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CHAN MAGAZINE

AUTUMN 2021





Enlightenment

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



CHAN MASTER SHENG YEN

Common Questions in the Practice of Buddhism, 1988

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The background of the entire page is a light, monochromatic photograph of bamboo stalks. The stalks are vertical and slightly out of focus, creating a serene and naturalistic atmosphere. The lighting is soft, highlighting the texture of the bamboo.

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CHAN MAGAZINE

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and do not necessarily represent the views of Dharma Drum Mountain.

*Seeking Enlightenment
through Chan Practice*

— BY —

CHAN MASTER SHENG YEN



Photo by Jeremy Bishop



Chan Master Sheng Yen Photo by Ven. Chang Chen

In the early 1960s while on solitary retreat in Taiwan, Master Sheng Yen wrote *Orthodox Chinese Buddhism*. In the Preface he said “my efforts were directed at explaining and clarifying what Buddhism really is.” Written in Q&A format, the book was published in Taiwan in 1965, and eventually became his most popular book in the Far East. In 2007 the English translation was published in the USA by North Atlantic Books.

In 1988, Master Sheng Yen published in Taiwan, the book that he considered to be a sequel to *Orthodox Chinese Buddhism*, entitled *Common Questions in the Practice of Buddhism*. (From his preface: “Many readers urged me to write a sequel in similar style, while exploring an even deeper and wider range of topics.”) Like *Orthodox Chinese Buddhism*, this book was written in question-and-answer format, and consists of seventy-five questions about Buddhist practice submitted by practitioners. This book was translated into English and published by the Sheng Yen Education Foundation in 2017. The English translation is the product of collaboration between Ven. Guo Chan coordinator, Hue-ping Chin translator, Jerry Wang bilingual reviewer, Weitan Wu reviewer, and Ernest Heau, editor. This article is a chapter from that book.

QUESTION: What shall one do if after lifelong Chan practice, one still has not attained enlightenment?

ANSWER: In Chan Buddhism, enlightenment means letting go of everything and having no attachments in the mind; that is to say, there is nothing to seek and nothing to give up. So if within a single thought we could let go of all our myriad engagements, in that moment we would be in enlightenment. As far as sudden realization or sudden enlightenment is concerned, there is no gradual progress or stages of attainment. So there is no need to worry about whether one has attained enlightenment before passing on.

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

practice, one must let go of this thought in order to practice well.

Therefore, practitioners of Chan emphasize the process rather than the goal. During the process, one follows the guidance of a good teacher, uses the correct methods, and practices diligently to go forward with determination. As the saying goes, "one slap, one bloody palm, one step, one footprint." One simply upholds the method in each and every thought, paying no concern to anything else. If one is clearly aware thought after thought without a break, holding closely to the method without gaps, meticulously without end, the practice naturally gathers strength. At this time one will know that none of these ideas – being enlightened or not, birth and death or nirvana – has anything to do with practice.

Beginning Buddhist practitioners generally know that the cycle of birth and death is an ocean of sufferings, and nirvana is the shore of liberation; but they do not really understand that there is no absolute boundary between birth and death, and nirvana. So beginners think that they should fear birth and



Photo by Clément Falize

death, and seek nirvana; they believe that before attaining enlightenment, they are shackled by vexations, troubled by birth and death, and tormented by myriad sufferings. And that once they attain enlightenment, they will be liberated from the cycle of birth and death, and become completely free. Little do they know that such a dualistic view is an expedient means for the confused, to lure them into practicing the Dharma; it is not for the enlightened. Once they step into the gate of the Dharma, gain faith and start to practice, they should be taught to not practice for any goals, that seeking enlightenment is also attachment. One has to be rid of all attachments in order to attain enlightenment, and not be afflicted by birth and death. Recognizing this, one will be able to let go of the desire to seek or anticipate enlightenment.

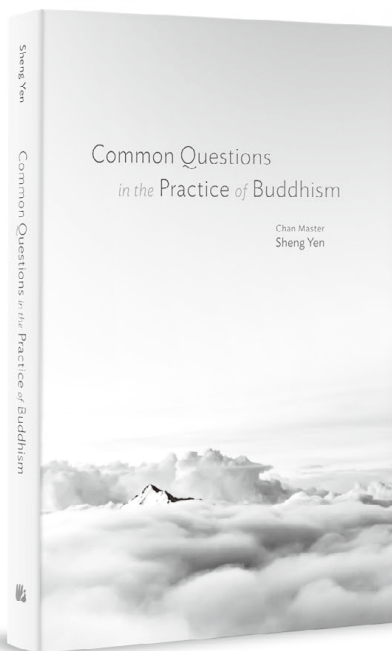
Spending one's whole life practicing without gathering strength indicates that from beginning to end, one has not learned to renounce attachments or let them go. Nevertheless, if one always practices diligently, even though one is driven by the fear of birth and death and the yearning for enlightenment, at least one need not worry about falling into the three lower planes of the desire realm. After all, focusing one's mind on leaning towards enlightenment is better than towards hell.

Buddhadharma emphasizes the power of our vows as well as the force of karma. If in our practice we are guided by our vows, even though obstacles from our past karma might prevent us from attaining liberation in this lifetime, we would at least not stray from the Three Jewels. If we cannot attain enlightenment in this life, we will still be able to continue diligently practicing the three learnings of precepts, samadhi, and wisdom in the next life, guided by the power of our vows. This is because the merits of upholding the precepts, together with the deeds of

samadhi and wisdom, will lead us to be reborn in a heavenly place or in the Pure Land, or even attain enlightenment. At the very least, we would be reborn into the human world to continue studying and practicing the Dharma.

Therefore, Chan practitioners should not be concerned about the direction they may go after death. However, there are practitioners who perceive that the strength of their practice is weak, who lack confidence and doubt the strength of their vow and the depth of their cultivation. They may fear that because their vow and their strength in the practice of precepts, samadhi, and wisdom are not strong enough, at the time of death they would be affected by the manifestation of bad karma or led astray by demonic foes. This would separate them from the Three Jewels, causing them to fall into the three lower planes, trapped in the cycle of birth and death with no chance to return. For these practitioners, it's better to rely on Amitabha Buddha's vow and seek rebirth in the Western Pure Land. In the meantime, they can use the merits accrued from all aspects of their practices including Chan meditation, to increase the provision for rebirth in the Pure Land; this would be the most reliable way.

Therefore, since the Song Dynasty there has been much interaction between the schools of Chan and Pure Land, and the dual practice of Chan and Pure Land has been promoted. This entails an equal emphasis on the methods of Chan and the power of the vow to seek rebirth in the Pure Land. If one can gather strength through Chan practice, there will be no need to worry about whether one will attain enlightenment. As in the case of a true Chan practitioner mentioned earlier, if one's practice cannot gather strength, one would still have the wondrous Pure Land as one's temporary home to continue one's practice. ☸



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



Attachment

BY

VENERABLE GUO XING

Venerable Guo Xing is a Dharma heir of the late Master Sheng Yen. He has served as the abbot of the Dharma Drum Retreat Center in Pine Bush, New York, as well as the Chan Meditation Center in Queens, New York. This article was first published in the Chinese *Shurangama Journal*, July 1, 2019. The English version was first published on the English *Shurangama Journal*, November 29, 2021. Translated by Mina Tang and edited by Keith Brown, Jenni Kuo, and Angela Yu.

