and was developed from my work with Jeff Love who was then presenting the “Enlightenment Intensives” of Charles Berner in Britain.
8. This article is presented as Part 3 in the book: Master Sheng Yen and John Crook, *Illuminating Silence: The Practice of Chinese Zen* (London: Watkins, 2002).
9. For a fuller description see Ibid. 6, 37–40.
10. See John Crook, *Catching a Feather on a Fan: A Zen Retreat with Master Sheng Yen* (Shaftesbury, Dorset, UK: Element Books, 1991) 104. Also see further in Ibid. 8.
11. The text of this talk was recorded and published in *New Chan Forum* 9, Winter 1994, 2–5.

Entering the Gateless

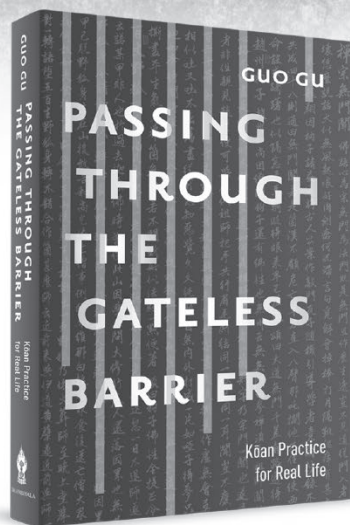
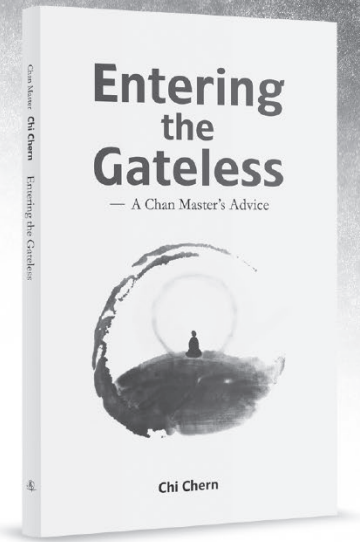
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