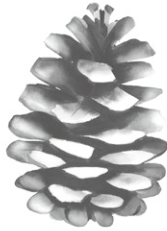


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CHAN MAGAZINE

AUTUMN 2022





To try to understand emptiness without practice will almost certainly end in misunderstanding. You can read the sutras and try to understand the theory behind them, but it is doubtful that you will reach true emptiness. Emptiness is a high teaching in Buddhism, but we must understand that emptiness means not only emptiness of existence, but also the emptiness of emptiness. At this level one can truly see how positive and affirmative Buddhism really is.



CHAN MASTER SHENG YEN

“Mind, Matter, and Emptiness”

Until We Reach Buddhahood

January 5, 1986

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The background of the entire page is a soft, misty photograph of a dense forest of evergreen trees. The fog is thick, creating a sense of depth and tranquility. The trees are dark green and black, contrasting with the pale, greyish-white mist.

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CHAN MAGAZINE

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COVER ART Artur Pawlak • MASTHEAD BACKGROUND Jasper Graetsch





Mind, Matter, and Emptiness

————— BY —————
CHAN MASTER SHENG YEN

Photo by Johannes Plenio

In December of 1984, and continuing through 1996, Chan Master Sheng Yen began a series of lectures on the *Śūraṅgama Sūtra* at the Chan Meditation Center (CMC) in Queens, New York. These lectures provided deep, learned, and insightful commentary on key passages from the sutra, placing them in the context of ordinary life for practitioners of Mahayana Buddhism. Oftentimes, he would use anecdotes from his own life experience and contacts with people to elucidate points from the sutra. These lectures were subsequently compiled by Ernest Heau and published in two volumes as *Until We Reach Buddhahood: Lectures on the Śūraṅgama Sūtra* (Elmhurst, New York: Dharma Drum Publications, 2016). This article is an excerpt from volume 1 of those books, based on a talk given January 5, 1986. English translations provided by Ming Yee Wang, editing by Harry Miller and Linda Peer. Note: As his reference text in English, Master Sheng Yen used *The Śūraṅgama Sūtra*, the translation by Charles Luk (Lu K'uan Yü), with notes by Master Han Shan of the Ming Dynasty. It is available for free digital distribution by the Buddhadharma Education Association, http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf_file/surangama.pdf.



ANANDA CONTINUES TO QUESTION THE Buddha about the essence of seeing, and he asks how he can tell the seeing from the seen. More and more Ananda is beginning to understand what the Buddha says.

In this section of the sutra there are three important questions asked:

Who or what is doing the seeing?

What is seen?

What is the relationship between the seer and the seen?

Ananda says that, as he now understands it, the person seeing and the thing seen are neither different nor the same; neither are they empty or existing. The Buddha replies, “Correct, correct.” Easy to understand, is it not? It is? Well, in that case, that’s the end of today’s lecture [jokingly].

That which can see is me. That part of me which does the seeing is my mind. And what constitutes “I” would seem to constitute the mind. Anything that can be seen is an object of the mind. Usually we think of

ourselves as separate from any object we come into contact with. We are not the same as what we touch. But as I've said in the past, the mind does not simply lie within the body. So "I" is not exactly the same as my "mind." I and mind are not exactly the same things. So things external to me are neither me nor my mind. Does the mind exist? It is neither internal nor external; neither apart from self nor apart from matter. We can also say that the mind is indeed me and it is external phenomena.

The Buddha said that the mind is neither internal nor external; neither self nor external phenomena. Then what is the mind? Ananda has not yet discovered what it is. Nobody knows what it is? We can, however, arrive at a theoretic understanding: the mind is empty. It is emptiness.

Once we have come to this realization, it follows that the self also does not exist. It is false. It is not real. So it is with external phenomena. All of these things are empty. But this is just theory. In daily life we see most things as real and existing, and we think of mind as self. What we mean by this is that all movements of the mind, all thoughts, reflections, what is seen and felt – these are what comprise the mind.

Many Views

A deeper level of understanding sees the true mind, the unmoving mind. This is emptiness. This is the perfect mind. The shallower level experiences the world as real and emptiness as only an idea, a theory. The deeper level experiences emptiness directly.

If the mind is real, is the external world real or unreal? I've often asked, when we die do the things that we now see continue to exist? Are they still here? Yes, of course. Washington helped establish the United States. He died over two hundred years ago, but

America is still here. What about your world? Will it still be here when you go? How do we know that there is a world or a New York City for example? We know because we mutually acknowledge its existence. Then consider this question: in your mind, what kind of a city is New York? What kind of a country is the United States? Perhaps that's too much to consider. Let's narrow our scope. Your husband, what kind of person is he? Your wife, what kind of person is she? And what kind of person are you? We must realize that we each see a different New York City, a different United States. A wife may have a particular view of her husband, but then again, his mother will have quite a different view of him. There are many views, but only one person.

Today Mrs. Shih cooked a wonderful meal, and she chatted about how good her children are. Mr. Shih also said nice things about his kids. Nevertheless they don't see their children in exactly the same way.

What about you? What kind of person are you really? Do you know?

I met someone recently almost a year after I had last seen him. A year ago he professed to be full of self-confidence. He was bursting with ideas about the things he wanted to accomplish. But now he says, "My whole outlook has changed. The person I was when you last talked to me was really quite immature. I've grown considerably since then."

What about the world we see? Is it real? Is it the same world for all of us? No, your world is not my world. My world is not yours. My world today is different from what my world will be tomorrow. My world last year is different from my world today. When I die, my world will die with me. Why? It is because the mind is not really related to this world. There is no true objectivity. There may be some views that are common to everyone, but even they, upon examination, are different. Therefore the

world that we see is not real. If it were real, it would not change incessantly. Our minds and the external world – are they the same or different?

Neither the Same nor Different

We learn from the practice of Buddhism, or from Buddhist theory, that the mind and the external world are neither the same nor different. Here is a story to illustrate: The story concerns Dongshan Liangjie (807–869), the first patriarch of the Caodong sect, who spoke with his teacher, Yunyan Tancheng (782–841). Dongshan said, “The ancients say that all phenomena speak the Dharma – the Buddha, bodhisattvas, arhats, sentient, and even non-sentient beings.” Yunyan replied, “Yes, I have heard that it’s true. Even non-sentient beings speak the Dharma.” So Dongshan asked the teacher, “Have you heard non-sentient beings speaking the Dharma?” Yunyan said, “If I heard non-sentient beings speak the Dharma, you would not be able to hear me speak the Dharma.” Puzzled, the disciple asked, “Who is it who can hear non-sentient beings speak the Dharma?” Finally, the master replied, “Only non-sentient beings hear non-sentient beings speak the Dharma.” This idea so perplexed Dongshan that it stuck inside his head and became what is known as a “ball of doubt,” which is used as a gong’an (koan) in Chan practice.

Dongshan became a wandering monk, practicing meditation, living sometimes at a temple, sometimes in the woods. One day, a few years after his meeting with Yunyan, it began to rain. Dongshan started to ford a river, and as he waded in, he looked down and saw his reflection. In a single moment, he understood the answer to the gong’an.

Yesterday, I told this story to Karen. I said to her that there is a direct relationship between

what Dongshan saw when he looked in the water and the thought that his master put in his head many years before – that non-sentient beings hear the Dharma from non-sentient beings. What is the connection?

What is involved here is the question of whether mind and external phenomena are the same or different. Normally, we understand something when it is communicated to us through speech or some other medium. It is mind that allows us to communicate. Now, if non-sentient beings speak the Dharma, they must have minds to speak it with. If they have minds, they can’t be non-sentient – they must feel and be aware. Therefore the non-sentient beings must really be sentient beings, right?