PATRIARCHS OFTEN INSTRUCT PRACTITIONERS to practice “non-attachment” by quoting from the sutras. In principle, there is no problem with this approach. However, the key question is whether practitioners can correctly understand the true meaning of “attachment” and apply the correct understanding to practice – of which, “taking the five skandhas to be the self” is the core attachment. For most people, “attachment” means insisting on one’s own point of view, or being reluctant to accept others’ suggestions. To this extent, we even label those who are reluctant to accept our own point of view as “attached.”

If I ask people what the meaning of “attaching to the five skandhas as self” is, not many are likely to be able to answer this question succinctly, not to mention apply the right view to practice. Sentient beings take their bodies to be the self in order to stay alive, which is the strongest attachment. For example, if we had a million US dollars, we would begrudge to lose it. However, if a person pointed a gun to our head, we would be willing to hand over the money. Why? The answer is that we regard our lives as far more important than money. But once our lives are safe and sound, we would then want to secure our wealth again. Therefore, the strongest attachment for most people is the attachment to the body for self-preservation. Most people will give up everything to stay alive.

Once our survival is assured, we will then seek comfort and reject discomfort. For example, when experiencing excruciating leg pain and struggling to relieve their legs during meditation, one would not simply be aware of the phenomenon of leg pain and the thought of releasing the legs. Instead, they would think that “my” legs are in pain, and “I” want to release my legs. Most practitioners would experience an entity of “I” that moves from the breathing

method to leg pain, after which this same “I” shifts away from leg pain to the thought of releasing the legs. This experience rapidly moves along stages of contact, feeling, craving, grasping, and becoming, in accordance with the twelve links of dependent origination. However, most people overlook the fact that this is simply the phenomena of continuous arising and perishing of contacting, feeling, craving, grasping, and becoming. Instead, they see that there is an “I” that contacts, feels, craves, hates, grasps, and rejects. In fact, there are only the perceived phenomena that are arising and perishing. However, people attach to the notion that the phenomena are “self,” and there is an eternal entity, or “I,” shuttling between phenomena. In fact, pain is a phenomenon, not the self (which is described as “not self” in the sutras); in the midst of the arising and perishing of the leg pain, there isn’t a real entity called “self” within phenomena (which is what “no self” means in the sutras).

During meditation, some people may recollect childhood memories of being harshly disciplined. This may bring out strong emotions that cannot subside. Some people are unwilling to perform gratitude prostrations to their parents, since their parents publicly humiliated and belittled them in their childhood, thus causing them to lose confidence. These images are memories that do not have sentience; nor do they have the function of seeing, hearing, perceiving, and knowing. However, most people regard these images of no awareness and no feeling as a living self or others, and hence take the imaginary for the real. We call this “mistaking the false to be real.” Most people are unaware that this is “attachment.”

Without understanding the true meaning of “attachment” in Buddhadharma, the acts of performing good deeds, speaking kind words, and giving rise to



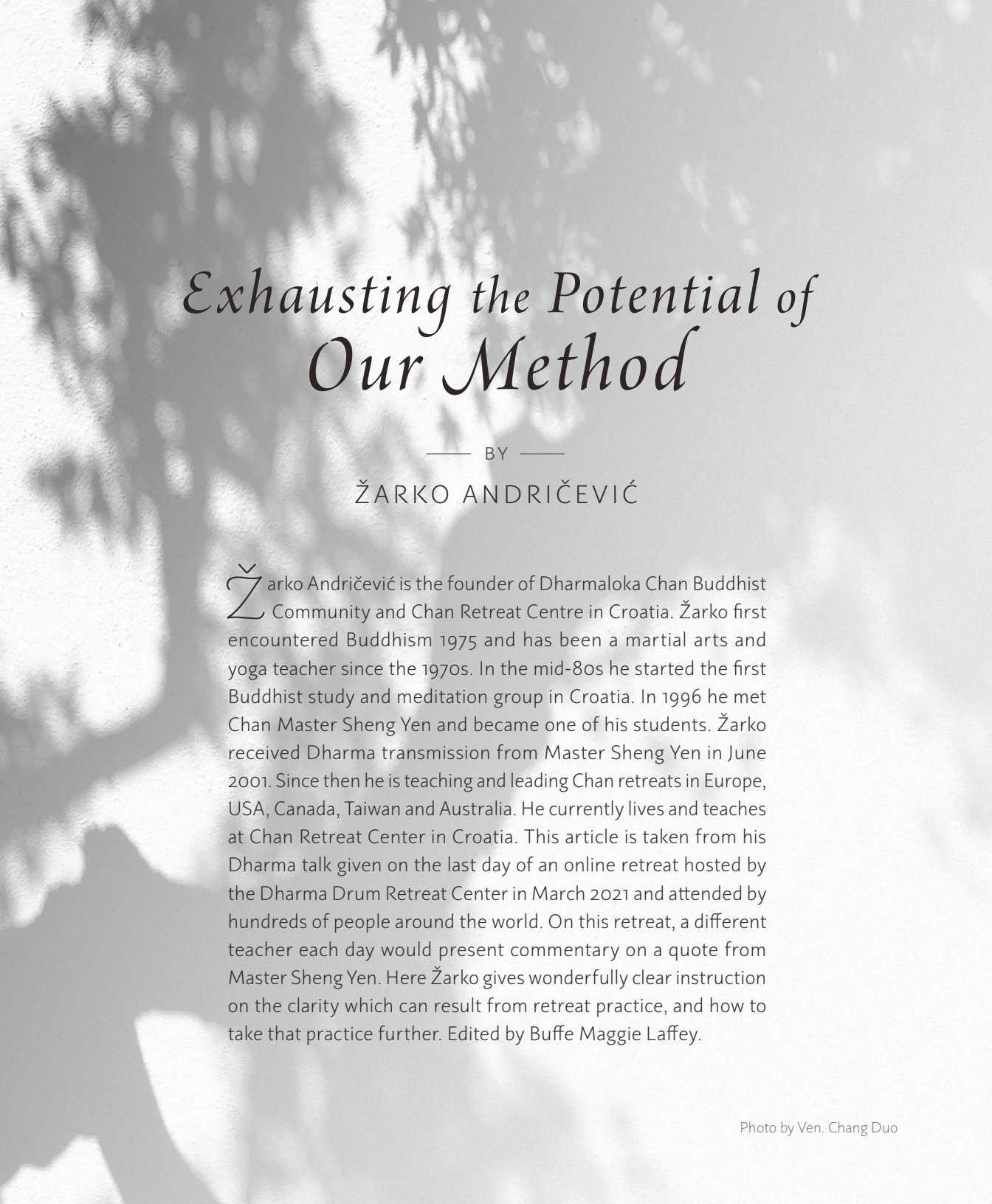
Photo by Mathieu Stern

kind thoughts are merely the worldly, wholesome dharms of renouncing evil deeds and performing good deeds. There is still an “I” that performs good deeds, speaks kind words, and gives rise to good thoughts. These are the wholesome dharms with outflows. To penetrate the ultimate, we ought to use the wholesome dharms with outflows as the foundation to embark upon the “threefold wheel of essential emptiness” of the wholesome dharms without outflows. Many people simply continue performing worldly wholesome dharms for blessings and prosperity. These deeds are also a form of attachment in which people are unaware that they are in the midst of inverted dreams. They only seek to change nightmares into pleasant dreams, without realizing

that these are yet again part of the samsara of the six realms and the three worlds.

