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CHAN MAGAZINE

SPRING 2018



熱心大眾事

聖嚴

*Enthusiasm for Public Affairs*

Dear Reader, please see an important message on the inside back cover.

**B**UDDHISM IS NOT A POLITICIZED RELIGION, so Buddhists do not have political ambitions. But politics concerns administration of public affairs, and as members of the general public, Buddhists cannot live independently of politics. Politics includes both political rights and the power to govern; political rights belong to the people and the power to govern pertains to the government. Buddhists are at least entitled to all their political rights, and should exercise their rights of election, recall, initiative, and referendum. A lay Buddhist with ideals, aspirations, and enthusiasm should contribute what she can in any way at any level.

”

CHAN MASTER SHENG YEN  
*Orthodox Chinese Buddhism, 2007*

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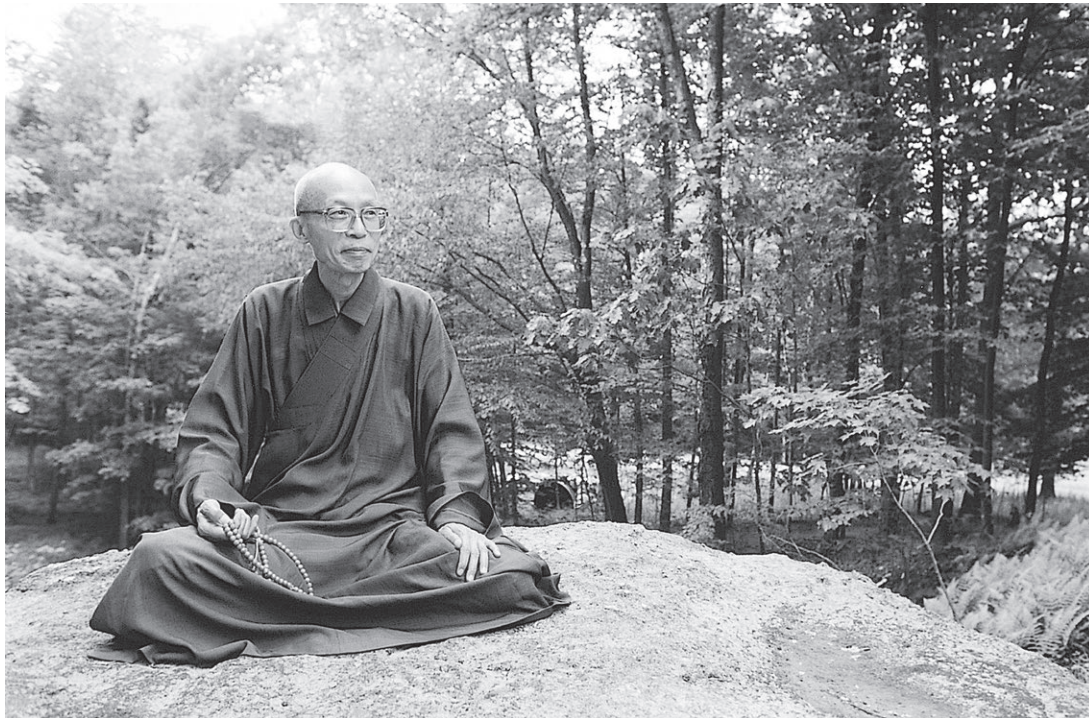
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*Shunning or  
Renouncing the World*

BY

Chan Master Sheng Yen





Chan Master Sheng Yen's book *Common Questions in the Practice of Buddhism* is written in the Q&A format and consists of seventy-five questions about Buddhist practice, submitted by practitioners. The book was originally published in Chinese as “學佛群疑” (*Xue fu qun yi*) in 1988. It has been translated into English and published by the Sheng Yen Education Foundation in 2017. It was translated by Dr. Hueping Chin, with bilingual reviews by Dr. Jerry Wang and Dr. Wei Tan, and English editing by Ernest Heau. The following article is taken from chapter 50 of this book.

**QUESTION** What's the difference between one's shunning the world and renouncing it?

**ANSWER** Usually beginners in Buddhism must have a sense of weariness and renunciation in order to appreciate the importance and need to practice Buddhadharma. They are weary of vexations and pains coming from contradictions and frictions within their own mind and body, as well from their relations with people and the environment. However, if they can transform their mind, they would no longer be weary of feelings associated with these phenomena, and when there's nothing to be weary about, they would have nothing to renounce. Therefore, having a sense of weariness and renunciation is their first step in studying and practicing Buddhism; it is to recognize suffering and wanting to renounce or transcend it.

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Generally, people think that wearying of relationships and wanting to renounce them and the world means negating the value and meaning of human beings. Actually it is just the opposite, as one who is world-weary would want to elevate the meaning and value of being human. It is like a tradesman who leaves home to earn money to support his family, or a child who leaves home to pursue an education, gain the knowledge and skills to embark on a career, to have a family, and to benefit self and others. Therefore, the weariness and renunciation associated with Buddhism is the first step onto the path of studying Buddhism, but it is not the ultimate goal.

Wanting to shun the world is different from renouncing it. A person who shuns the world does not want to fulfill their obligations and face the reality of life; they would prefer to run away from their debts, and be far away from their living environment. People like this are like escaped prisoners, as their minds are full of fear, uneasiness, and insecurity; they will always be burdened with the stress of having no place in this world. This is completely different from renouncing the world of vexations by studying and practicing the correct Buddhadharma. If one wearies of one's vexations and renounces them, one can then gradually depart from these vexations. The more one departs from vexations, the more one feels liberated and at ease; the more one is at ease, the more vexations will lighten. Eventually, one will attain complete liberation, and when one has attained liberation, there would not be any issue of weariness or renunciation.

One does not solve their problems by shunning them. Shunning indicates one is aware of their sufferings but is afraid to face them; instead, they choose to run away from them. On the other hand, having a sense of weariness and renunciation means that one knows about one's sufferings and seeks to

alleviate them, thus practicing Buddhadharma to be free from them. Instead of shunning problems, one tries to work through them. Shunning problems not only ignores the law of cause and effect, it is also not condoned in Buddhadharma. To have a sense of weariness and renunciation does not necessarily imply leaving this world; rather, the important thing is for it to lead one to cultivate a thorough understanding of worldly phenomena through the guiding principles of Buddhadharma and its methods of practice.

Nagarjuna's *Root Verses on The Middle Way* (Sanskrit *Mulamadhyamakakarika*) says: "Whatever is produced by causes and conditions, I say they are empty." In the beginning, one has a sense of weariness and renunciation; in the end, one realizes that all phenomena are empty and illusory. As such, one will no longer have vexations or attachments, and thus no longer needs to be weary of and to renounce anything. However, just having an intellectual understanding of this will not necessarily enable one to transcend suffering. Therefore, one may temporarily leave the secular environment and focus on practicing and observing the three learnings of precepts, samadhi, and wisdom. That way, it would be easier to reach the goal of transcending suffering.