Dongshan saw the non-sentient water, the non-sentient reflection in the water, and the non-sentient body the water reflected (the body without the mind would be non-sentient). He realized that his non-sentient reflection spoke the Dharma to his non-sentient body. Here is a case of a non-sentient being speaking the Dharma to a non-sentient being. Nevertheless, this is not a very high level of understanding in Chan. It is what we talk about when we say that mind and body become one, that mind and external phenomena become one. But you must go deeper than this to understand as Master Yunyan understood.

Dongshan had the realization that sentient and non-sentient beings are non-existent. Is this a very high level of understanding? No. The view that mind and body are the same, that self and external world are the same – this is the level of the expanded sense of self, the great “I.” To see that self, mind, body, and external world are all non-existent is to reach an understanding of emptiness itself. Reach this level and stop, and you will indeed have a pessimistic outlook on the world.



Not Two Different Things

Go deeper and you arrive at the level of Yunyan and Ananda. They understand that emptiness and existence are not two different things. Neither are mind and external phenomena two different things.

Let's talk about the mind. Is there anything in it? If anything exists in the mind, it is only attachment. If there is nothing in the mind, that, too, is attachment. One extreme is the attachment to existence; the other, the attachment to emptiness. A beginning practitioner tends to attach to existence and not emptiness.

At the end of the last retreat, one of the participants brought his friend to talk to me. He said, "If Buddhism teaches that everything is empty, why bother to practice, since there seems like there's nothing to attain." I asked, "How do you know about emptiness?" He said, "I've read a little bit about Buddhism, and in every book it says that life is suffering, emptiness, impermanence, and no self exists. This is a pretty negative outlook on the world, and if that's not emptiness, I don't know what is." My reply was, "You're right, but I think you should know a little bit more about emptiness."

No-Characteristic and No-Desire

Emptiness can be broken down into two aspects: no-characteristic and no-desire. No-characteristic includes no birth, no death and no nirvana. No-desire includes no abiding in or departing from birth and death, no abiding in or departing from samsara. After he heard this, the friend was even more convinced that there was no need for practice: "There's no need to wish for release from birth and death because they don't exist, and there's no nirvana to attain anyway. Why practice?"

I said, "For someone with your frame of mind, it is best to talk about existence, not emptiness." He asked me, "What exists?" "Suffering," I said. He countered, "All I hear Buddhism talking about is suffering. This bothers me – I'm really opposed to this teaching. It doesn't seem reasonable. OK, there's a certain amount of suffering in everybody's life, but as far as I'm concerned, the time I don't suffer far

exceeds the time that I do.” I bet most of you agree with this, right?

The idea of suffering can be quite subtle. Of course, suffering includes the pain and distress that most people associate with the word. But impermanence itself is suffering. I heard some people here talking about the Radio City Music Hall Christmas show. They said it was wonderful, but it lasted only ninety minutes. It seemed like it ended almost as soon as it began. Is this happiness or suffering? Most people would say that this is a kind of happiness that passes quickly. They would hope to go again sometime. But how many opportunities will there be in one lifetime? Finally, your chances to go will run out.

I asked the friend about his plans for the future. He said that he planned to do a great deal in his life, but he complained that there’s not enough time to

do all that he wants to do. “There were many things in the past that I wanted to do, also, but I never got around to them,” he said. This, too, is suffering.

Why practice? We practice to leave suffering. Once we leave suffering, we reach emptiness. On retreats, when people complain of the pain in their legs, I say, “It’s your legs that hurt, not you. It’s not your mind. Just let your legs hurt.” Most people give up and say, “I just can’t stand the pain.” Then I ask, “Is the pain real or illusory?” They will say it’s real. I say, “No, you’re wrong; it’s illusory. If it’s real, then give the pain to me. Hand it over.” Then, they say, “As soon as I put my legs down, the pain disappears.” I reply, “Therefore it’s illusory. If it was true and real, then even when you put down your legs, the pain would still be there.”

Practice to Understand Emptiness

We must practice to understand emptiness. To try to understand emptiness without practice will almost certainly end in misunderstanding. You can read the sutras and try to understand the theory behind them, but it is doubtful that you will reach true emptiness. Emptiness is a high teaching in Buddhism, but we must understand that emptiness means not only emptiness of existence, but also the emptiness of emptiness. At this level one can truly see how positive and affirmative Buddhism really is.

A woman I know in Taiwan complained to me recently. She said that her children were giving her so much trouble that she wished she had become a nun instead of getting married. But the fact of the matter was that she was not a nun and she was married and had children. She asked, “When will these relationships with other beings end? This time I’m a mother – my creation of a child means creation of more karma. Next lifetime I will again have some



relationship with the one who is my child in this lifetime. When will it all end?"

I told her that the relationship between people is real, but the suffering she feels is illusory and so is the child's lack of obedience. And if bodhisattva's didn't have other people to speak the Dharma to, they would not be able to become bodhisattvas. If the Buddha had no one to speak to, he could not have become the Buddha. If she did not have her child, she would not be able to become a bodhisattva. By having a child, she realizes how difficult it is to raise someone. And, something I emphasize for all Buddhist families, going through this gives you the opportunity to do something good for someone. You should be grateful for the opportunity. If your son or daughter reacts badly to your efforts, if he or she is not appreciative, it doesn't matter. That's their business. But the woman said, "If my life continues like this, I don't see how I can attain liberation." "It's very easy," I told her. "First, don't desire liberation. Second, don't be afraid of trouble."

Accept and Give Freely

Another story also illustrates this: A disciple who visited his master asked, "Will you please help me to get rid of my vexations? The master replied "Who binds you? Who has bound you?" True liberation is not sought after. True nirvana is not sought after.

Your attitude in daily life and the way you interact with your family is what's important. When you feel love and then attach to it, it is not liberation. When you feel hate and then attach to it, it is not liberation. If you want more of this and less of that, it is not liberation.

If you accept what you are given and you give freely of what you have, this is liberation. This idea of emptiness, where nothing exists, where you want

nothing, and where nothing makes demands of you, is not true Mahayana Buddhism.

The other day I asked for donations. I used to be reluctant to do so. I thought, "When can I pay all these people back." Once a woman gave me \$20 and said that she would like me to give her peace of mind. I just put the money in the donation basket and hoped that the accumulated merit might bring her some contentment. If she comes again, I might say, "Why not give \$200 or \$300?"

What's the principle here? When she donates, she really helps bring Buddhadharma to more people and she helps more people to practice Buddhism. Of course the result of the giving of that money may lead to peace of mind. But if I took that donation and went to see a movie, or went to Radio City Music Hall, or bought a bottle of liquor, then sooner or later I would have to pay back the donor.

Do you think that I am always calculating about how I can get more money? Do you think I look at Marla and say, "Hmm, I bet she's worth something?" Or do I think about Peter or Nagendra in terms of what good jobs they have and how much I could get from them?" I know Harry just bought a co-op. He must have money.

But the money should come through a natural process. We don't need to bother or think a great deal about it. If you think about money all the time, it is certainly not true emptiness. If you absolutely avoid money, that is also not true emptiness. Even a very serious Zen practitioner will have some money at times. Most Buddhist practitioners still work. At one point Chris didn't have a job, but now he does. Do I have a job? What is my job? I don't feel like I have a job. Whenever there's attachment to something, there's unhappiness. Avoid thinking about what you're going to get for your work. If you do not attach to what you do, nothing you do will seem like work. 🍃

Taming the Mind Is the Foundation of Chan Meditation

BY

VENERABLE GUO GOANG

Venerable Guo Goang became a bhikṣuṇī in 1990. She received transmission from our late Master Sheng Yen and became one of his Dharma Heirs in 2005, when she was the executive vice-provost of Dharma Drum Mountain (DDM) in Taiwan. From 2006 to 2013 Ven. Guo Goang served as the provost of DDM, then from 2013 to 2019 she took a six-year solitary retreat. Currently Ven. Guo Goang is the Vice-abbot of DDM and serves as a senior teacher at the Chan Meditation Center in Queens, NY. This article is taken from a Dharma talk given on March 6, 2022. Transcription by Yi-Wen Wang, translation by Cindy Robinson, editing by Buffe Maggie Laffey.