Shifu (Chan Master Sheng Yen) often stated that only when combined with practice can Buddhadharma come to being. In this regard, we ought to strive to apply Buddhist terminologies into our own life experiences. Only by connecting with and applying Buddhadharma in our daily life can the Dharma come to existence. If one can understand the meaning of “attachment” – that is, taking the five skandhas as “self” – one can begin to practice from memory, becoming clearly aware that the images in memory are non-self and non-human. Then one can be liberated from the entanglement and suffering which result from erroneous views. 🌿





Exhausting the Potential of Our Method

— BY —

ŽARKO ANDRIČEVIĆ

Žarko Andričević is the founder of Dharmaloka Chan Buddhist Community and Chan Retreat Centre in Croatia. Žarko first encountered Buddhism 1975 and has been a martial arts and yoga teacher since the 1970s. In the mid-80s he started the first Buddhist study and meditation group in Croatia. In 1996 he met Chan Master Sheng Yen and became one of his students. Žarko received Dharma transmission from Master Sheng Yen in June 2001. Since then he is teaching and leading Chan retreats in Europe, USA, Canada, Taiwan and Australia. He currently lives and teaches at Chan Retreat Center in Croatia. This article is taken from his Dharma talk given on the last day of an online retreat hosted by the Dharma Drum Retreat Center in March 2021 and attended by hundreds of people around the world. On this retreat, a different teacher each day would present commentary on a quote from Master Sheng Yen. Here Žarko gives wonderfully clear instruction on the clarity which can result from retreat practice, and how to take that practice further. Edited by Buffe Maggie Laffey.

The Last Day is Precious

GREETINGS TO ALL; I SEE MANY FAMILIAR faces there [on the Zoom screen]. It is an exceptional experience to have such a retreat, not being altogether in one place, instead everybody at their own home, and every day a different teacher comes and gives a talk. This is a very special experience. I hope that we can turn these conditions for our own benefit and for the benefit of all other people. I give thanks to all who participated in the organization of such a complex event. I can imagine how difficult that must have been.

Let me start by simply saying that this is the last full day of the retreat. The last day of a retreat is usually considered the most precious of all. There are several reasons for that. The first reason is that by now you have fully adapted to the conditions of the retreat and have left all difficulties behind, maybe even a few days ago. Secondly, you are able to use your method much better now than was the case at the beginning of the retreat. Thirdly, today your practice is like surfing on a wave; somehow everything

goes much smoother than before. For all these reasons, the last day of a retreat is considered to be very precious – a great opportunity for deepening our practice even further. So having said that, I will turn now to the quote for today from Master Sheng Yen:

You have nothing to do. Both mind and body are at ease. If you have no thoughts, that is good. Then you are comfortable. You don't even have to continue to notice your breath. If your mind is clear, just sit. But once you start to feel your body, then make sure your posture is correct. I hope you can do this. Don't think you have to sit because you owe someone something.¹

That sounds really wonderful. Mind and body at ease, not many wandering thoughts. You feel comfortable. You don't even have to continue to notice your breath. It is definitely an important stage of practice – by using the method we have come to the position where we have actually exhausted the potential of that method. For that reason, we don't need

that method anymore. It is like when you are watching your breath, and after using the method day after day, continuously working on it, you come to the point at which your breath is so subtle that you almost can't notice it. At the same time your mind is very clear, settled and stable, with maybe just a few wandering thoughts here and there.



Photo by Jeremy Bishop

Nothing to Do

This is precisely the situation which Master Sheng Yen describes in this text. There is no need for us to watch the breath anymore, because the function of the method has been fulfilled. The purpose of using the breath was precisely to come to that stage of clarity and stability. Once we do that, we can forget about it. We don't need to watch the breath anymore.

This is coming out of the grip of a scattered mind, and the various emotional turbulences we experienced at the very beginning of our retreat. Because when we start a retreat, our mind is very unsettled, and in a state of unease, and sometimes that's followed by strong emotional reactions. To get out of that and come to this position which is described at the beginning of this quote, that's a great release. We can finally witness the possibility of getting out of this turbulence. We know now that we can experience a different state of mind and body from the usual one; this marks a very important stage in our practice.

But at the same time, I'm sure that not all of us find this stage of practice at the end of the retreat, isn't that so? Sometimes it happens; sometimes it does not. Maybe a certain number of you are at this stage, maybe you've even gone beyond. But a lot of people are not in that position, and they are still struggling with the body, with all these wandering thoughts and tensions, and various emotional states. This is what we predominantly experience on retreats. So hearing about this wonderful state of a mind and body at ease, it might sound like a fantasy. For this reason, let me say a few words about the process through which we can come to this stage in our practice. Because this stage doesn't just come out of nowhere, or because some people get lucky. It's not that at all. No, there is a procedure

to come to that stage. If we are very careful and if we know the elements of this process, we can all find ourselves there.

Elements of the Process

Here are the elements which I think are important in coming to this stage of having a mind and body at ease. First of all, you know that when we come on retreat we find simplicity, living a much simpler life than our everyday life. In this situation [an online retreat] where you are practicing at home, maybe it is not so simple as when you are in the retreat center. But nevertheless I am sure that you organized your life in a way to simplify it as much as possible. This is a very important part of training the mind, to simplify life, that is the first and very important thing.

The second thing is slowing down. In our ordinary life we are all, I imagine, living in a rhythm which is very fast, and for that reason not very healthy. It's a rhythm which brings a lot of tension and dissatisfaction. It's very important to slow down so that we can find our natural rhythm. When we slow down, everything happens in some kind of clarity, so we don't miss anything. This is another very important condition.

The third condition is relaxing – recognizing and releasing all those physical tensions which accumulate in our bodies, and calming our mind by releasing the worries which are the result of the way we live in general. Once we relax the body and the mind, leaving aside thoughts about the past, and leaving aside expectations of the future, we start to live in the present moment. Then we are very close to the condition described at the beginning of the quote. In the present moment, the body and mind are at ease. For this simple reason, we are no longer living a complex life full of tensions. Living in the present

in the context of retreat is a life free of all those things which create problems.

When we start to feel the taste of the present moment, contentment naturally arises. We become at peace with what is. There are no more fears and hopes, expectations and worries. We are at ease with ourselves, and as a result we start to feel content. There is no need to go anywhere, or do anything. Everything is fine as it is, and we are fine where we are in the moment.

So these are conditions which enable us to experience what is described at the beginning of this quote. Of course there is a method of practice; that is our main tool to arrive there. The most important thing with the method of practice is establishing continuity. I hope that even if you haven't experienced this so far, that in your practice today and tomorrow you will be able to settle down and use your method efficiently, and experience this contentment; the state of being stable and clear with nothing to do.

Sometimes this experience seems to be very far away from us, but it all depends on how we relate to our practice, how we use our method. If you sit in a good posture; if you relax your body and mind, if you release all those worries and pick up your method with interest and inspiration, knowing that you are doing the right thing at the right time, you can arrive in no time at this state. It's not necessarily a matter of days or months; it can happen actually in one sitting, and I think that's very important to know. Because sometimes we approach practice with the idea that it takes a lot of time and experience to achieve anything meaningful. By thinking so, we defeat ourselves, and it won't be possible to make any progress. But once we know that mind is nothing substantial, mind can change and turn in a moment. So if we establish the right condition for that to happen, it can happen right now.