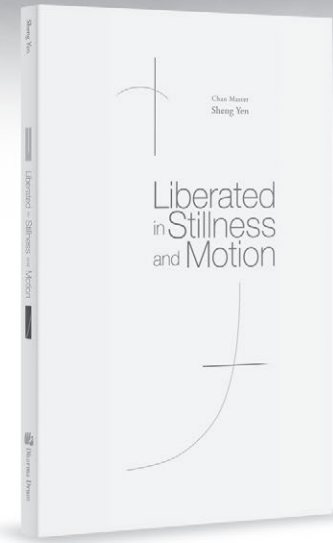
Therefore, people with the most superior karmic capacity can attain sudden enlightenment once they come into contact with the Dharma; afterwards as a monastic or lay practitioner, they may continue to help others in this secular world. People of average karmic capacity would find it most effective to leave the secular world and be a monastic. However, being a monastic is a very challenging thing, not achievable except by the bravest. First of all, most people do not have a sense of weariness and renunciation; and second, while some people do have a sense of weariness and renunciation, they are not able to actually attain renunciation. ☸

## 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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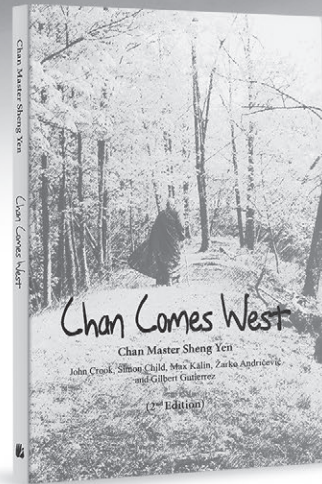


## Chan Comes West (2nd Edition)

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*



## Common Questions in the Practice of Buddhism

Chan Master Sheng Yen

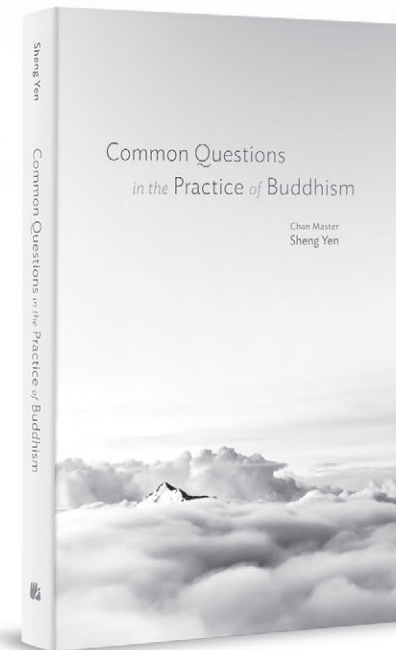
*If someone believes in and practices Buddhism,  
should they also take refuge in the Three Jewels?*

*Is special knowledge and advanced learning required to  
practice Buddhism?*

*Are there any taboos concerning practicing Buddhism at home?*

In *Common Questions in the Practice of Buddhism*, Chan Master Sheng Yen addresses these and many other spiritual and worldly problems in a simple question-and-answer format. He clarifies common areas of confusion about Buddhist beliefs and practices and gives practical advice on leading a life that is “full of wisdom, kindness, radiance, comfort, freshness, and coolness” in the contemporary world.

*Sheng Yen Education Foundation • ISBN 978-986-6443-92-3*





## *Year of the Dog*

BY

**Venerable Guo Yuan**

Venerable Guo Yuan, a Dharma heir of Chan Master Sheng Yen, is currently the Abbot of the Dharma Drum Retreat Center (DDRC) in Pine Bush, New York. He gave this Dharma talk for the Chinese New Year celebration at the Chan Meditation Center (CMC) in Elmhurst, New York on February 18, 2018. Translated by Anny Sun, transcribed by Lingyun Wang, and edited by Harry Miller.



GOOD MORNING, AND HAPPY NEW YEAR to everyone! According to the lunar new year calendar, this is the year of the dog. So, today we are going to discuss some pertinent Chan lineage cases and references. How do you attain Buddhahood, progressing all the way from being a dog to becoming a Buddha? It is a very long practice indeed. There are many references in the Chan school to stories generated by the patriarchs and past masters, and they continue to resonate to this day. If you have some experience with meditation or Chan practice, you are probably familiar with the dog references in the Chan school. The original story of “does a dog have buddha nature?” came from Chan Master Zhaozhou. The story is so well-known that it is even important in the Japanese tradition.

The story originates with Chan Master Zhaozhou Congshen, the disciple of Master Puyuan Nanquan. Even as a child, Master Zhaozhou was not interested in the childhood play of other children. In fact,

he became a *sramanera*, a novice monk, at very young age. He traveled and met different teachers and masters to request their teachings. This was a common practice at the time. Master Zhaozhou heard of Master Nanquan’s fame and learning. Master Zhaozhou hadn’t taken the complete bhikshu’s precepts at that time, yet he still went ahead and requested Master Nanquan’s teachings. When he arrived at Master Nanquan’s monastery, the Master was resting in his own room. Master Nanquan asked Master Zhaozhou, “where did you come from?” Master Zhaozhou said, “I came from Rui Xiang monastery” (where he was a novice).

### Auspicious Signs

The character *rui* means auspicious in Chinese. Master Nanquan asked, “do you still see auspicious signs (*rui xiang*)?” This is actually a play on the Chinese characters because auspicious signs usually manifest when someone is really deep and sincere in their own practice. At such times, the practitioner might see images of the Buddha or bodhisattvas or bright light. That is called *rui xiang* – auspicious signs. But it was also the name of the monastery where Master Zhaozhou came from. So Master Nanquan not only asked about Zhaozhou’s background, he was asking about the depth of his practice.

Master Zhaozhou answered, “I don’t see auspicious signs, but I see a buddha (*tathagatha*) lying down before me.” Master Nanquan was indeed resting and lying down in the abbot’s room. In a sense, Master Zhaozhou was describing what he was seeing at the present moment. This was a very high-level dialogue in that one asked very deep, probing questions, while the other responded in kind, but with clear, present-moment awareness.

Upon hearing Master Zhaozhou’s answer, Master Nanquan sat up immediately, and asked, “Are you

a novice monk with or without a master?” This question contains a double meaning. On one level, do you actually have a master whose teachings you follow? On the other level, have you found your own, inner master? So, “Are you your own master or not?” To become one’s own master bespeaks a very high level of practice. Hearing this question, this novice monk Zhaozhou did not answer immediately. Instead, he slowly walked towards Master Nanquan, prostrated in front of him, and said, “the weather is bitterly cold outside, and I hope that you are healthy and well!” (It was cold then as it is here in New York today.) Listening to this dialogue, Master Nanquan realized that this novice monk in front of him truly had special and deep karmic roots, so he accepted Zhaozhou as his disciple and assigned him work and responsibilities.

### Are We in Control?

Based on the story, we can reflect: “Are we indeed our own masters?” Think about it – when can we

really be in control? What matters, what things, can we control? We can consider what things we can control, but people? Can we really control other people, manage their lives, or organize them in some way? Or, applying this question to yourself according to your own circumstances and obligations, how much of it can you really control? Let’s say you’re sick, can you simply say “sickness stop!” When you give rise to anger, bad thoughts, or other vexations, are you really able to control them and make them stop?

I remember once I was in an airplane, and I sat next to someone who was quite obese. He had to raise the divider between seats to squeeze into the limited space. He had to spread out both legs. Even so, his legs bumped up against the seat in front of him. Just observing him, I saw what a lot of work he had to do just to sit down. And I was squeezed all the way against the side of the cabin. Neither I nor the other person could control the situation. The best that I could do was to accommodate him to reduce the difficulty of the circumstances. Really,

when we look at our life, we can rarely control what is happening. Sometimes we are controlled by the environment, so instead of our transforming our surroundings, they transform us.