FELLOW MONASTICS, FELLOW BODHISATTVAS, how is everyone? The main topics for today are: taming the mind is the foundation of Chan meditation, and, the roles and functions of the mind in one's life. To address these topics, I would like to introduce a well-known sutra, called *The Dhammapada* (Pali; Sanskrit: *Dharmapada*), available in both Theravada Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism, and also available in Chinese¹ and English².

The Dhammapada is a collection of Śākyamuni Buddha's early teachings. The entire sutra is written in stanzas which cover the daily practice of Buddhadharma in one's life. It can be viewed as a cultivation guidebook. Today we will pick two stanzas from this book to illustrate the relationship between our mind and our lives, and the roles as well as the functions these two stanzas play. The first stanza reads:

*All dharmas are guided by the mind;
the mind steers our behaviors.*



Ven. Guo Goang CMC Archive Photo

*Should one commit maleficent deeds,
speak vile language and perform evil deeds,
then suffering will follow,
like the wheel following the
tracks of the animal's feet.*

諸法心先導，心主心所作，
若以意惡行，惡語惡身行，
則苦必隨彼，如輪隨獸足。

This means that our mind has direct impact on our body, language, and behaviors. If our body, language, and mind are nasty, misery will follow, as the wheels of an ox-cart will follow along the ox's tracks. In other words, our mind is the commander of our life. It governs our body, language, and behaviors. Suppose this body, language, and demeanor are nasty, it will then lead one's life to suffering. The second stanza reads:

*All dharmas are guided by the mind;
the mind steers our behaviors.
Should one carry out benevolent deeds,
speak benevolent language and do good deeds,
then happiness will follow,
like the shadow following the body.*

諸法心先導，心主心所作，
若以意善行，善語善身行，
則樂必隨彼，如影隨身形。

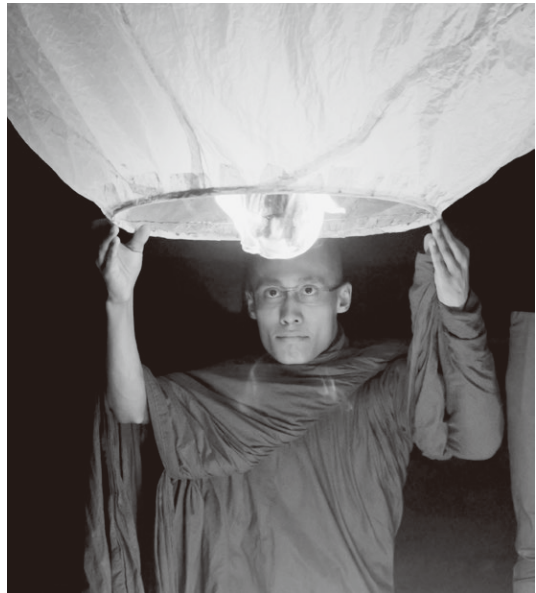
The second stanza and the first stanza are coherent. It means that if our body, language, and conduct are benevolent, then peace and happiness will surface as their reflection. From the above two stanzas we can realize that our mind is directly influencing the direction of our life, whether it be suffering or enjoyment. Therefore, learning how to inspire our

mind to pursue excellence and moral integrity is the main subject for one to practice Chan meditation and Buddhadharmā.

Our mind can be viewed from two perspectives: one is the unpolluted mind, which is also called the pure and serene mind. The other is the defiled mind, which is known as the vexatious mind. After all, what attributes to contamination of the mind? The answer is: ignorance, greed, anger, foolishness, and pride, etc. These vexatious elements contaminate the mind, and result in the arising of afflictions. The role of Chan meditation, however, is to sever the vexatious elements and to bring about the emergence of the pure, serene, and unpolluted mind. This process, that transforms a polluted mind into a pure and serene mind, may be called *taming the mind*.


Taming the mind has always been the axis of Chan Meditation – to transform the polluted, afflicted mind into a pure, serene mind. Through the use of the Chan meditation method, the vexatious elements such as ignorance, greed, etc. are gradually diminished, even eliminated, which results in the surfacing of the pure and serene mind. For example, our environment is polluted, which leads to the deterioration of the quality of our situation; it may even bring about some harmful impacts on the health of our body and mind. Once the environment is gradually purified, all creatures will be able to enjoy their pure and serene nature together. Similarly, after the sources polluting our mind have been purified, the pure and serene mind will usher peace, joy, auspiciousness, harmony, and wisdom to our lives.

There may be some differences among various Chan meditation methods, but they never deviate from the primary principle of taming the mind. Therefore, it is said that the foundation of Chan meditation is to train the mind. Practicing Dharma is also a process of taming the mind.




The Dharma sharing today is to point out that while we are walking on a spiritual path, we must know that the focal point of our practice should be taming our mind. Let this be the target, onto which the power of our Chan meditation is concentrated. 🌸

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1. *The Dhammapada: A New Translation*, Chinese trans. Dhammavaro Bhikkhu (Perak: Siladidhamma Pavarasaya Vihara, 2001).
 2. *The Dhammapada: The Buddha's Path of Wisdom*, English trans. Acharya Buddhārakkhita, with an introduction by Bhikkhu Bodhi (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1985).
 - 1) *Mind precedes all mental states.*
Mind is their chief; they are all mind-wrought.
If with an impure mind a person speaks or acts
suffering follows him
like the wheel that follows the foot of the ox.
 - 2) *Mind precedes all mental states.*
Mind is their chief; they are all mind-wrought.
If with a pure mind a person speaks or acts
happiness follows him
like his never-departing shadow.



WHAT'S GOING ON
IN THE
MIND

— BY —
SIMON CHILD

The background features a minimalist, abstract design. A large, light gray sphere is positioned in the upper left quadrant. Several broad, curved bands of varying shades of gray sweep across the frame, creating a sense of depth and movement. The overall aesthetic is clean and modern.

Simon Child is the principal teacher of the Western Chan Fellowship, a lay Chan organization based in the UK. Simon started his training with John Crook in 1981 and trained with Chan Master Sheng Yen from 1992, from whom he received Dharma Transmission in 2000. His teaching approach uses the orthodox methods of Chan Master Sheng Yen with some adaptations to help the Western personality engage with traditional practice. This article is taken from a talk given at a Silent Illumination Intensive retreat, at the Dharma Drum Retreat Center in May, 2015. Transcribed and edited by Buffe Maggie Laffey.

ALLOWING YOURSELF TO BE AWARE OF what's going on in the mind has its benefits. The simple fact of feeling more alive, continuously present and engaged with your life; that's one big benefit in itself. There is also the advantage of making the practice more portable and holistic – practice can continue in different circumstances. If you are engaged in an activity, you can be aware of the activity, and if the activity needs some focus and concentration, you can apply that. Furthermore, you can apply that relevant focus in the context of a larger awareness. You don't become too narrow-minded, oblivious to other things which need attention. If you can concentrate on a task, that is good. But if you can concentrate on a task and also be aware of the wider context, then you can balance yourself more appropriately.

The ability to carry a wide open view of all activities is very useful. The specific aspect of being aware of actions and speech about to emerge gives an opportunity to regulate them. The word regulate is too active; they sort of regulate themselves. Words forming in the mind, about to be spoken, which seem appropriate, continue to be spoken. Words forming in the mind which are inappropriate, fade away with no real effort to drop them – but only if we are aware of them before they are uttered, only if you are aware of where they're coming from, and why they are appearing in the mind at this moment. What's driving them there? It may not be an appropriate reaction to the circumstances. It may be an inappropriate habitual response, driven by self-concern, that becomes noticed during the formation of the prepared speech before it is spoken.