Chan Practice Is Deconstruction

In general, Chan practice is more about deconstruction than about creating or achieving something. It is more of letting go, discovering what's already here, than creating something else not existent yet. I think this is very important to know. When we practice Chan, everything that we need for our practice is already here. For that reason, there is no need for us to go anywhere or do anything. By letting go of doing anything, we come closer to who we really are.

We discover our true nature by letting go of all these things which hide this nature from us. On the one hand there is a need for this strong belief that we have this true nature which is there all the time; a conviction that we are not lacking anything, that everything is actually okay with us. But we have obstructions which keep us from being in touch with our true nature. So when we start practicing, we practice by letting go wrong views, letting go of attachments, letting go of anything which hides this nature from us.

This is also the meaning of "you have nothing to do." If you go back now to the beginning of the retreat, there were a lot of things to do. In our everyday life we are very busy. And the more busy we become somehow the further we are from our true nature. In practice we are letting go of this busyness, and once we come to the point in which there is nothing for us to do, that is a great release. That is actually liberation, because there we can experience our true nature. This stage which is described in the quote, it is not that stage of seeing our nature. It is simply a stage in which, by exhausting the potential of our method, we can enjoy for a while the fruit of our work. Our body and mind are at ease, the mind is stable and clear, and we can simply stop there and not do anything.



And in the process of just sitting our minds become even more clear and calm and silent. How is that possible? What is happening there?

Posture and Attitude

Once we expand our awareness to include the whole body sitting, the first thing is to make sure our posture is correct. Once we straighten our posture, our mind becomes very alert. By correcting the posture we correct our attitude, and as that attitude is one of alertness, we become sharply aware of our body sitting there on the cushion. When that happens our field of awareness expands from what was the breath at the beginning, to the whole body now. At that stage it is a very natural thing to do. If we are at that stage which the text describes, we won't have much difficulty with knowing how to be there with the whole body. That problem arises when our mind is scattered, when we simply don't have that mental stability. But in this case the mind is very stable and clear and at ease.

What is true is that we can't maintain that state for long. After a while the mind will start thinking again and will maybe even start to be tense again. So in the second part of the quote Master Sheng Yen says "If your mind is clear just sit. But once you start to feel your body then make sure your body is in the correct posture. I hope you can do this."

At the point which the first part of the quote describes, Master Sheng Yen is suggesting to us to use the method of silent illumination. In other schools traditionally maybe the four foundations of mindfulness would be the way to proceed. But in Chan, once we come to that stage, we can continue by just sitting. So, from being at ease in body and mind, and being stable and clear, we direct our attention to the body. We continue our practice by simply knowing that we are sitting there, nothing more, nothing less.

Once we direct our attention to the whole of the body sitting there, we have no doubt about how to do that. As soon as you expand your awareness to the body you know that you are sitting. There is nothing confusing there, it is very obvious. You feel the weight of your body on a cushion. You feel all the sensations of your body. Your mind is so calm that it does not jump from one sensation to another – and this is what confuses people when they start to establish this awareness of the whole body: the fact that the mind jumps from one sensation to another creates doubt about how to be aware of the whole body. But when our mind is so stable and clear we don't have these doubts. We are simply aware, and from moment to moment we continue by being aware of the body sitting there.

Inside Totality

At that time, what does our practice consist of? We are aware of body and mind being together in the act of sitting; the practice consists of the mind *not* focusing on the particular phenomena arising in that mind-body context. I hope that is clear. The mind does not focus at one point on one thing, and at another point on another thing. For example, “Oh, now my knee hurts,” so I focus on the knee thinking “it’s not pleasant, how can I avoid this?” If you start following those thoughts, this is not the method of silent illumination, of just sitting. Whatever arises, whether it is sensation arising in the body or wandering thoughts arising in the mind, we are not focusing on those phenomena, not leaving the totality of the body sitting there. Whatever is happening, it’s happening inside totality.



So for example, if you are aware of your whole body sitting, and then your knee starts to hurt, you don’t focus on the knee. You are very clear that there is a pain in the knee, but you are aware of the rest of the body as well. Once these sensations arise, we don’t focus on them and we don’t react in our usual way by rejecting or grasping. That’s the main aspect of our practice there. When we see that our mind reacts to these phenomena, and it’s either grasping if it is a pleasant sensation or rejecting if it is unpleasant – this is what we let go of. Of course our mind will focus, but once we see, we will let go and our mind will return to the totality of the body. And next time we have more chance of succeeding in not reacting to those phenomena.

Simply Know

If we don’t react to these phenomena, what is it that we do? We simply know them. We are very clear that they arise at one point, are there for a while, and then they leave. They are coming and going all the time. The same is the case with wandering thoughts. Whether there are phenomena arising in the body or phenomena arising in the mind, we treat them all in the same way: we don’t react. We don’t follow our wandering thoughts, we don’t fight against them. We know they are there but we simply ignore them. Our attention is on the totality of the body sitting there.

This sitting with a sense of full presence is the main characteristic of the “just sitting” stage of silent illumination. We sit with full presence and whatever is happening should not have the ability to move our mind. The less we react to whatever arises, the more free we become in that sitting. The less conflict there is between our mind and body, the more peaceful and clear we become. If we progress in that way, the strength of the sensations arising in our body starts

Photo by Kryz Amon

to diminish and the sensations become less and less noticeable. In other words, our body stops being the burden. Our body becomes lighter and lighter in that practice.

Also, if we don't follow our wandering thoughts, and are not fighting against them, fewer and fewer wandering thoughts are present. By ignoring wandering thoughts in this way we actually ignore the self-centricity of our mind. Because every single thought is self-centered. By letting go of those self-centered thoughts, the strength of self-centricity is lessened.

It goes up to the point in which we could say our body and mind are reflecting each other, without any kind of conflict between them. We sit and we know we are sitting. It goes to the point in which we don't feel the body so strongly anymore, we can even leave the sense of the body as we normally have it, and then naturally what happens is our mind expands farther from the body into the environment in which we sit. When that happens we continue our practice in the same way using the same principle, the principle of allowing everything to arise and not grasping or rejecting anything which does arise.

The level of practice becomes more and more subtle. Our mind becomes even more stable and our clarity becomes more present. By not reacting to anything which arises in our body, our mind, and now our environment, we allow everything to come and go. At the same time, we are clearly aware of all those phenomena arising and passing away. If we continue in this way, we actually come into position to understand the nature of those phenomena. Because by doing that, we are outside our mental constructions about ourselves and the world. We are no longer relying on those conceptions, but are witnessing all those phenomena directly from moment to moment. And if we don't introduce our self there, if we are not describing and coming to conclusions

about those things – those phenomena actually describe themselves to us. This is possible because there is no grasping and rejecting (which is precisely the self). When there is no self there, we see things as they are. Whenever a self is there, perspective is very small. But when there is no self-perspective and the mind is very open, it has the ability to see the totality of things, to see how things are actually co-arising. There is none of this strict division of subject and object, self and other.

Compassion Is Responsibility

So this is how we can proceed from that stable and clear state of mind, the state at which we arrive after we exhaust the potential of the meditation method. Then we can know further, all the way up to the point of seeing ourselves also as a phenomenon, empty by nature, as are all other phenomena. Once you see that, that's wisdom and that's compassion. Wisdom is the understanding of how things are and compassion is the responsibility which that understanding brings, which is very natural. It's the free function of the mind which is not self-obsessed.