Let’s talk about children. We give them birth, and at first, we seem to have some control. But if you consider the question carefully, how much control do we really have? I think you all have an answer already. So how much control do we really have? With no illusions and a clear understanding of our current situation, we can look deeper



Photo by Danny Postma

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and start thinking about ways to actually change and make improvements in our lives. I think many of you are already on that path. Whether you practice meditation or engage in other kinds of Chan practices, there are many ways to gain better control of your life. The cultivation of Chan practice is indeed what Shifu (Master Sheng Yen) counseled as a way to gain more stability and control.

Use these stories of the great masters as reflection points. We can get a hint of the levels upon which they moved, and by contemplating their dialogue we begin to engage at their level, which for the moment is beyond our comprehension. These stories may trigger a lot of questions. Why, for example, did Master Zhaozhou not directly respond to Master Nanquan's questions, "Do you have a master?" and

"Are you your own master?" Instead, Zhaozhou approached Master Nanquan, prostrated, and said, "I hope that you are healthy and well." So, why is that? On a deeper level, what's going on? There are subtleties and intricacies that bear investigation.

Your ability to understand the story depends on your level. I remember a night years ago, when Shifu gave teachings here at the Chan Meditation Center, and he went through several Chan stories. At the end of the class, he asked his students and the audience whether they understood. Some of you here today were actually present there. Those people who had been following Shifu for a very long time, mostly said, yes, they understood. But when Shifu turned to a girlfriend of one of his students, who had little Chan background and just happened to attend the

talk, and he asked whether or not she understood, she said she was completely lost, "I don't know what you are talking about."

### Everyday Ordinary Mind

Zhaozhou, after becoming a disciple of Master Nanquan, studied very hard every day, adhering to the strict schedules. One day, he approached Master Nanquan and asked "What is the path of cultivation?" What is the real path for our practice? Master Nanquan replied "Everyday mind, everyday mindset, is the path of cultivation." This phrase is very familiar to the Chinese speaking people in this audience. What is this ordinary mind? Does it just refer to performing daily activities? What is he referring to?

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Upon hearing this, Master Zhaozhou replied, "You talked about this ordinary, everyday mind. Is there nothing more, nothing deeper than this?" Master Nanquan answered, "if there is anything more than this, then it's wrong." Master Zhaozhou still couldn't understand. So, he asked, "Well if it's just this everyday or ordinary mind, and that's it, how can I know what the path really is?"

Master Nanquan answered, "This path cannot be known or understood, nor can it be not known or not understood." Two Chinese characters, *zhi dao*, ordinarily mean "to know" in modern Chinese, but they need further explanation in this case. *Dao*, the second character means "way or path"; but the first character *zhi* means "knowing, awareness, or realization." But you might just have a conceptual "awareness" and this is just a thought, an illusory awareness. So, that's not it. Yet, at the same time, if you do not have even this awareness, then your mind becomes unclear and muddy. So "knowing" is not good enough, and "not knowing" is certainly not good enough. It's neither of these polar opposites. Once you get to true understanding, questions cease. You know what it is. It's almost like stepping into a vast, boundless, empty space. In that state no relative matter is of any concern. There is no sense of right or wrong, yes or no, this is the path, this is not the path. True understanding is not confined by such notions.

### Incomprehensible and Unthinkable

There is also an understanding that if this path of cultivation can be explained or taught, then at best it's only an expedient truth, it's not the ultimate truth. This true understanding can only be reached through experience. It transcends our normal frame of reference and transcends our normal way of thinking. It is beyond what we can articulate or

distinguish. It can only be known by experience. The common phrase in Buddhist scripture is "it's incomprehensible and unthinkable." Thus, a true answer cannot be reached through logical thinking. You cannot get the answer this way. Nor can it be achieved through discussion or debate. That's not the way to get to the true answer.

Then, you might wonder what it is, what it is like. You cannot tell me because you cannot use language, nor can you use logical thinking to get it. In Chan, we use a method called investigating *hua tou*, where you have to investigate what we're getting at, this unanswerable question: What is it? You are not allowed to think or use logic, and you are not allowed to name it. Yet still the question remains: What is it?

Returning to the story: when Master Nanquan asked Master Zhaozhou, "Are you a novice monk with a master or not?" Master Zhaozhou's answered, "Yes, a novice monk with a master." Then Master Nanquan continued to ask, "Who is your master?" But Master Zhaozhou did not give a direct answer. He approached Master Nanquan's seat, prostrated, and said, "I wish you well!" This exchange already gives you a hint of the subtleness and the unutterable truth embedded in their exchange.

You may wonder what happened to the topic of dog? Okay, let's return to the story of dog. Why does it take so long for me to get to the story of the dog? Well, there's a reason – I was giving some background to show how great a master Zhaozhou was. He followed a great master, and later became a great one himself. Now we can proceed to talk about the dog story generated by Master Zhaozhou. Master Zhaozhou had already become a great master, teaching and guiding people's practice. One day a monk approached him, and asked, "does a dog have buddha nature?" Without hesitation, Master Zhaozhou said, "NO."

The questioner was not an average monk. He had done some cultivation or he couldn't have come up with this question to ask Zhaozhou. Obviously, he was familiar with the discussion in the *Nirvana Sutra* about all sentient beings having buddha nature. This means that all the way up to the Buddha and down to bugs, everyone has buddha nature. This disciple was not happy with the answer. How could everyone have buddha nature, but not a dog?

## What is Wu?

In Chan practice or on meditation retreats, this is as far as we go with the story. We don't go to the next part. We just use the question "What is Wu?" by itself. We do not include the dog in the question. "What is Wu?" is understood to mean not having buddha nature. But you must go deeper into the question without resorting to logical thinking or intellectual analysis. You put mind and body into the question. You are not supposed to refer to any Buddhist text to get the answer. You are supposed to keep investigating.

Have any of you in the audience investigated this question "What is Wu?"

Nobody raised their hand. So, your answer is "Wu." That's the answer!

So, this Wu, translated into English, means nothingness, no, not, etc.

Of course, some of you here do investigate this *huatou*, but I am actually going to continue with the story, and provide you with something of an answer, to sort of undo this puzzle. Master Zhaozhou continued to explain his answer. He said that the reason a dog does not have buddha nature is because a dog still carries its own karma. Because of karma, the buddha nature is not manifested. This is not a very satisfactory answer and it would stop people from investigating the *huatou* which is already quite

tricky. Besides, that answer comes too easily, so you can still go back and investigate whether or not you know the answer supplied in the sutra.

However, let's look closer at the answer about the dog's karma. This will allow a little self-reflection. How heavy is our karma? Is it preventing our buddha nature from manifesting? Ask yourself this: from birth to the present moment, what kind of karma have I generated, some with a heavier habitual pattern, some with less impact on me?

Look at the interaction you have with your family, parents, siblings, and spouse. How clear are you about these relationships and interactions? How would you characterize them? There is much to be reflected upon just within this family microcosm. Observe and try to decipher the nature of your relationships – your parents may favor some siblings over others. Some family members are healthy, others sickly.

During school years specific types of relationships emerge – how does your specific relationship with one person affect your relationship with another? Are there patterns with female or male classmates? Note the trends and intricacies.

At work, a myriad of situations arise. Sometimes success is easy. Other times obstacles get in the way. What kind of situations did you encounter? What kind of situations ensued? How did you react? What did you learn? These are all insights available to you.

There are so many phenomena we have to deal with, sometimes natural calamities, sometimes events with smaller impact. Some are severe and serious. Some less so. How do we react to these events? Inspired by Zhaozhou's reply about the dog, we can reflect deeply about our karma. This is not the end of the dog story. There is a lot more to say. But we do have to be clear that whatever insights we derive from listening to or thinking about this story, those insights are still not it. That's not the answer to our investigation.