Being aware of what's happening in the mind helps you cultivate a more harmonious and helpful way of being. We all know that experience, of practicing meditation and finding the mind has wandered. You sat with the intention of practicing and then you

find, yet again, you've time traveled. You're back in the office, you're back at home, you're on the beach that you're hoping for next month and so on. You've time traveled into another place. At the moment you realize the mind has wandered, you let it go and return to the practice. There is a sense in which, at the point of noticing the mind has wandered, you've already returned to the practice. You've become aware of what's going on. Up until that point, you weren't aware. Or maybe you were sort of half aware. Sometimes we're half aware of a wandering thought, but we've sort of forgotten that we're practicing, and we allow the thought to continue. We follow the story, and then we come to full awareness of the mind wandering, and then we let it go.

Usually (but not always) at that point of full awareness of the wandering thought, it's easy to let it go. Once you've noticed that you've wandered, it's not usually difficult to bring the attention back to the method. It might be that the same thought occurs again quite soon, and it might be that occasionally it's difficult to let go of – you may feel an impulse to follow that thought through to its conclusion, to solve some problem. But the majority of times, as soon as you notice the wandering thought clearly, then you're back to the method without difficulty.

Seeing It, Dissolves It

This is a little bit like the example of the speech forming in the mind. At the point of noticing it, the appropriate response arises; it's dissolved or it's continued. It's the same with the wandering thought. Having noticed it wandering, it's already gone. You can test this in your own practice. When you find the mind has wandered, realize that at the actual point of noticing it's wandered, it's already stopped wandering. It's not that you have to notice it and apply the

brake and cut off the thought – the thought sort of dissolves in front of you. I don't know whether you've already noticed that, but if you haven't, then test it out. Realize there is actually no effort in letting go of a wandering thought when it is seen to be that. It's already going as you see it. The act of seeing it, dissolves it. This might sound a little bit strange if you've not experienced it. But if you test out you'll begin to see what I mean.

Our habitual attitude towards wandering thought might be to cut it off as soon as we get a hint of it, which means that we blank the mind; we pull ourselves away. Really, all of that effort isn't necessary. The noticing of the wandering thought is the beginning of the ending of it; it will take itself away. If you cut it off prematurely, it hasn't yet delivered its message, so it comes back and tries again. This is where we get recurring thought streams. We keep finding ourselves thinking the same thought, and we keep trying to cut it off, because we're not really hearing

the message. This thought has a responsibility to share itself with us. If we keep rebuffing it saying "No I don't want to hear you," it doesn't let go of its duty. It keeps coming back until you receive the message of the thought. As a metaphor for this, it's a bit like an officer of the court trying to serve a subpoena on you; he won't go away just because you close the curtains. It doesn't work that way. Eventually you'll receive it, and then you won't see him again.

Thoughts carry some message, but the hearing of them is the important part. A thought stream unheard recurs. A thought stream partially heard is difficult to let go of, because only part of the message has been delivered. This is why some thoughts seem to be hard to cut off; they are incomplete. Often what's lacking is an acceptance of the consequences of this particular situation which is in the mind. Or maybe it's the feeling that goes with the story. The thought stream seems to be some familiar story, and you're fed up with it, you don't want to hear about



Photo by Andrei Lisakov

it again. What you are overlooking is maybe you've somewhat sanitized the story. You've rephrased it a little bit and it's not quite complete or true. You've polished the story to make you look better than you might otherwise have done. Maybe you've overlooked some distress associated with the story and you just focus on the words. So this is a story which is not yet fully experienced, and you have cultivated a trick of the mind to avoid experiencing it.

Recurring Messages

If the story keeps on coming back, if your mind keeps wandering in the same direction, you should closely examine what's been happening – is there a message here I'm avoiding? Maybe there's a message carrying a package of shame or guilt or fear and you're not receiving the whole message, you're just hearing the story that you're bored with. Well, that story carries a sting in its tail and you need to notice, "Yeah, actually I was responsible for that" or "I felt guilty about that" or "That still really hurts" or whatever it is. Until you acknowledge the whole story, including the extras that come with it, this part of the mind is not yet fully clarified. It's overlooked, maybe accidentally, maybe deliberately. It doesn't just dissolve when you notice it, because it hasn't finished its task of delivering the message. In fact it's getting rather frustrated: it keeps trying, getting halfway there and still not being heard so it keeps coming back.

The easy, everyday wandering thoughts dissolve themselves the moment you notice them. If you try to be ahead of the game and cut them off before you've really noticed them, you're just creating more trouble for yourself. Because they are incomplete. They haven't finished and they will return. If you accept them, but don't accept them fully, by accident or by intention, they'll come back, they won't go away.

This is again the value in allowing yourself to notice what is going on in the mind and to really notice it completely. Not just a quick glance and say "Oh it's a familiar story, I'm fed up with that one coming back. I'll cut it off." It's more like "That story seems somehow incomplete. Interesting." Really allow it to be there; don't chase it away – let it be. Being with it, you may get a hint, at the feeling level, of what it's carrying to you. For example: "Oh yeah, I've been too hasty cutting it off in the past and now I see it's bringing something more than just the memory. There's something else to be acknowledged." If you recognize it, then it may dissolve itself.

Some of these stories have multiple layers, and you might appropriately receive the story and its message dissolves, but yet it comes back with another layer to tell you about. Then yet another layer. Each time you find something in the mind, be with it. Experience it fully. When it's ready to dissolve and go, let it go. If it's not yet ready to dissolve, probably



Photo by Pelayo Arbués

what's lacking is some degree of attention. You imagine that you're paying attention, but on some level the attention is not yet sufficient. Really be with it and experience it, and then it will take care of itself. No need to attempt to cut it off, that's futile because it comes back.

Mind Gets Quieter

If you **really** receive a thought, a memory, a story – there's a tendency for it not to come back. Of course some other story will come along, but again if that's fully received, that tends not to come back. What happens over a period of time is that the mind gets quieter. We usually start off practice with very busy minds, thoughts tumbling over each other so we can hardly separate them. But as we receive a thought and experience it and it dissolves and doesn't come back, we find the mind quietens. The thoughts get fewer, become more distinct and more easily seen. Being more easily seen, they more easily dissolve. As we persist with the practice of being aware of the contents of our mind, the contents of our mind get less.

The mind quiets down. But this is a very different sort of quiet from what is attempted by cutting off thoughts, which is really about cutting off awareness. This is a mind which really is clear. It's able to be open wide because it knows how to respond to anything that comes. Whereas a mind which is practicing by cutting off is rather anxious, guarded and closed; afraid that something will come along and trigger a train of thoughts to be cut off again. If you can cultivate a mind which just experiences what's present in the mind, the mind clears. Now you're getting somewhere nearer to silent illumination. The clearing of the mind is the silence. The illumination is the fact that this mind is open wide, is not afraid to have anything enter it.

Not Cutting Off

The problem with cutting off thoughts is, they're not really cut off, they are avoided. You can investigate this for yourself. When you've cut off a thought, what you're really doing is taking your attention away from it. The thought runs its own course through the mind after that, maybe semi-consciously or subconsciously. But it still has an effect on the way you behave, the way you act. If there's a streak of selfish, angry, or bitter thought, cutting off awareness of it won't stop you behaving in a bitter or angry way. It just stops you being aware of it, until you find people arguing with you, and you wonder why, and then you realize how you've been behaving. Then maybe some new difficult thought comes, and again you cut it off, and the thought continues subconsciously and generates more difficult behavior – this is not a good way forward. I am emphasizing the importance of simply being aware on all levels of what's going on in the mind: the words, the story, the feeling, the associations. Really having complete experience and acceptance of all these layers, leads to a dissolution of any wandering thought.