We can see this whole process as one of deconstruction, of letting go. On a retreat we first make a distinction between our wishes and our needs, and we stay with the needs and forget about the wishes. Then we continue by letting go of everything which is not essential. In letting go of all these things and arriving at the present moment, we actually feel contentment; no need to go anywhere, to do anything. And when we go deeper and deeper into our practice by letting go of this pattern of grasping and rejecting, this is a continuous opening into what is really there.

This is what I thought was good to say in relation to this quote from Master Sheng Yen. I hope that I brought some clarity into this practice and

that this could be useful to you. I will end my talk here; so if you have any questions I'll be very happy to answer them.

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First Student: I am happy to hear that all the elements we need for practice are actually in us, we just need to discover them. I have a very beginner question: I'm still struggling with my method which is counting the breath. Even before I actually start using the method, all the wandering thoughts are already in the mind. If I just keep doing it every day, will I eventually learn how to let go of the thought?

Žarko: That is a very usual situation that you're describing, something which happens to all of us in the beginning stages of practice. Meditation on counting the breath is a very effective method to collect the mind. But you also have to think in a certain way about wandering thoughts, which somehow stand between us and the method. We have to see those thoughts in a certain way in order to be able to let go of them. If you think those thoughts are important, then it will be very difficult to let them go. So first of all we have to see that, when we sit, *we* decided to sit. We ourselves decided to use the method of practice. If our mind goes somewhere else from that decision we can reflect on that, and we can say to ourselves that these thoughts might be important in our everyday lives, but right now they are not important at all. Actually they are preventing us from having a clear understanding even of those issues that the thoughts are related to.

Most often the thoughts are about something that happened in the past. If it happened in the past it does not exist anymore; there is not much point in thinking about it now. We are here, alive in the present, and the past is gone. Even the previous moment is not there anymore. So why go there? The same

thing is true about the future. We may be thinking about some kind of expectation or planning, or some fear of a possible outcome in the future. If we see that our mind actually builds frustration on the basis of something which doesn't exist yet, then we can let go of that and return to the method.

So this is one kind of reasoning which can help us. Another thing is that we know, if we stay with our wandering thoughts, nothing will really change in our life. Our range of experience will stay more or less the same. The only change possible is if we stay with one thought – then things start to happen. We start to experience ourselves, the environment, and other people differently than we normally do. That's enormously interesting, it's an adventure actually, to stay with the one thought. At the beginning it seems like a very boring thing, counting one to ten. Then we find that we are not even able to count one to ten; it seems very disappointing.

But we can think of it as not actually counting, think of it as one thought we are repeating from moment to moment. As we stay with that one thought, we are not with the thousand other thoughts, and then something starts to change in the way we perceive things. Our mind stops being scattered and becomes concentrated. That's a completely different condition of the mind which we can actually feel, and we start to be carried in our practice from that moment. When we become one with that thought in our practice, it's like for the first time we experience ourselves as one whole being. Every single cell in our body rejoices in that moment. It's an unimaginable experience. But nothing of this could happen if we follow our wandering thoughts.

Second Student: You talk about relaxing the body and the mind. Relaxing the body is easy. But when we try to relax the mind, it's like trying to shoot a gun with the gun. It becomes more confusing. What



you say about relaxing the mind, is it using the method, or going into mental constructions?

Žarko: We start by relaxing the body, and from the very beginning we should know that body and mind are connected. So all this tension we experience in the body is actually caused by mental tension; the origin of our physical tensions are in our mind. By relaxing the body we start with something we know how to deal with. We know how to release that physical tension, and by doing that our mind already starts to be more relaxed than it was before. The first reason why that is so is, as we are relaxing our body, our mind is not trapped in a continuous perpetuation of what makes it feel tense. We switch that attention to the body, and then by relaxing our body there is a pleasant feeling arising and the mind is naturally attracted to that. Being attracted, the mind is no longer trapped in emotionally charged

thinking which brings a lot of tension. So this is how we approach the mind.

Then our breathing settles down. As the mind becomes concentrated on the method more and more, it becomes more and more relaxed, because it's taken out of the usual context which creates mental tension. Now when we come to the present moment, body and mind are at ease because in the present moment there are none of these negative emotions arising. Negative emotions arise when we are thinking about certain things in a certain way in which we used to think about those things. When we don't do any of this, but instead are simply present, none of those things are actually in the present moment. Therefore the mind relaxes. 🌿

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1. Chan Master Sheng Yen, *Zen Wisdom: Knowing and Doing* (New York: Dharma Drum Publications, 1994), 4–5.

Take Circumstances as They Come

— BY —
VENERABLE GUO QI

Venerable Guo Qi ordained as a monk in 1992. With a great respect for nature, he often walks barefoot in the mountainside to be close to the earth. He has served as the head of the meditation hall at Dharma Drum Mountain (DDM), head of Youth Development, deputy director of DDM, he's been in charge of the kitchen at the Dharma Drum Retreat Center (DDRC) in Pine Bush, NY. This lecture is taken from his book *Waking Up from the Dream*. Chinese editing by Pei-Shan Huang, translation by John Gill.



This world doesn't have anything worth clinging to. Nothing. Just let go.

When it comes to “giving up” and “letting go,” what is the difference? “Giving up” means that we stop doing anything. “Letting go” means doing our best and then, afterwards, putting it down and letting it rest.

Yet there are many people who, after an issue is resolved, continue to worry. They ask, “Did I do the right thing? Could I have done better? Will everyone be pleased with me?” At first glance this seems like a very conscientious attitude; very considerate of others. But at its core this attitude is just worrying about what other people think of you.

If you worry so much about your achievements, your performance, and other people’s praise and attention, these worries will gradually weigh you down.

They’ll build up slowly until, one day, they’re more than you can bear.

If you don’t want to have such pressure, it doesn’t mean you should give up and do nothing. Rather, it means taking circumstances as they come and, as circumstances change, adjusting according to the changes. This is living according to causes and conditions: whatever it is you do, you’ll experience the results. Strive to do the right thing and attend to your affairs. Then the results of your actions, whatever they may be, simply accept them as causes and conditions.

It’s like planting a tree. You may put your attention into watering it, fertilizing it, and doing all the



Photo by Francesco Gallarotti

other things that a gardener should do, but in the end, do you know how the tree will grow? Will it feel harsh wind and strong rain? The tree will simply have to follow and accord with causes and conditions.

It doesn't matter if the issue is raising children, caring for sick family members, or dealing with difficulties at work, at home, or in a marriage. They all unfold just like this.

The proper way to deal with an issue is to face the problem, accept the problem, deal with the problem as best you can, and then let it go. This world doesn't have anything worth clinging to. Nothing. Just let go.

Many people think that because someone is their teacher, or their boss, or their mother-in-law, or some other such relationship that they must accept pressure from that person. In fact, no one can make you worry except yourself. If you don't want something, you probably aren't going to buy it, and if you don't like some food you probably aren't going to eat it – so why is it that when someone gives you pressure you don't want, you take it on?

Suppose you assume responsibility and handle the problem well. Your teacher, your boss, or your family member may still unreasonably criticize you. Perhaps that's just the way that this person sees things. But it is still your choice whether or not you will accept their scolding. Often we'll feel humiliated after being scolded. But have you ever considered: at the moment that someone is cursing and berating you, exactly what part of you is being scolded?