Art by Chien-Chih Liu

## Correcting Our Mistakes

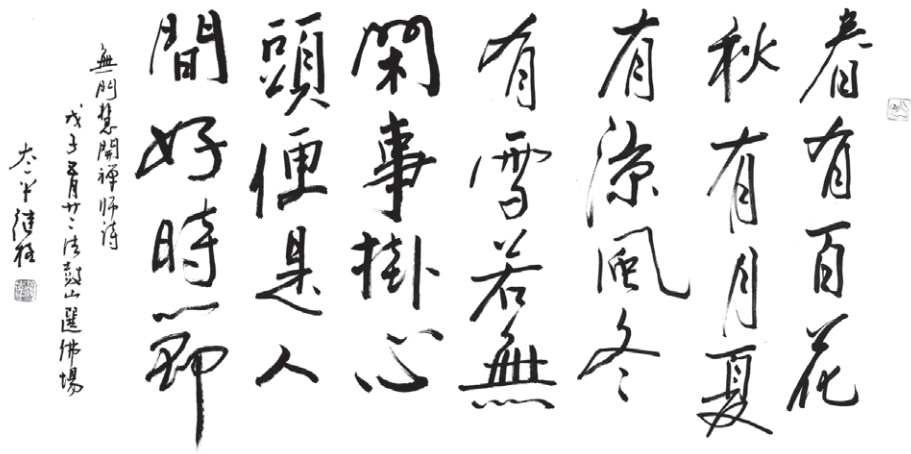
Another disciple came and asked again, "Does a dog have buddha nature?" This time without any hesitation, Master Zhaozhou answered, "YES." This disciple again was not satisfied, either: "If a dog has buddha nature, then why hasn't it become a buddha yet?" Why is it still a dog? It's because the dog continues to repeat the same mistakes. There is a phrase in Chinese "you know it's wrong, but you still do it." So, the story ends here. But here is another entry point for self-reflection. How often in life do we keep repeating the same mistakes? We know we

shouldn't, but we still do it. Does this happen to you a lot or infrequently?

Ample evidence abounds in everyday life. Take alcohol, for instance. Some people say a sip or a small glass is just fine, and perhaps that's a small matter. But, some people can't control themselves and they develop alcoholism. Gambling is a second example. People addicted to gambling can't stop until they win. They can't shake this idea: I can't stop unless I win. This leads down the road to disaster. Similarly, with drugs, a friend chides you and says, "All these years and you have never tried this? What kind of life is this? What a waste? Give it a try." So, you think, why not? You try it, you like it, and before you know it, you're addicted. People will find out and continue to supply you. The fourth example has to do with relationships or attachment to sexual desires. This is a very basic and common attachment. We see a beautiful girl or a handsome guy, and the attraction is instantaneous and we're hooked. Finally, there is greed for money or for any variety of things. All of these attachments may lead to habitual patterns. We know that they're wrong or dangerous, but we still commit the same mistakes. We follow a pattern and fall into a rut. That is why a dog is still a dog.

## Unattached to Anything

So, this second part of the story is that YES, dogs do have buddha nature, but they do not become buddhas because they are ensnared in their habitual patterns. This understanding can teach us that, yes, mistakes happen, but we should correct and learn from them. Some habits are relatively easy to change. Others require a lot more work, determination, and persistence. You must make a great vow to overcome some habits. Look back to the first part of the story, you can see that if you really can be your own master, then all of these habitual patterns can be broken.



This brings us to another poem, written by another Chan Master, Wumen, which is familiar to many Chinese. Someone even turned this poem into a song. Here is the translation:

*There are hundreds of flowers in spring,  
there is a brilliant moon in autumn;  
there are cool breezes in summertime,  
and there are snow flurries in winter.  
If the mind is unrelated to any matter,  
then it will be a favorable time  
in this very human realm.*

This poem sounds beautiful and it may calm the mind. It also serves as a good reminder or direction for our practice, especially this third phrase that if the mind is unattached to anything, then it will be a wonderful time in this very human realm. This is the practice of the mind being unattached to, or not related to, the matters that usually distract us. Can we really do it? Are we really in charge? If we find ourselves entangled in thoughts or vexations, are we able to simply cut them off and let go? If

you can practice like that, then it will really be a wonderful time.

The first phrase of the poem says “There are hundreds of flowers in springtime.” Usually springtime is pleasant and flowers are beautiful. But some people are very bothered by their allergies when the flowers bloom. In the autumn, there is the bright moon floating in the sky, and the light is very gentle, calming and soothing. In summer, there are cool breezes and then you feel happy and comfortable, but when it’s hot, the weather is annoying, and life may not be so wonderful. There is snow in the winter. Yesterday, it snowed quite hard. To me, when I walk outside and look at the bare trees, it looks like there are white flowers on the trees, but of course it’s just snow. Some people, however, find all the snow and cold very unpleasant. It really depends on the perceiver and how you respond to your surroundings. The natural progression of the weather is spring, summer, autumn, and winter. The natural progression of human life is birth, growing up, sickness, and eventually passing away.

There is a very popular verse from Su Dongpo (Su Shi): “The moon waxes and wanes in human life, people come together and depart.” We cycle through birth, aging, sickness, and death. In the physical world we encounter existence, abiding, decay, and destruction. With our undertakings, we have a sense of success, failure, gain and loss. Our thoughts cycle through existence, abiding, change and cessation. Observing all of the changes, we experience and come to understand impermanence. It is very important to see how we experience impermanence in everyday life.

### Understanding Impermanence

Some of you who come to these talks often may feel that we always talk about impermanence. Aren’t there any other topics? Something a little more interesting, more novel? But impermanence is reality. Are you really experiencing it? Are you living in it? Are you trying to understand it? It’s not all bad. It just means phenomena are always changing. Something bad can become good. Good can turn to bad. The nature of phenomena is impermanence. Our physical condition is impermanent. Our mental condition is impermanent. Everything changes. Don’t object to the concept of impermanence. Don’t think it’s just talk.

Here are some verses by Master Chi Chern. He began with the lines from Wumen’s poem: “There are hundreds of flowers in spring, there is a brilliant moon in autumn; there are cool breezes in summertime, and there are snow flurries in winter.” Master Chi Chern added:

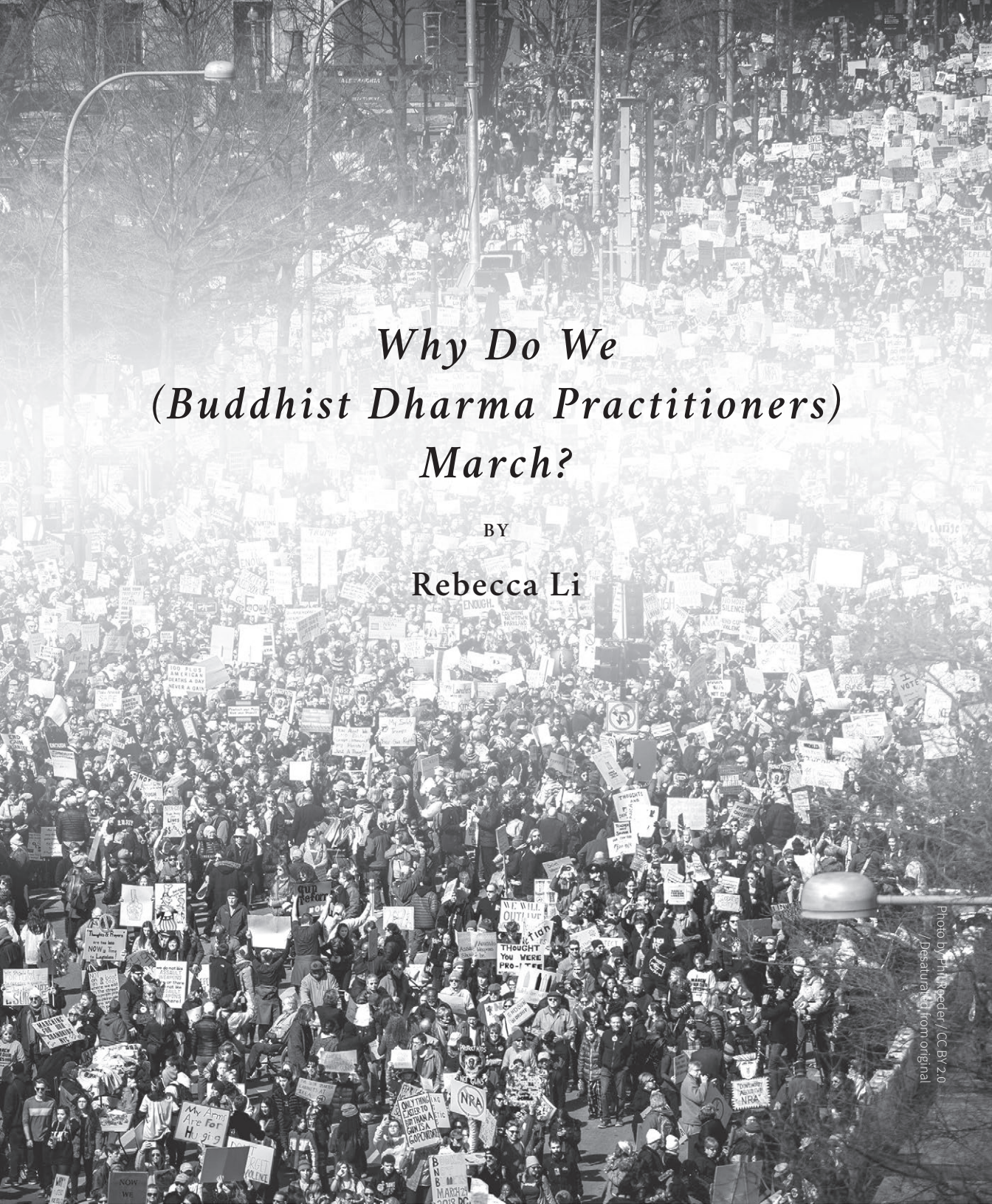
*Be firm as a plum flower in winter time,  
pure as the orchard,  
with the integrity of green bamboo,  
at ease and at peace like the chrysanthemum.*

Master Chi Chern’s words can encourage our practice. To conclude today’s talk, I’ll include the phrase we print on our banners: “Peace without troubles.” I wish that all your days are peaceful and without trouble, with the mind of non-attachment. If you can reach this level, it’s not just one thumb up, but many, many thumbs up for you. This is my New Year wish for all of you!

I shared several stories with you today. Do you remember them? They all provide themes for self-reflection. First, “Can you be your own master?” Second, we talked about the question of whether a dog has buddha nature. That relates to karma and habitual patterns. Third, consider the task of correcting your mistakes. Fourth, untroubled by nonessential matters and in a state of non-attachment, we experience the wonder of this human realm. Last, let us realize the aspiration to be at ease, at peace, untroubled. How does that sound? What do you think? I am grateful to all of you! I hope that we can all use these stories to encourage ourselves and each other as we continue to raise our level of understanding and practice. Thank you! ☺



Photo by Rachel Ormes



# Why Do We (Buddhist Dharma Practitioners) March?

BY  
Rebecca Li

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Rebecca Li attended her first intensive retreat with Chan Master Sheng Yen in 1996 and began serving as his interpreter in 1998. She started her teacher's training with Master Sheng Yen in 1999 and started teaching as Dharma and meditation instructor in 2002. Later on, she trained to lead intensive retreats with John Crook and then Simon Child, both Dharma heirs of Master Sheng Yen, and received full Dharma transmission from Simon Child in 2016. Currently, she teaches meditation and Dharma classes, gives public lectures and leads retreats at Dharma Drum centers, university meditation groups and Dharma practice groups mostly in northeastern United States. Some of her talks and writings can be found at [www.rebeccali.org](http://www.rebeccali.org). Rebecca Li is also a professor of sociology in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at The College of New Jersey.



ON FEBRUARY 3, 2018, I participated in the first New York area gathering of the Buddhist Actions Coalition. Bhikkhu Bodhi started the project and brought together a group of engaged Buddhists to organize the gathering. Greg Snyder, co-founder of Brooklyn Zen Center, asked me if I would give one of the opening addresses to the gathering. As I prepared the talk, I identified a few questions that have been on my mind regarding Dharma practice and being socially engaged. I thought it would be useful to share them. Here is the bulk of what I said that morning:

Here we are, joining this gathering to find ways to be more engaged. We are putting our moral conviction into action. We may find that we are also putting our practice and faith in the Dharma to the test.

I find myself wondering: how do we engage politically without being sucked into the culture of divisive speech, the mental habit of demonizing those with whom we disagree, and developing rigid views that stop us listening to each other – unfortunate practices that are pervasive in the realm of politics nowadays?

Also, how do we get into the fray of supporting one policy position over another while still being able to

empathize with and appreciate the humanity of those of us who may hold different positions?

What do we do when, upon a closer look, we find disagreement between the Buddhist teachings and our existing political position? Are we going to compartmentalize the two, telling ourselves that is where the Dharma no longer applies?

I wonder if it is fear that our current beliefs about ourselves and the Dharma will be challenged if we get more involved that is keeping us from being more engaged.

I have no answer to any of these questions.

We can talk about and analyze them using Dharma concepts, but still we have no idea how any of this is going to unfold in practice. We will just have to find out for ourselves, and the only way to find out is by rolling up our sleeves and getting our hands dirty as we dig into the mess.

If you have been wanting to do more but have been hesitant and wondering about some of these questions, you are not alone. I am with you. Working on this talk has helped me articulate these thoughts.

The question is: do I trust the Dharma practice to get me through the mistakes I will make and find the

Archive Photo

way to resolve these questions? Absolutely. I have no doubt about that.

Two weeks after our gathering, seventeen people were killed in a school shooting in Parkland, Florida. We were presented with the opportunity to find out how we can be more engaged while maintaining our commitment to Dharma practice. Surviving students refused to let this be just another school shooting and organized March For Our Lives (MFOL) on March 24 in Washington, DC and many cities across the country, including New York City, had sister marches. The Buddhist Actions Coalition decided to join the march as a form of Buddhist action. Discussions ensued on organizing various sangha groups and the question of why we would march came up.

I thought about the question, treating it as a *huatou*, to investigate why I felt it appropriate and important for us Dharma practitioners to march. The following lines came up:

We march because it is a natural response of our concern for our fellow human beings who have suffered unnecessarily due to the rampant presence of highly potent weapons among civilians. We march because we have been paying attention to the development of this phenomenon over the years and can see that something is seriously wrong, that our society has chosen to prioritize the rights of corporations to profit from selling guns over everyone's longing to live without fear of unnecessary gun deaths and injuries. We march because we realize that it is not enough to pray or dedicate our chanting or meditation, in private or within our centers or temples, to those suffering from losing their loved ones to gun violence and living in fear of gun violence in schools and other public spaces. We march out of appreciation that someone is willing to devote the time and energy to organize collective actions to try to

push for sensible legislative changes and we show our gratitude and support by showing up and participating.