There is an article by Shifu (Master Sheng Yen) where he addresses this precise point¹. It is from a talk that Shifu gave to the monastic sangha, where he refers to a famous Chan saying:

*“When thoughts arise,
just be aware of them.
With awareness of the thoughts, they vanish.”*

A very direct statement from Shifu, one that is very important. When there are thoughts in the mind, be aware of them. It's all you need to do; that's sufficient for them to vanish. “When thoughts arise, just be aware of them” refers to being aware that

there are wandering thoughts. When we are aware that there are wandering thoughts, we will have immediately departed from them. Thus at that time they will no longer exist. In the article Shifu makes the point that we should practice this way at all times, in all activities. Be very aware of the mind at all times. That is sufficient for the wandering thoughts to vanish, and to clear the mind.

The big joke here is, many of you have been cutting off thoughts in the hope of freeing the mind of thoughts. But it works backwards to that: The way to have a mind free of thoughts is to allow the thoughts to be there. Be aware of them, and they vanish. Perhaps you got into this bad habit of cutting off thoughts because you read in the sutras of “a mind with no thoughts.” If you practice well, the mind may touch a state where there are no thoughts at all. This is indeed true; you can experience a mind with no thoughts. It’s not something you have to try and achieve, but it is something you may experience. It might seem to you that the way to achieve the mind with no thoughts is to cut off every thought that appears there. But as I’ve indicated, actually you’re not cutting off the thought, you’re just cutting off awareness of it.

Being With Thoughts

Paradoxically, the way to cultivate a mind of no thoughts is to allow the thoughts to be there, leave them alone and just be aware of them. By being aware of the thoughts, the state of no thought may arrive. You don’t reach the state of no thought by trying to banish thoughts. But by being aware of the thoughts, the state of no thought may appear. At the very least, a quieter mind may appear.

This seems contradictory; to allow yourself to be aware of the thoughts and not to banish them doesn’t seem like a very good way to get a mind with no

thoughts. But this important point of being aware of the thought *is* the secret of dissolving it. Pretending you’re not having it, looking the other way, doesn’t mean you’re not having the thought. Be very clear that you’re having the thoughts and seeing their relevance, or lack of relevance. They are not sustained when they are seen clearly. Each moment dissolves its own attachment. The practice is to be aware of the contents of your mind, attentive to each moment of experience, not resisting at all, and finding in that the freedom of nonattachment to any moment.

This is not just something I’m telling you. This is something you can investigate in your own practice. Slightly tune the awareness so that next time the mind wanders, you realize there is actually no work involved in letting go of the wandering thought. The noticing of it *is* the letting go of it; is the disappearance of it from the mind. If the mind is attached to a thought, at the point of noticing that attachment there is no difficulty at all returning to the practice and forgetting that you even had that thought. It is back on the practice. Of course, it wanders again and you notice it’s wandered so, again, you’re back on the practice. You can test this out for yourself.

Non-Wandering Thoughts

You can also test it out in relation to what we might call non-wandering thoughts. These are just an awareness that arises in the mind: awareness of a sound, of a feeling in the body, of anything. It’s there, and as you’re being aware of it, there’s a sense in which it doesn’t continue. If there is a sound, of course the sound might continue, like birdsong. But you don’t attach to that particular note that you heard, you just carry on being present and you hear another one and you carry on being present, and you feel a twitch in your leg and you carry on being



present, and you hear another cheep of the bird. Attention flows, it doesn't hook on to any one of these, it just flows on.

You can really test this out in your own practice. It's not something you can easily test at the beginning of a retreat, when the mind might be more unstable and out of control. But now your minds are beginning to settle, and it is possible for you to investigate this phenomenon. If you can practice in this way you will probably find that the mind naturally becomes much clearer and brighter. Because you are really acknowledging these thoughts they don't keep on banging at the door. They deliver their message and leave you in peace. Other messages arrive, are received, and leave in peace. Some of the concern that you brought with you from the outside world is finally set aside.

You might recognize some event from the past and think "It's really distressing that that happened but it's not relevant now. Being present here and now is what matters." You realize this moment stands alone. It's useful to have information of past experience, but it shouldn't decide what happens now, because this moment responds to this moment. You

find yourself freed of these inheritances of the past. There are not completely irrelevant, and they may be useful, but they don't determine "now."

You find yourself much more able to be present, experiencing and responding appropriately, which in the context of sitting meditation is hardly responding at all. In the context of work practice, the appropriate response is working with awareness. In the context of eating, it is experiencing the taste and the swallowing. The attention becomes very appropriate, and the response becomes appropriate. When these outside influences from past and future impinge, we notice what's going on, and that noticing releases it, and we become even more centered and stable.

Mind Before Thought

This potential for the mind to become more stable and clear gives us another possibility to further deepen the practice. I've spoken about investigating the mind. In many ways what we've been doing up until this stage is investigating the *contents* of the mind, because that's all that's been available to us; the mind

has been full of contents. Our process of investigating the mind has led us to investigating the contents: the stories and feelings; that's what we've been doing automatically. By this point in the retreat you've got a mind with few or even no thoughts. What does investigation mean when the mind has no thoughts? Now we're just beginning to "peek behind the curtain." We are investigating what we might call mind itself, or the basis of mind, and of course words fail us. We're peeking behind the everyday experience of phenomena, because at this point there are no phenomena; the curtains have sort of dissolved as well. We're just staring straight at the mind.

Consider this idea of being at the point of the mind before a thought begins to emerge. If you're in a mind which has very few thoughts, then there are gaps when you can be aware of ... what? Of mind? Of awareness? That's for you to find out. But at this point, if your attention has become stable and sharp, we can say that you are placing your attention on the mind before thought. The mind which may experience the thought beginning to arise. And maybe, because it experiences it beginning to arise, it is dissolved hardly before it's arisen, and the mind continues to be still. This is a place where you can sit in a very deep, steady state. You're not disturbed, because what would disturb you? Everything that comes along is sort of seen and experienced very vividly and clearly before it's developed into anything, and you continue, totally present and sharp.

We're beginning now to investigate the phenomenon of mind itself. We've moved beyond investigating the contents of mind (of course this is just terminology but I think you see what I mean). We're now looking at the mind itself, which is a very mysterious process but it is accessible to us if we practice in this way. We allow the mind to clear itself, we train it so that it knows exactly what's

going on and that the appropriate response is letting go, dissolving. Not pushing away, not denying, not blocking, but just simply flowing through awareness and dissolution. This process gets shorter and shorter so that the thoughts hardly begin to arise and you've dissolved them. You're staying with the continuous state of mind before thought, and no thoughts between thoughts.

This is very different from our usual experience. But this is something which is available to you through this practice. In this way you begin to understand the arising of thought, the arising of self, the arising of phenomena, and you continue sitting, observing. This is where the practice is taking you. But for this to be possible, it requires you to be very diligent in observing the mind and allowing everything which presents itself to be let through and experienced fully. Being with it, allowing it to dissolve, not pushing it away before its time, but allowing it to go when it goes. If it doesn't go, allow it to be there longer, be with it. Maybe you're not quite hearing it yet; stay with it. The usual problems of drowsiness and so on may get in the way but by now they're beginning to fade. The mind still may wander and get stuck on stories, but now you have a method to deal with that. Allow yourself to notice where you've wandered to, and if you fully acknowledge where you've wandered to its easily released; it happens automatically. So you pick up the practice and continue. And you wander again, you see what happened and you pick up the practice and continue. Over a period of time the subpoenas stop arriving. The delivery is complete. In peace, clear mind, just sitting, nothing else happening except that everything is happening but it doesn't disturb you. You continue just sitting. 🌿

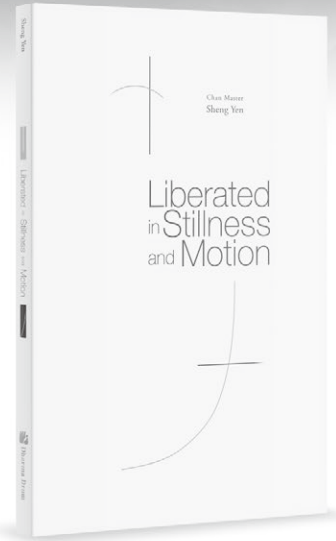
1. Chan Master Sheng Yen, "Directly Practice 'No Mind,'" *Chan Magazine*, Summer 2013, 4.