Perhaps they decried your name, and this makes you feel terrible. But does your name represent all that you are? Maybe their finger was in your face, hovering just in front of your nose. Is that nose you? Suppose your abuser was red in the face and slammed their fist on the table. Clearly it was the table they hit, so why do you feel unbearable pain?

Your body is obviously not injured in any way. Why it is that when we're scolded we feel so much pain? It's because you perceive the scolding.

The moment the wind blows, the grass bends. When the wind stops, the grass stands up straight right away. So why does the voice that criticized you still echo in your ears, and you can remember everything as if it were happening before your eyes, even long after it's passed? Is your mind still riled and ill at ease?

Why is sound of abuse different from the wind, the rain, or the cars on the road? You can't remember what the rain sounded like just a moment before, but you can remember harsh words from over a decade ago. Over the many long years, why is it that we collect some sounds and scenes to remember and not others? Is the problem that hurtful sound someone blurted out a decade ago and has long since faded? Or are you the problem?

When other people criticize you, they are trying to make you angry. But you don't have to let them have their way and punish yourself by getting angry. You don't have to follow someone else's orders when they tell you to get up and dance.

You can practice by giving all the sounds you hear equal importance. Don't hold them in your mind, don't become invested in them, and don't follow them. If you're in an argument and someone hurls abuse at you, treat their voice the same as the sound of cars, the humming of birds, or the bustle of the wind.

All of these sounds are just vibrations in the air. Sounds are just sounds. There's no need to distinguish them, cling to them, or analyze them. If you're not invested, then other people's criticism won't even reach you. But if you care just a bit and reflect upon them, then that person's abuse will squarely hit its mark. 🌿



An Interview with
Rebecca Li

— BY —

REBECCA LI &
GEORGE MARSH

Rebecca Li, PhD, is the founder and guiding teacher of Chan Dharma Community. She began practicing with Chan Master Sheng Yen in 1996, and in 1999 began serving as his translator. In 2016, Rebecca received Dharma transmission from Simon Child (Dharma heir of Master Sheng Yen). Rebecca is a sociology professor at The College of New Jersey where she also serves as faculty director of the Alan Dawley Center for the Study of Social Justice. She teaches meditation and Dharma classes, gives public lectures, and leads Chan retreats at Dharma Drum centers in North America. George Marsh, editor of *New Chan Forum* (the journal of the Western Chan Fellowship), interviewed Rebecca Li in January 2017 about becoming Simon Child's second Dharma heir. This article authored by George Marsh and Rebecca Li was published in *New Chan Forum*, Issue 54, Summer 2017, and is reprinted here with their permission.

Was there religion in your childhood? Was there any sign of transcendence or vision? How about influences from Chinese culture?

I grew up in Hong Kong, which is a very Westernized place, and went to an English school, so I never searched for Buddhism. In fact, I almost became a Catholic in secondary school. The most memorable early experiences that might have primed me to be open to Buddhism were two. When I was about seven I was in my father's hardware store in Hong Kong, and while alone I had the strong feeling that I was in the wrong place in the wrong body, like I didn't belong there. It was a very strong and shocking feeling. "Why am I here?" I wondered. At that moment it felt like I belonged somewhere else. That memory and feeling stuck with me, and while I didn't have any ideas beyond the feeling of awe at that strange feeling at the time, because it did stick with me so vividly I suspect it helped open me to the idea of past lives when I was eventually exposed to Buddhism. That said, I am not sure for one to practice Chan that it is necessary to believe in rebirth, but I definitely don't close my mind to that possibility.

Later, when I was about eight, in Elementary School, I heard Hui Neng's four-line verse ("There is no Bodhi-tree / Nor stand of a mirror bright / Since all is void / Where can the dust alight?") on a TV show. I asked my mom, who was also watching, what it meant and she just said it was something Buddhist. I didn't experience any realization or anything like that but I did find it intriguing, and thought that maybe Buddhism, whatever that was, would be interesting. My family was not religious nor was my mother Buddhist, but I did think at that time "If I ever have a religion it might be Buddhism." So even though I never pursued it, or sought it out, that openness to Buddhism remained, so when I finally was exposed to it I had an open mind.

In addition to my family not being religious, we were also not brought up "traditionally." The Confucian values of family, filial piety, duty and obedience are very strong for the Chinese. It is much more so in Taiwan and China than in Hong Kong, but it is still a common set of values in Hong Kong as well. However, my father was considered something of an eccentric because he taught us not to blindly respect someone just because they are an elder or an authority figure but we should think for ourselves

whether that person's views and actions are sensible, so I became very independent in judgement. This later affected how I related to Buddhism and Buddhist teachers. But more on that later.

How did you come to Chan? Tell me about your first meeting with Master Sheng Yen.

It was not until I was a graduate student in California that I encountered Buddhism and began to feel its pull. I was going through a period of deep sadness after losing a friendship which had been very important to me at that time. A number of people treated me as someone who could help them with their problems, but in fact I had real problems of my own that I was not sure how deal with. I thought I must do something different, to try a new approach so I joined an Aikido class, feeling the need to connect my mind and body. It was an attempt to break my mode of living at that time which was very cerebral and focused on abstract ideas. I became interested in meditation after reading Eric Fromm's *Escape from Freedom* in which he said reading, something I was doing a lot of, was a form of escape and perhaps we should try meditation. Even though I had no idea what meditation was, I was intrigued by the idea. I also met David at that time, now my husband, who was taking Qi Gong and Chan meditation classes.

David told me about the meditation classes he was attending with Gilbert Gutierrez, a student of Master Sheng Yen who later became one of Master Sheng Yen's Dharma heirs. Hearing about that, I found myself reading a few of Master Sheng Yen's books. They were a revelation to me. They explained so much, and many things started to make sense, in particular my friendship difficulty. It made sense that changes in causes and conditions lead to the coming into being and the passing away of impermanent

feelings and connections, unfortunately even including friendship. But this helped me understand that what I was suffering over was a natural process, and that even though it was painful it was how things work.

My very first class with Gilbert Gutierrez was on Yogacara. I knew nothing at all about it conceptually, but did feel that it made sense somehow. One person in the class also reported on a seven-day retreat that he just attended with Master Sheng Yen in Queens, New York. For some reason that sounded like something I definitely wanted to do, and the sooner the better! In addition, Gilbert's wife Ellen was Taiwanese and she had practiced for a long time, including under Master Sheng Yen. She had a lot of compassion and wisdom and influenced me deeply. One thing she told me at the time was "Don't go to any random teacher. You need to be careful who you follow. It is important to follow someone with clear lineage so that you will not be led astray." Growing up in Hong Kong where we were taught to be skeptical about self-proclaimed masters of all kinds, such as those claiming the ability to turn copper into gold, I took her advice to heart. Based on what I read and his background, I felt that Master Sheng Yen would be a good teacher for me to follow. Years later when I worked on Shifu's autobiography, I found that he practiced with new religious groups in Japan and it helped me become more open-minded about teachers from all backgrounds. As I met teachers from different traditions, it has become clear to me that it is an individual's practice and conduct that makes one a worthwhile teacher.

Around that time, Shifu (Master Sheng Yen) was due to make his first visit to California and I was absolutely sure I wanted to take refuge with him. As his visit approached I got very sick all of a sudden, and I remember this thought arising in my mind, "maybe

I will be too sick to travel to the refuge ceremony.” I was shocked to see that thought and said to myself, “Even if I have to crawl, I’ll go.” It was a taste of the practice of angry determination that Shifu would often talk about in retreat, and I knew that it was essential for keeping us on the path.