I shared these lines with Greg Snyder who urged me to share them in a public forum. After some thoughts, I decided to explain my thoughts behind these lines in an article for the *Chan Magazine*.

**We march because it is a natural response of our concern for our fellow human beings who have suffered unnecessarily due to the rampant presence of highly potent weapons among civilians.**

As we engage in the practice, stabilizing the mind and cultivating clear awareness of our body and mind and the world around us, the sense that we are isolated individuals begins to dissolve. Instead, we feel increasingly connected with all sentient beings and cannot help but feel their suffering. This does not mean that we break down sobbing every time we hear in the news about someone having been killed. When we do hear about these incidents in the news, we allow the sadness and sorrow that are natural responses to such human tragedies to arise and be felt. In these moments, we are experiencing our full humanity as we allow our heart to be touched by the suffering of our fellow human beings. Regardless of their nationality, religion, race or whatever categorizations invented by human beings that can be used to create a sense of separation between us and them, we are all capable of feeling the pain and anguish suffered by another sentient being.

As we allow our practice to help us let go of attachment to, and identification with, these categories that distort our view of reality, the interconnectedness among all beings becomes increasingly clear. Our opened and softened heart can feel touched by the deep sorrow of

someone who has just lost their parents, siblings, children or friends. The practice allows us to keep our heart open and soft, as opposed to the cultural conditioning of a hardened and closed heart. We may be tempted by the illusory sense of safety or comfort afforded by turning away, telling ourselves that “life is hard” and “the world is a mess” and “people just have to deal with it.” Regardless of whether that is true or not, as practitioners we need to ask ourselves what motivates us to turn away. Are we afraid of feeling and being overwhelmed by others’ suffering? If so, are we allowing this fear to deprive us of the opportunity to connect with the compassion that arises in our heart when we allow ourselves to be touched by the anguish and sorrow of suffering beings? We may think that we are keeping ourselves safe and comfortable by turning away and holding onto this sensation of separateness, yet we are unaware of the great price we are paying – being disconnected from the unconditional love made possible by an open and gentle heart. With practice and cultivation of clear awareness, the price we pay by engaging in these seemingly self-protecting mechanisms becomes increasingly clear. As we let go of the habit of hardening and closing our heart, concerns about the suffering of fellow human beings arise naturally. It is not contrived. It is not out of the obligation of being a “good Buddhist.” We experience it as a natural part of being human.



As the first noble truth describes, “there is suffering.” One may use this as a reason to support this thinking: “that’s the way the world is, that’s what human beings do – suffer, and there is nothing I can do.” But the Buddha also taught us that suffering is not inevitable. The world of samsara (suffering prompts us to hurt others which generates more suffering for ourselves and others) is co-created by sentient beings. We can co-create a world of less suffering as well. History has shown us that human beings are fully capable of organizing ourselves and living together in a way that makes life on this earth less difficult and challenging. We found ways to cooperate in food production so that we could avoid living constantly on the verge of starvation, thus reducing the anxiety related to feeding this human body. Similarly, many societies have found ways to regulate and restrict the ownership and use of deadly weapons to reduce the unnecessary harm caused by the use of these weapons. The stark contrast in premature deaths caused by gun violence between the US and other countries paints a clear picture. It makes the suffering

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caused by gun violence in the US all the more painful. While death is unavoidable for human beings, most countries have managed to effectively protect their citizens from unnecessary gun-related violence by keeping deadly weapons such as high capacity semi-automatic rifles out of the civilian population. As many clear-eyed students from Parkland, Florida have pointed out, an emotionally disturbed person with a knife could not have killed many. Similarly, a child playing with a knife, instead of an unsecured gun, is less likely to be killed or kill someone with it. The needless deaths and suffering from losing our loved ones adds to the sorrow in our heart. The understanding that we need not live like this fuels the resolve to act to reduce the unnecessary suffering.

**We march because we have been paying attention to the development of this phenomenon over the years and can see that something is seriously wrong, that our society has chosen to prioritize the rights**



Rebecca Li (right) at the March for Our Lives in New York City Archive Photo

**of corporations to profit from selling guns over everyone's longing to live without fear of unnecessary gun deaths and injuries.**

Many people misunderstand the practice as focusing only on what is happening in the mind in a way that isolates us from the world around us. Retreats are set up to isolate us from the world in order to provide us with a simplified environment to focus on learning how to practice. It does not mean that we should isolate ourselves from the world in daily life lived outside of retreat. When we try to isolate ourselves from the world, we perpetuate the erroneous view that we are independent of and separated from others instead of uprooting it. As we engage in the practice of silent illumination, we cultivate total awareness of everything. When we are sitting on our cushion, we are clearly aware of the moment to moment changes of bodily sensations, mental activities and happenings in our surrounding environment. When we are living in our daily life at home or at work, we are clearly aware of how others around us are acting and feeling, how our responses are manifested in our body and mind.

Living in the society that we co-create with others; do we pay attention to what has been happening? We do not need to become experts on every issue. If we pay attention, we will notice that every mass shooting was followed by articles by and/or public radio interviews of people who have been studying and following the phenomenon to help us understand the issues. Do we bother to pay attention even

when so many people worked so hard to make the information accessible to us? If we don't, we are setting ourselves up to feel blindsided by events, leaving us feeling shocked, confused, betrayed, disappointed or powerless. If we pay attention, we can see more clearly that these events are the coming together of many causes and conditions, not merely the doing of any isolated individuals.

Among these causes and conditions are: our allowing gun manufacturers to lobby politicians and to control the agenda of organizations such as the NRA, our allowing politicians to become so heavily dependent on private campaign funding as campaigns became more expensive, our allowing mental health care to be neglected, our allowing violence to be glorified instead of promoting nonviolence and kindness in our culture over the past decades, and so on. As we look at the list, beware of our habit of pointing fingers at others. Doing so tends to take us down the road of feeling powerless as we let these "others" be in control of the situation. We can instead reflect on and acknowledge our part in the whole situation. When we do, we may realize that our not paying attention – and thus allowing those with vested financial interest in shaping policies and culture in their favor to do so unrestrained – may have contributed to these causes and conditions. When we see that our past actions or inactions were part of the causes and conditions that brought about the current state of affairs, in that moment, we can choose to change our actions or stop our habit of inaction and apathy. By taking responsibility without being paralyzed by guilt, we empower ourselves to contribute constructively.

Some practitioners worry about engaging in dualistic thinking and avoid identifying anything as "wrong." Citing teachings on emptiness, some may argue that everything is empty and thus there is no good, no bad, and no one really dies anyway as death

is an illusion. That is the perspective from absolute reality. As ordinary beings, we function in relative reality where we feel the pain of losing loved ones and find devaluing human life in pursuit of profit or power immoral. I find Master Xu Yun's (Empty Cloud) teaching particularly useful here. In response to people who cited Master Hui Neng's saying "when the mind is still there is no need to bother upholding the precepts," the master asked us to reflect on whether our mind is indeed still. By still, he meant the mind "being utterly unmoved when being embraced by someone attractive and naked, not giving rise to a hint of anger or resentment when someone insults or beats us without any reason whatsoever, not discriminating at all between those close to our heart as opposed to strangers." Only when we can do all of this completely is our mind genuinely still. Until then, we uphold the precepts and practice to discern what is wholesome and what is unwholesome. That is, we do our best to live as ordinary beings using the Dharma as our guide.