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.”

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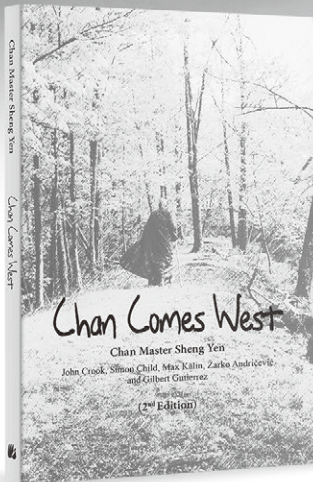
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Resolving Anxiety the Chan Buddhist Way

— BY —
DAVID LISTEN



Photo by Matthew Henry

David Listen has been sharing Chan/Zen meditation and Buddhist teachings for over 15 years, leading intensive meditation retreats, classes, and activities throughout North America, Europe, and East Asia. Previously known as Venerable Chang Wen (常聞法師), he was one of the few Western monastic disciples of Chan Master Sheng Yen. He had been a monk for over a decade, and has since returned to lay life to share the insights of the Buddha in his own creative way. David is fluent in Mandarin Chinese, and has done extensive work translating the teachings of Chinese Buddhism into English, both on retreat and in published works. He holds a Bachelor's in Environmental Studies, a Master's degree in Mental Health Counseling, and is a licensed counselor in the State of New York. He also has his own life mentoring/coaching practice, guiding people in their cultivation of wisdom and compassion on an individual basis. This article is taken from an online talk given at the DDM Center in Vancouver, March 20, 2021.

WE ALL DEAL WITH ANXIETY TO A GREATER or lesser extent; in today's talk I'm going to introduce how to deal with it according to the Chan buddhist tradition.

Anxiety is everywhere in all of us. Some of us live in big cities where people are competing for places to live, competing for work, competing to travel. Sometimes you have to fight your way onto a train, so that just getting to places on time can be anxiety provoking. There's also competition for leisure time. In New York City we have big, beautiful Central Park, but sometimes when you go there it's hard to find a space where you can sit comfortably, that's not crowded with people. During this pandemic there's even more competition and stress with the economic situation. Even though things seem to be opening up and getting back to what we used to call normal, there's a lot of uncertainty about the future.

I don't know if there's any place in the world that's free from anxiety. Some folks may live in a rural area

with a simple life, few people, and not much competition. However even in the countryside, if you're very far away from things, there may be an anxiety of making sure you have enough food. Especially in wintertime if there's a big snowstorm and you're miles and miles away from the store. Or if you're all alone in a rural area, you may be concerned about your safety.

What about the fact that we have our bodies and our health to deal with? Is there anyone who's free from physical ailments? Our body can be a source of anxiety if we don't know whether we're going to be able to maintain our health. If we have some kind of illness we don't know what's going to happen – will it get worse? Will we be able to afford the treatment? Even if we're in good health, maybe we're anxious about our wealth or our possessions. I have a friend who does a lot of stock market trading and it seems like every day I hear another story of how the stocks are going way up or they're going way down. If it's



Photo by Gustavo A. Pérez

going down they end up losing everything they just put into it, so it there's a constant anxiety about the gain and loss of wealth.

Relationships with family, with life partners and friends, can be a source of anxiety too. We may be anxious of losing someone due to their health, or due to the relationship just not working out. It's safe to say that we all face anxiety.

Definition of Anxiety

The word anxiety is not often used in the Buddhist sutras or discourses, however we frequently see the term *restlessness*. There's a teaching on the five hindrances to meditative stability, and restlessness is one of the hindrances. The Chinese word is *diaohui* 掉悔 which means restlessness and remorse. The mind is very agitated, not at ease. It may be due to remorse about the past, it may be due to worry about the future, but it's an overall restless state of mind. I think that corresponds to how we use the word anxiety today. In the Buddha's talks he also used the terms *fear* and *dread* with regard to the reality of life and death and the comings and goings of everything in our environment. This is an underlying fear that we all experience. If we want to define anxiety we could say it's an agitation of mind due to worry and preoccupation with uncertainty.

When we're anxious, we need to have an object to be anxious about. Some people have a very specific object, for example, they may be anxious about their health. Others maybe don't have a specific object, they just feel anxious and disturbed almost all the time. I don't know if some of you have experienced that; I've actually experienced that when I was in my twenties, just a seemingly constant feeling of anxiety and unease. But it wasn't anxiety about something in particular, I was anxious about everything: driving,

talking to people, looking for work, every big and little thing. There's still an object there but it was shifting and changing all the time, an underlying current of agitation.

Symptoms of Anxiety

The Buddha didn't have a technical way to talk about the symptomology of how we suffer from anxiety. But there are some common experiences, and modern psychology creates a clear presentation of symptoms as well as categories of anxiety. I think the Buddha's teachings as well as modern psychology's categorization of mental illness and mental health can be quite useful together. Because if we can recognize some symptoms we can know better what methods to use to help ourselves.

One symptom that people may experience is having a racing mind, thinking about all sorts of things. Usually that's accompanied with muscle tension, and maybe even tremors shaking the body. Some people may have unpleasant feelings in the stomach or the chest, or oftentimes the lower gut area. Some people experience an overall irritability, they feel upset whenever somebody approaches them or when they have to deal with things. Due to anxiety, a person may have poor sleep; they may wake up in the middle of the night with a racing heartbeat, even sweating. Some people may have anxiety to the point where certain parts of the body feel numb. Rapid breathing is another symptom. When anxiety becomes more serious a person could have uncontrolled bowel movements or vomiting. An anxious person might experience complete confusion, to the point of losing sense of their body altogether, or feeling that they're out of their body. People can be anxious to the point of losing consciousness altogether.

If you have experienced any of these symptoms that could be a sign that you're suffering from anxiety and may not know it. But it's nothing to be afraid of. If we look at the number of people seeking professional help from a counselor or a therapist, the most common ailment is anxiety. I was curious how many people went for professional help due to anxiety and according to the Anxiety Disorders Association of America, it's around 40 million people, 19.2% of the population in the United States alone (updated info as of 2022). There's likely many more people who struggle with anxiety but they just don't seek for help, so that number could be doubled, who knows?

Types of Anxiety

In the Buddhist teachings there's no categorization of types of anxiety. But within modern psychology we've identified that certain people have certain forms of anxiety. One is general anxiety, when a person doesn't have just one specific thing they're anxious about but may feel anxious about everything. Another kind is social anxiety; some people feel particularly anxious when they have to go socialize with others, or when they have to give public talk. That can be a very paralyzing kind of anxiety. There's also separation anxiety; some people feel that it's traumatic to separate from their parents. This could be babies or young children or this could also be adults. There are also anxieties related to specific objects; such as a phobia towards spiders or other animals. Some people have a phobia towards inanimate objects, for example, sharp weapons or even needles.

Why do we experience anxiety? The Buddha once said fear or anxiety is due to foolishness, due to ignorance. That's not meant to insult anyone. In Chinese, ignorance is *wuming* 無明 and *yuchi* 愚癡, which means a lack of clarity or understanding; we

can also call it a lack of awareness. We have an ignorance about ourselves and about the object we are anxious about.