I have to say that I felt a strong connection to Master Sheng Yen from the beginning. I had not met him in person until that refuge ceremony and I did not know much about him other than a few of his books I have read (it was before the time of Google), yet I was sure that I wanted to follow him on my spiritual journey. Later on, I met many people who have studied with many different teachers in their search. For some reason, I felt that I had found my teacher when I met Shifu; there was no need to look anywhere else.

There are four lines that emphasize how rare it is to be born with a human body, what an opportunity it is, and how rare it is to meet the Buddhadharma and have access to liberation. These lines made a very deep impression on me. Master Sheng Yen started his journey along this line, feeling that Buddhadharma is

so wonderful and it was such a pity that so few people knew about it. This was why he devoted his life to sharing the Dharma and I felt a similar calling to do so. Following Master Sheng Yen has thus always felt like accepting his invitation to everyone to join him to share the Dharma.

In the mid-1990s, Shifu’s intensive retreats were held in the Chan Meditation Center with enough space for only thirty participants. It was very difficult to get accepted to a retreat. I was so happy, after one failed attempt, to finally have the opportunity to attend a seven-day intensive retreat even though that involved flying across the country all by myself. In that retreat, like the next few, I was mostly dealing with drowsiness from jetlag and a drastically different daily schedule than my usual night owl life. When it was my turn for an interview with Shifu, I didn’t really have any questions for him. For some reason, I would just start crying as soon as I sat in front of him and could not stop. I remember feeling, “thank goodness, I finally found you again!” Recalling this now still tears me up. It was as if I was with him a long time ago and got separated, like a child who got

人身難得今已得，
佛法難聞今已聞；
此身不向今生度，
更向何生度此身。

*It is rare to be born with a human body.
It is rare to encounter the Buddhadharma.
One ought to strive towards liberation in this life,
otherwise, in what life will you have the chance to liberate yourself?*

separated from her parents in a crowded market, and the joy I felt was like being reunited with my loved ones. At the end of my first retreat we had a sharing. Because my Mandarin was not good, I shared my experience in English. After I finished, Shifu looked me in the eyes and said, "You are going to help a lot of people." It was a vivid memory because I was puzzled. I did not say anything extraordinary. I was barely able to stay awake during my meditation. "How on earth am I supposed to help a lot of people?" I thought to myself. Perhaps that comment helped put me on my path as I would use that to remind myself to make myself useful for others as I engage in the practice. It was that mentality that guided me as I served as Shifu's interpreter, board member of Dharma Drum Retreat Center, Dharma teacher, and as a retreat leader.

How did you learn the specialist Buddhist vocabulary to translate for Master Sheng Yen? Please share some of your stories traveling with him.

I did not speak much Mandarin when I first met Shifu at the retreat in New York. I only had one course in college and my listening comprehension was still quite poor. I had to rely on Ming Yee's translation to understand Shifu's Dharma talks. When I was invited to be trained as Shifu's translator I tried much harder to learn Mandarin. One difficulty was that he spoke with a strong accent which I could not follow at first. I learned to understand Shifu's accent by listening to his recorded talks again and again, and listening to the translations of his previous translator (Ming Yee) to get to know the technical vocabulary. To learn the Buddhist terms I bought a Buddhist specialist dictionary and collected all kinds of glossaries that listed Buddhist terms in Chinese, Sanskrit and English and memorized them. As I gained more

confidence in my translations, I moved away from trying to find the perfect translation for a specific term. I teach sociological theory which also has a lot of specialized language, and I have found it much more helpful when I explain these concepts to my students in layman's terms and minimize the use of jargons. The goal is to understand the idea and the word used to communicate the idea is merely an approximation, so what is important is to work out what the idea really means. So I would ask Shifu to explain the concept to me and then construct my own English equivalent. I guess I did alright since from time to time Shifu would comment that the English explanation was clearer than the one in Chinese!

In this way I got to know Shifu well. We travelled together quite a bit, mostly for religious leaders meetings and also for a retreat in Switzerland. Since we shared hotel breakfasts together and worked together I had a different point of view from those who treated him as a god. I did not just see him as someone up on the stage or pedestal. I saw him as human, as a monk, and as a practitioner like the rest of us. Because my dad told me a person has to earn your respect I judged Shifu as I found him, not based on others' notions, or mystical beliefs. Shifu most definitely earned my respect. He did so by being a serious practitioner, and by adhering to the Buddha's teachings sincerely and treating each person with genuine respect.

Shifu had a very weak stomach, so he always travelled with an attendant who cooked his food for him and often with a secretary and other helpers as well. After 9/11 in New York he was invited with other religious leaders to the World Economic Forum, held in New York in 2002 to show solidarity (it is usually held in Davos, Switzerland). Entourages were severely restricted. Only a single translator was allowed, so I had to be his food attendant, secretary,



Master Sheng Yen, Rebecca Li, and John Crook DDM Archive Photo

liaison with Taiwan as well as translator, but he happily pitched in. So between us we did the faxing, secretarial work, reporting to Taiwan and so on. I did my best serving him food, knowing that I was probably breaking all kinds of protocol as attendant since I did not really know what they were. It was totally not a problem for him that things were not done the usual proper way or in the correct sequence. And he was willing to chip in and do whatever needed to be done. He was capable of not being the VIP, and did not have a self-important ego.

When I had the responsibility for running the retreat center in upstate New York he was able to play the role of president without always being in charge. If people tried to lobby him for changes at the retreat center, he would refer them to me. He did

not have to exercise his power. When I read about abuses of power in some other Zen communities Shifu's example stuck with me. It is important for the teacher to be aware that just because others let you be the power, you do not have to.

When we were working on his autobiographical book *Footprints in the Snow* he used to completely forget about his Master's "dignity" and he would act out scenes from his childhood and youth to me. I remember him down on the floor demonstrating the push-ups he did in army training, a wonderfully informal man reliving it all for the book.

On a trip to Jerusalem for another meeting of religious leaders I saw how quickly he absorbed large quantities of information and could understand why he was so successful. I gave him a briefing, using

the information I read, on the history of various sites we visited and the city itself. A film crew from Taiwan was traveling with us for a documentary of Shifu. When I saw Shifu's interview on this trip, he repeated everything I told him about the history of the sites. It was really impressive what a fast learner he was, especially when he did this amidst a busy meeting schedule for the religious leaders. Also on that trip I saw him forego his special meal, out of a delicate concern for others who could not eat at the same time, knowing that he would suffer for it later. To this day, I still draw on things I learned by watching Shifu's responses to situations during our travels when I try to figure out how to handle difficult situations I encounter.

Could you share with me some of your retreat experiences?