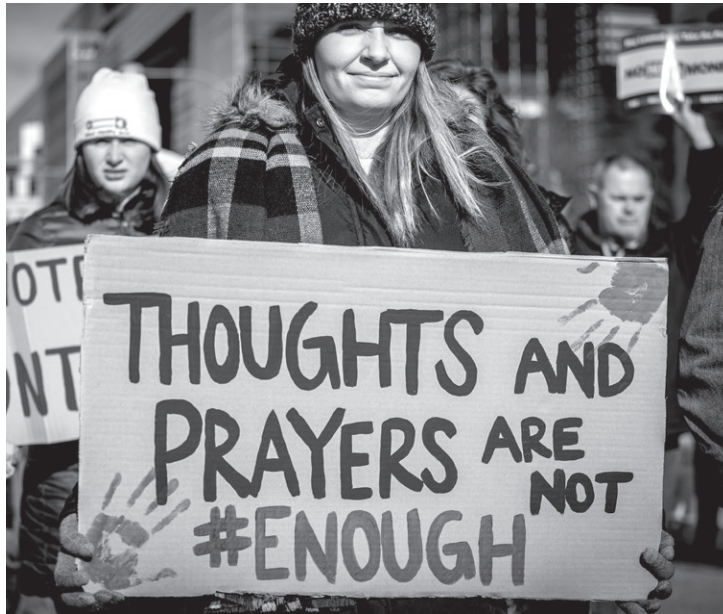
As ordinary human beings who engage in Dharma practice, we cultivate wisdom and compassion. With wisdom, we recognize what is beneficial to sentient beings and what is harmful and causes suffering. With compassion, we try our best to bring benefits and avoid causing harm to others and ourselves. In this way, as we cultivate the path toward Buddhahood, we can at least be decent human beings and responsible members of our family, community and society. As we recognize that prioritizing the rights of corporations to profit from selling guns over everyone's longing to live without fear of unnecessary gun deaths and injuries is causing fear and suffering, we do our part as citizens in a democracy to reduce the suffering. At the same time, we practice to not give rise to hatred and delusion as these vexations obscure our wisdom and compassion.

We march because we realize that it is not enough to pray or dedicate our chanting or meditation, in private or within our centers or temples, to those suffering from losing their loved ones to gun violence and living in fear of gun violence in schools and other public spaces.

When we hear news of people being killed and hurt by guns, our heart aches. Our heart goes out to everyone who lost their lives, who had to experience those terrifying moments of violence and endure the trauma in the months and years to come, who are heartbroken by the loss of their loved one, and who find their sense of safety shattered and become anxious and fearful. We express our solidarity and support by praying and dedicating our practice to everyone who suffers. This shows that we are human and that we can empathize with other people's suffering.

Praying calms our mind as we struggle to make sense of what has happened. The increased level and intensity of anxiety triggered by news of gun violence can be quite overwhelming and unsettling. Practices of praying, chanting or meditating in private or with fellow practitioners in our temples can be very helpful in these challenging times.

While we are praying or chanting or meditating, we need to pay attention to thoughts and feelings that arise under these circumstances. When we pray or chant or meditate for peace and alleviation of suffering, we may notice nagging questions such as: How is the peace we are praying for supposed to come about? Who is going to do the work to bring



about peace? When we ask these questions, do we picture that someone else will do the work necessary to bring about the changes for which we are praying? Who is this "someone else" supposed to be? Why aren't we one of these people? Are we waiting for someone to miraculously make everything better for us?

One of the most inspiring quotes I have seen is "we are the ones we have been waiting for." Instead of helplessly waiting for the perfect person to show up to save us, we can do something in this very moment. We can take responsibility for co-creating the world we would like to live in. While there is no absolute safety in the world, we know that it is possible to co-create a world where we do not need to live in fear of gun violence while attending school (or while our loved ones are at school), watching a movie, attending a concert, spending some leisure time in a shopping mall, or gathering with others in a house of worship. We know it is

possible because we have seen a world without rampant gun violence. We have seen other countries experience drastic declines in deaths from gun violence when they treat gun ownership as a right that comes with responsibility, and limit such right only to those unlikely to harm themselves or others with their guns.

Why is praying and dedicating our chanting or meditation not enough? It may be enough if all we want is to feel better ourselves. If we are serious about benefiting sentient beings and care about the well-being of our fellow human beings, we need to contribute to changing aspects of our system that allow gun violence to proliferate. Many countries passed and implemented laws to restrict access to deadly weapons after experiencing mass shootings, and saw deaths caused by gun violence drop precipitously. What needs to be done in our system is not a mystery. As long as those profiting from the current system can continue to do so unabated, they will. Hoping that corporations will stop maximizing profits permitted by the law is wishful thinking, a form of delusion, and not seeing reality clearly as it is. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. has said, "Those who love peace must learn to organize as effectively as those who love war." Praying for what we hope for is not enough; we also need to take part in the work of change-making.

When we pray and show our solidarity and support privately or within our centers or temples, we are not aware of how widely shared the sentiment is that something is seriously wrong and how deep the suffering is. When responding in isolation only, we are prone to underestimate the severity of the situation. When we join others and learn about how others feel, we allow the gravity of the situation to sink in and touch the core of our being. Reading the signs made by other participants at the march put a human face on all the abstract ideas that I have read

about regarding the issue of gun violence. Some of the most haunting sights at the march were seeing a man hold up a sign saying "I was a kid when my mother killed herself with a gun that she should never have been allowed to get," and an elementary school child wearing a sign over his chest saying "Am I next?" Connecting with other humans in our response makes things real and keeps us from turning away or falling back into the habit of thinking that it is just another news story.

Bringing structural change is hard work and takes perseverance. The suffering expressed by these fellow human beings will motivate us to keep trying, doing what we can to contribute to the causes and conditions needed to bring about change. We may not live to see the legislative changes needed but we vow to keep doing our part. As my late teacher Master Sheng Yen said, "empty space may have limit, my vow is limitless." In this spirit, we vow to contribute to the betterment of this world as part of our bodhisattva vow.

**We march out of appreciation that someone is willing to devote the time and energy to organize collective actions to try to push for sensible legislative changes and we show our gratitude and support by showing up and participating.**

The students of Parkland, Florida put time and energy into organizing March For Our Lives to bring change after witnessing years of inaction. They could have been doing fun things to amuse themselves as teenagers, but they chose to do something for all of us. The least we could do was to do our best to show up and encourage others to do the same. If no one participated, we would be telling these young people that we really did not care and therefore breed more cynicism. We would also be killing their enthusiasm and hope for a better future

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by not showing our support. These are examples of how inaction creates unwholesome karma. Many years ago, I learned from a volunteer at the Chan Meditation Center who encouraged everyone to show up for an event as a form of offering. Indeed! There would be no event if only the speaker showed up. Similarly, the students were doing the heavy lifting of organizing the march, all we needed to do was to show up. They gave us an opportunity to cultivate the paramita of generosity, by offering our embodied presence to a worthwhile cause.

It was also an opportunity to cultivate gratitude to those who are willing to lead and act, despite having to endure criticism and sometimes personal danger by speaking out and organizing for change. One way to express our gratitude is to show up and participate, to repay such a generous offering of courage and fearlessness that gives us hope and empowers us and keeps us from falling into despair.