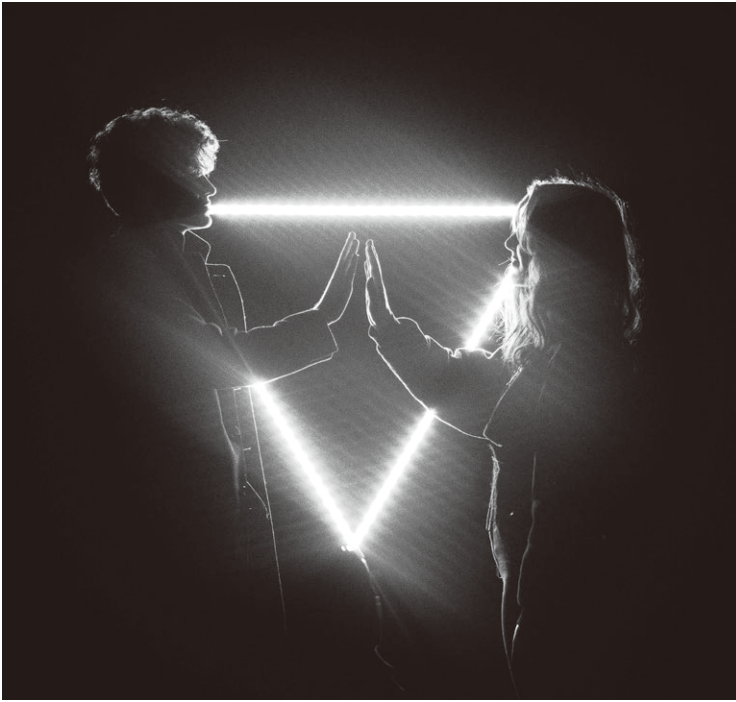
But what does it really mean to be ignorant? In this context ignorance refers to a lack of deep understanding about the reality of our self and the world. To be more specific, the Buddha would say that one aspect of ignorance is when we see permanence in things that are impermanent. We perceive things to be permanent when they're always changing. From another angle, we perceive things to have a self that actually don't have a self. "Self" means something that's totally independent. We often view ourselves as being totally independent when actually we're connected with other people in an infinite number of relationships. We have this perception of self and separateness when there is no possibility to be totally separate.

So in terms of time we don't see change; in terms of space we don't see the deep connection that we have with everything. We could say this is the source of suffering; this is what brings about our anxiety. This is the core of the Buddha's teachings, trying to point to the source of our problems and anxiety.

Grasping and Attachment

To give an example, maybe there's a relationship in your life that you're afraid of losing. You may be anxious all the time just thinking and wondering whether that person will leave you. In the moment of anxiety, what are we doing with our mind? The person may not even be near us in space but they are in our mind. We have this image of the person that we love dearly and we take that image of them to be the real person.

There was a Zen master who said when we fall in love we actually don't fall in love with people or things; we fall in love with an image in our mind.



end up thinking constantly. It's not that thinking itself is bad; it's the problem of *grasping* onto thought that leads to a constant, obsessive, unclear way of thinking, which then stimulates all kinds of emotions. Today we're talking about anxiety, but essentially this process is the source of all forms of suffering whether it's anxiety, doubt, anger, craving – it's all the same process.

The Buddha spoke about this process of attachment or ignorance in the teaching of the twelve linked chain of dependent origination. “Conditioned arising” is the technical term; the Chinese is *yuanqi* 緣起. It's the process of ignorance

Thích Nhất Hạnh said this when he was talking about the psychology of mind from the perspective of the Consciousness-Only school of Buddhism, which points out that love, hate, and anxiety are born from this ignorance where we grasp onto the images of our mind as permanent objects, as totally independent selves out there somewhere.

But let's reflect on that: when we're anxious and we're imagining what it's like to lose this person, is that image that's floating in our mind the real person? Or is that just an impression of one moment in time that we had with that person? It was a memory that we've frozen in time and grasped onto it with our mind. This is what we call attachment. This is the manifestation of ignorance, grasping onto our thoughts as permanent independent objects. What happens when we grasp onto our thoughts is that we

manifesting and then continuing. There are five links which are the central process that we can experience in this very moment. We don't need to think about it or see it as a philosophy; we can reflect on our experience. What is that experience? It's when we contact the world. When we see, hear, feel, think, we're not clear about what's happening. When we contact anything, very quickly this image in our mind is also arising and we grasp onto it.

There's also a feeling that arises in our body. It may be a pleasant feeling; it may be an unpleasant feeling. If it's a pleasant feeling we will like it; if it's an unpleasant feeling we will dislike it. This mechanism of attaching like or dislike then generates a momentum which the Buddha referred to as karmic force. This momentum of attachment to our thoughts, and resisting or seeking the feelings that arise, perpetuates

and recycles again and again. This is the continuation of our anxiety and all kinds of suffering. We can see that the root of it is this ignorance or lack of clarity.

Letting Go of Clinging

So now that we know the cause of anxiety, how do we actually deal with it? There may be a countless number of methods, but in terms of the Buddha's teaching there is a certain principle that, if we understand it correctly, we'll be able to use the right approach with any method. The principle is that anxiety itself is impermanent. The experience of anxiety is empty of permanence, empty of self. Anxiety is not some kind of fixed problem inside of us that we need to spend a certain amount of time to get rid of. If we recognize that anxiety arises from a moment-to-moment attachment to the content of our thoughts, we can be free from it in the very next moment. At

every moment we have the potential to be free from whatever suffering or trouble we're facing. Precisely because the suffering is empty, we can be free from it. The Buddha spoke of this as buddha nature.

We all have the capacity to be free from suffering even though we feel that we're completely immersed in it. In this moment we have the capacity to be free from it; that's our buddha nature, our potential to be awake. Emptiness, the fact that our suffering is changing and not fixed, is directly related to buddha nature.

How can we free ourselves from suffering? The unique approach of the Chan tradition is to let go of clinging to our self that comes from this constant thinking. The moment we can let go of clinging to thought, in that very moment we can be free. Does it mean that if we can do that we'll be free forever from all of our problems, just like the Buddha? No, that's not what it means. Even if we were to experience a moment of freedom from this burden of attachment,



Photo by Jessica Christian

it doesn't mean we're forever free. But that is the basic principle. If we can do it every moment, then every moment we're free. If we can do it for one moment, then for one moment we're free.

That's why so many masters in the Chan tradition would often say something very simple like "drop it." Drop what? Drop clinging to thought. Does it mean, never think again? No, not at all. You can think freely. But it means we have the potential to see and drop our clinging and be free from anxiety.

In Any Situation

But the problem is, can we do it? If you could already do it, at this moment we'd all be free and probably wouldn't need to come to these talks. One problem is we're not yet clearly aware of what we're doing with our mind. Because of that, we need some sort of concrete method. Within the Buddhist tradition sitting meditation is one method. However it doesn't have to be sitting meditation, it could be walking, it could even be working meditation. From the perspective of the Chan tradition, sitting meditation is just one activity. The potential to cultivate our mind, to become aware of ignorance and clinging, and to eventually be able to let go of that; in theory we could do that in any situation.

That's why a very famous teacher, Master Huineng, the sixth ancestor in the Chan lineage, didn't advocate sitting meditation as the only way. He said in theory it's possible to develop this awareness in all situations in daily life, that the stability of mind can be developed at any time. He called it *yixing sanmei* 一行三昧, meaning one singular approach to practice. This means, in any situation, sitting, standing, walking, working, even talking, we can develop awareness of what's happening with our body-mind and we can use it more skillfully. It doesn't mean that

sitting meditation is not good. Sitting meditation is actually one of the easiest contexts to develop our mind specifically because we're not distracted by so many things when we're just sitting still. We're temporarily disengaging with our senses, with the world, to be more aware of the inner workings of our mind.

Deep Breathing

I just talked about the capacity that we have to be free from anxiety. Now it can be useful to talk about method. We could look at it as applying to sitting meditation, and it can actually apply to any situation. With regards specifically to severe anxiety I'd like to introduce a couple of techniques which you can do when you experience an attack of anxiety.