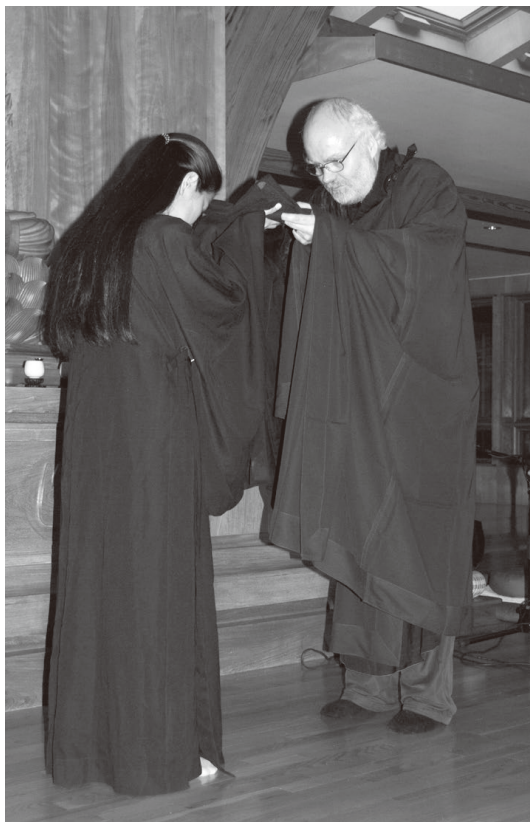
When I started attending retreats with Shifu, they were not divided between huatou and silent illumination. I mainly learned how to use the breath method and it seemed some participants were practicing with a huatou. Those were very important retreats as they laid the foundation of establishing right views and proper attitudes toward the practice for me.

In my early years serving as Shifu's translator on retreats, I attended several huatou retreats mostly because they were the ones that fit into my schedule. I was a slow learner and it took me a while to appreciate how powerful huatou practice was. Then in 2004 when I travelled with Shifu to Switzerland to translate for him at the silent illumination retreat I told Shifu that the huatou still came up on its own. He said, "That's okay. In the depths of silence there's the question anyway." It helped me understand that the separation of the two styles is somewhat arbitrary. They are different doors to enter the same room.

My first Western Zen Retreat with John Crook in 2001, however, transformed my practice. The combination of communication exercises and intensely personal interviews helped push me deeper into my practice. Because of that, I consider John my second teacher besides Shifu. I believe his approach is an important innovation in Chan to meet the needs of practitioners living in the modern era. I was able to see through many of my vexations in the retreats with John, which were often co-led by Simon Child and Hilary Richards. After Shifu stopped traveling to the United States for retreats, John and Simon became my main teachers. Besides participating in their retreats, I began my training with them first as guest master and then with Simon to conduct retreat interviews. I started training exclusively with Simon after John passed away in 2011. The training was a very important part of my practice in those years. They helped me work through a lot of deeply entrenched habitual tendencies. Learning how to conduct retreat interviews and lead the Western Zen Retreat was one of the most difficult things I have undertaken. I wondered many times if I could ever get it. Learning how to persevere through it all was one of the many great gifts I received from Simon for which I am forever grateful. In a retreat I sat with Simon in 2010, causes and conditions came together and Simon informed me that I had seen the nature and I wrote about it in a retreat report. I can't help but feel that I am the most fortunate person on earth. Meeting and practicing with a great master like Master Sheng Yen is already a great blessing. I was also able to meet and study with two other great masters, John Crook and Simon Child, along with others who have taught me on the Path. The only way I know to repaid their kindness is to share the Dharma using what I have learned from them.

Now that you have received Dharma transmission, what do you want to do with it? Will you lead retreats in Britain? Will you start your own Sangha? Will you teach in a traditional Chinese or modern Westernized style, or reform the teaching in some way?

As you can see, I came to Chan like many westerners or “convert Buddhists” did. The way Shifu taught in the West appealed to those of us with more scientific minds like John Crook, Simon Child and myself, people who are not prone to swallow beliefs based simply on authority. John adapted the teaching to incorporate a learning style more common among



Rebecca Li and Simon Child DDRC Archive Photo

the western-educated. This is the style I can relate to the most and I find helpful to practitioners in my retreats and classes.

As for whether I will lead retreats in Britain, we will see how causes and conditions unfold. Fiona Nuttall is my dear Dharma sister and I will support her in whatever way she needs me. I co-led a Western Zen Retreat with Hilary Richards in 2015 at Maenllwyd and had a wonderful experience. It was a lot of fun and we received a lot of retreat reports from the retreatants. I think they could sense the joy Hilary and I were feeling as we shared the space. I have made many friends with the Western Chan Fellowship sangha over the years and would cherish the opportunity to practice with them again, on whichever side of the pond that may be.

As a Dharma heir my most important responsibility is to carry on the lineage and identify someone with the great vow to commit to carrying it on as well, while continuing my practice and teaching. It has struck me how much there is to do. Besides my full-time job as a sociology professor, balancing my responsibilities for Dharma teaching, retreat center business, family and civic life will be a lifelong practice. As for any specific plan, I have not yet made any major decisions yet. I have been doing a lot of thinking, considering my abilities and limitations as well as feeling out the shifting causes and conditions. I am giving it some space to allow things to take shape. I have been thinking a lot about teacher training, knowing full well how long it took to train me when I had such dedicated teachers. I still remember how many people started when Shifu began training us to be Dharma lecturers in 1999 and how few finished the training, and fewer yet stayed on as teachers. It reminds me again of the importance of great vow, as Shifu often emphasized. So I have also been thinking, “what can I do to instill that vow in students?” 🌿

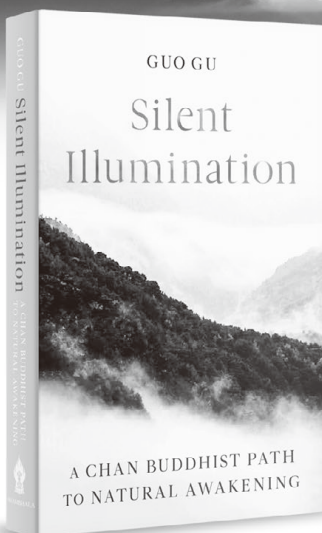
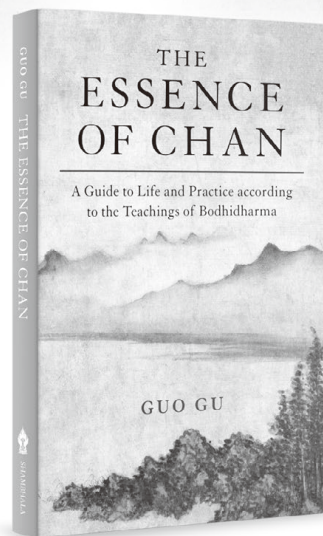
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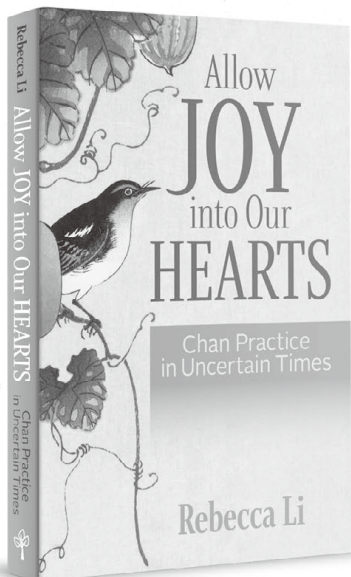
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Allow Joy into Our Hearts

Chan Practice in Uncertain Times

Rebecca Li

When faced with an event that disrupts every aspect of our lives, how do we avoid succumbing to hopelessness, bitterness, and other destructive habits of the mind, and instead find ways to allow joy, kindness, and generosity to fill our hearts in the midst of suffering? Rebecca Li explains how we can, through the cultivation of clear awareness, transform challenging circumstances into fertile soil for wisdom and compassion to grow by facing each moment with tenderness, clarity, and courage.

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