Some people may think that it was a waste of time as nothing would change even if hundreds of

thousands of people joined the march. It was not a waste of time because everyone who participated was changed, and everyone around them were changed indirectly through their participation. It may not be visible, at least at first, these inspiring moments are like seeds that germinate in our heart. An event like this inspires those who were there and those who weren't, but there would be no event if no one participated. Our participation is a very concrete way to co-create the world we would like to live in by co-creating these moments that become seeds in our heart. Some of the organizers and participants may become our future political leaders, civic leaders, corporate executives, pastors, teachers who will continue to spread these seeds that were planted in their hearts. If we remember the teachings of the law of cause and effect and the law of causes and conditions, we will know that it is an erroneous view to believe that nothing would change with so many people showing up and being inspired by each other. In fact, the country's

mood regarding the issue of guns has already shifted since the march.

Joining the march was not the only way to act. Many people donated money to support the students' organizing efforts. Some helped with publicity and encouraging others to march even though they could not participate. At the march in Manhattan, some people bought food and water and handed it out to participants along the route and cheered us on. I was deeply moved. Every little thing each of



Photo by Rebecca Li



Photo by Alex Radelich

us does serves to encourage everyone to remain involved and persevere, as structural change will take decades if not longer to materialize. In response to my invitation to join me at the march, many people sent encouraging words and support even though they were not able to join me. Their support, in turn, encouraged me to remain engaged as it would have become all too easy to let other things in my life push this aside.

We need to be careful not to put ourselves above others when we engage socially as Buddhists. I was grateful that causes and conditions allowed me to join the march. Many people were not able to join for many reasons. Some had to work. Some were too exhausted from work. Some were not physically well enough to march. Some had responsibilities they could not get out of. It was a miracle that the

march was scheduled on a Saturday when I was available, as weekends tend to be very busy for me. I was grateful that my schedule worked out and my life circumstances allowed me to join. Many people told me that they wanted to join but could not because of various reasons that kept them from participating. I was grateful that I could be there and marched with them in spirit. That means the millions of people who showed up at March For Our Lives across the US and around the world represented only a fraction of us who cared and wanted to engage. May we remember this to keep our heart nourished, especially for the moments when we feel loneliness, cynicism and despair are about to take over our heart. May we all have the good fortune of finding the causes that move us to engage as we tread the bodhisattva path together. ☸



# Returning to Origins

by Ernest Heau

"The ten thousand things return to one;  
to where does the one return?"



## *The Stream Resurgent*

I

Small birds  
ghostly in their excursions,  
fewer and fewer  
as the leaves lace  
with threads of frost;  
the mind suspended,  
not questioning  
whether 'tis better to  
take the long road home  
or sit in falling light  
as time lapses into now.

II

A struggle in deep water  
or so it seems  
all senses gathered  
into one;  
time revealed  
as it unfolds,  
the stream resurgent,  
flooding the banks:  
at long last  
giving way  
to the enchantment of dying.

III

Come and go as one will  
there is yet stillness;  
the heart-mind in its wanderings  
can go no further  
than gravity permits;  
at the quiet center  
are those  
who came and went  
noticed by no one,  
leaving only  
echoes in a soundless realm.

*As Time Thickens*

I

As time thickens  
into the real,  
how can the mind resist  
the allure and the promise  
while keeping  
the spirit poised,  
the heart pulsing;  
and when the moment passes  
into silence and regret,  
not falling into  
tentacles of despair.

II

Inside the gate,  
living beings in a frenzy  
of mutual enmity,  
yet finding accord  
and watchful harmony,  
devouring and being devoured;  
balancing the scales  
of remorseless karma,  
unknowing witnesses  
betrayed by their own  
schemes and stratagems.



III

What to make of it  
when all things are fashioned  
from wisps of matter,  
having no other basis  
than desire and aversion,  
coming into being  
only to affirm fragility,  
like the self-devouring  
serpent of legend,  
in its ceaseless affirmation  
of birth and extinction.

Photo by Ernest Heau

*Roots*

I

*In solitary threads  
yet often entwined,  
it is always so  
when roots seek  
refuge in alien soil;  
once there conceding  
nothing to chance,  
putting forth hopeful leaves  
with effortless grace,  
bending towards light  
in obeisance to mortality.*

II

*A gathering of crows  
in winter's tree,  
barren branches bending  
like wreaths of ice,  
honoring the lifeless one  
cradled among fallen leaves;  
above the silence  
mindless winds moan,  
birds with tongues afire  
tossed to and fro  
in the rough winds of karma.*



III

*Watchful forbearance  
is the way of trees,  
standing in all weathers,  
obeying the same laws  
that give birth to stars  
whirling in infinite space;  
myriad jewels  
like seeds of retribution  
each containing the cosmos,  
sown throughout the universe  
to seek new life in virgin soil.*

Photo by Ernest Heau

# Chan Meditation Retreats

## 5-Day Chan Meditation

Led by **Žarko Andričević**

October 24 – 28, 2018

Easter Seals Camp Harmon · Boulder Creek, CA, USA

**CONTACT** [info@ddmbasf.org](mailto:info@ddmbasf.org)  
[www.ddmbasf.org](http://www.ddmbasf.org)

## 3-Day Chan Meditation

Led by **Gilbert Gutierrez**

November 9 – 11, 2018

DDM Los Angeles · El Monte, CA, USA

**CONTACT** [ddmbala@gmail.com](mailto:ddmbala@gmail.com)  
[www.ddmbala.org](http://www.ddmbala.org)

## 7-Day Intensive

Led by **Guo Gu**

November 23 – 30, 2018

Tallahassee Chan Center · Tallahassee, FL, USA

**CONTACT** [Tallahassee.Chan@gmail.com](mailto:Tallahassee.Chan@gmail.com)  
[tallahasseechan.org](http://tallahasseechan.org)

## 7-Day Silent Illumination

Led by **Žarko Andričević**

October 13 – 20, 2018

DDM Vancouver Center · Richmond, BC, Canada

**CONTACT** [info@ddmba.ca](mailto:info@ddmba.ca)  
[www.ddmba.ca](http://www.ddmba.ca)

## 7-Night Investigating Koans

Led by **Simon Child**

December 1 – 8, 2018

Maenllwyd Retreat Centre · Wales, UK

**CONTACT** [admin@westernchanfellowship.org](mailto:admin@westernchanfellowship.org)  
[www.westernchanfellowship.org](http://www.westernchanfellowship.org)

## 5-Day Begin Anew

Led by **David Listen**

December 28, 2018 – January 1, 2019

DDM Vancouver Center · Richmond, BC, Canada

**CONTACT** [info@ddmba.ca](mailto:info@ddmba.ca)  
[www.ddmba.ca](http://www.ddmba.ca)

## Foundation Retreat

Led by **Abbot Guo Yuan**

September 28 – 30, 2018

## Western Zen

Led by **Rebecca Li, Simon Child  
& Fiona Nuttall**

October 5 – 10, 2018

## Footsteps of Ancient Masters

Led by **Gilbert Gutierrez**

October 20 – 28, 2018

## Huatou Intensive

Led by **Abbot Guo Yuan**

November 24 – December 2, 2018

## Intensive Chan

Led by **Abbot Guo Yuan**

December 25, 2018 – January 1, 2019

Dharma Drum Retreat Center · Pine Bush, NY, USA

**CONTACT** [apply@dharmadrumretreat.org](mailto:apply@dharmadrumretreat.org)  
[www.dharmadrumretreat.org](http://www.dharmadrumretreat.org)



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