Some people experience anxiety attacks where they feel it's hard to breathe and their mind is racing. They may even be afraid that they're going to die. That's a completely emotional response triggered by this strong attachment to thoughts. For example, one person I work with shared with me that sometimes when they go in an elevator and the door closes they have the sudden thought of, "What if we get stuck or what if the elevator falls?" Suddenly after having that thought their whole body and mind is struck with an attack of anxiety. They've been overcome by that thought. Heavy breathing, increased heart rate, sweating, racing mind – it's a very painful and difficult situation to be in.

One method that you can do to first diffuse that response, is deep breathing. We need a certain degree of calm before we can clearly see what's happening within our mind. So deep breathing in an anxiety attack can be very helpful. You can even try it with me now: sitting or standing, take a very big kind of coarse breath, but take it slow. Breathing in through the nose, out through the mouth; the whole chest

is moving. If you do this deep breathing three or four times, that can be enough to take the panic attack from unbearable to bearable. Settling down the breathing settles down the heart rate, settles the body and mind to where panic is still happening but it's manageable. While deep breathing you can also make sure you have good posture because that allows the body to relax. If you can do that you'll find that the anxiety attack will pass in time. You know you're not going to die.

It's interesting that these three initial methods of deep breathing, good posture, and relaxation are also used in our Dharma Drum Lineage of meditation. The very first thing we do when we sit down is to adjust the posture, sitting in a way that's not using unnecessary tension to hold our body. We're just putting our body there and letting the body sit. This in itself allows us to relax into ourselves. Usually before this we have a deep breathing exercise, regulating and calming the breath.

Posture can also be practiced in daily life. For example, if you do a lot of work at an office desk, typing, what's your posture like? If you are more conscious of your posture you start to have a greater awareness of the condition of your body. If you develop good posture you're actually relieving your body of a lot of pressure. Standing, sitting, even lying down, awareness of posture is a gateway to awareness of our mind. It's important that we look at our body and mind as a whole; they can't really be separated.

Posture and Relaxation

So, first is deep breathing, regulating our breath. Second is good posture, in sitting meditation and in all situations. Next is relaxation. If we are aware of our posture we'll be aware of where there is tension. Some of us may be habitually holding tension. We

may have sort of shrugged shoulders and we don't even know it. We work that way, stand that way, talk and walk that way; we're holding a lot of tension in ourselves. If we can be aware of that we can release it and relax it. Physical relaxation will bring a lot of comfort to us. It can relieve the pain of anxiety just by relaxing the muscles; it's very comfortable.

As to relaxing more deeply – if we can relax our attitude, that is key. Relaxing our attitude means that we're learning to become aware of how we cling to our thoughts, to the objects of our anxiety. We first need to see that. I'll use the example of losing the person in our life that we love. When we're aware of relaxing our body we'll start to notice that our mind is clinging to that image. If we're thinking about them leaving, we're resisting that. If we're thinking about wanting them to stay with us forever, we're seeking that. That kind of attitude of resisting, seeking, resisting, seeking, continues to cycle. If we can see that process, we can drop it; we can relax that resistance or that seeking attitude.

What's interesting is that when we relax our attitude, we start to let go of those objects of thought because we see how much pain clinging brings to ourselves. We become more and more comfortable with relaxing our grasping and having this very open mindset. We're accepting of whatever happens. We're not grasping onto an idea of that person leaving or staying; acceptance is letting go of grasping. We're just fully aware of what is present here and now.

This relaxation of attitude leads to a more deeper insight. It corresponds to the aspect of calming the mind. When our mind is calm, we have the capacity then for wisdom, insight into the very nature of how our mind is working. We see that our thoughts, those things that we cling to as real objects out there in the world, are just thoughts. They are images, sounds, contents of our mind. They're flowing and changing

constantly. It's so easy to actually observe the impermanence of our thoughts. This is not thinking about impermanence, it's observing the impermanent nature of the content of our mind.

It's also observing the nature of feelings and emotions, the pain or the pleasant sensations experienced in the body; we can observe them very clearly as changing. We're also observing how these thoughts are selfless. What does that mean? Thoughts don't just arise by themselves. Thoughts arise because we have different contacts with what we see, what we hear, what we feel. Some thoughts arise because of previous thoughts. Thoughts are completely dependent on experiences of sight, sound, smell, taste, touch and other thoughts.

Observing the Process

If we're able to be clearly aware of this process of the arising, changing, and passing away of all experiences of our body and mind, we will truly be able to let go of clinging to them. Because why would we cling to something that we actually can't keep? If we think about all our anxieties that way, all of the objects of our mind, and even the objects of the physical world; there's nothing that we can truly keep. When our mind is very calm and clear we can observe this process within ourselves, the impermanent, selfless quality of our body, mind and environment. When we can do that, then we can truly let go. That's that moment of freedom from not only anxiety but all kinds of pain and suffering.

What's unique in the Chan tradition is that we don't talk about stages or a fixed period of time, for example, how long does it take for me to go from being really anxious to being totally free? That's not something which is discussed within the Chan tradition. What is discussed is the principle that it's possible: as



long as we can drop this attachment for one moment, then for that moment you're free. According to the Chan tradition, the principle is more important than the specific process. That's why it's called a sudden insight and a sudden moment of freedom.

I'd like to finish with a quote from the *Heart Sutra* which is quite important to the Chan and Zen tradition. There's a line that says, when there are no obstructions in the mind there's no fear. With wisdom, with the ability to see how our mind is working, we have the insight of how to relieve ourselves from this obstructive problem of attachment. When we relieve ourselves of this obstruction, we relieve ourselves of fear and anxiety, and we can truly live in a more peaceful and in a more compassionate way. 🌿

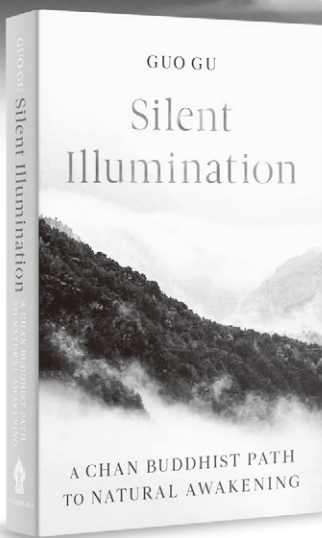
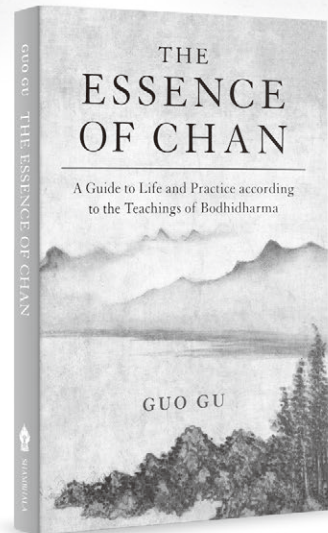
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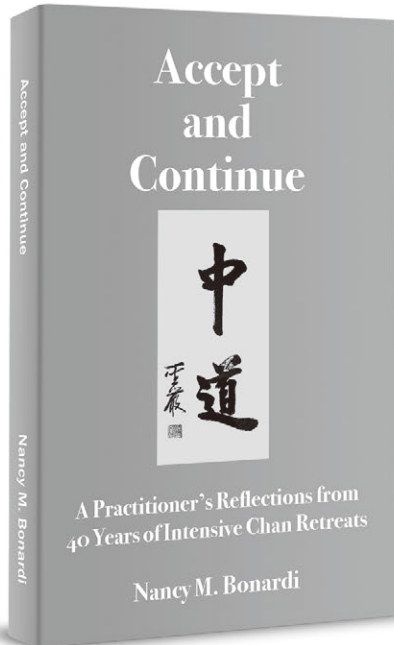
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