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We who study Buddhism should not be too attached to existence or non-existence. In an appropriate location, time, and situation, it may be correct to talk about existence. However, in another place, time, and situation one cannot talk about existence, and it would be correct to talk about emptiness. However, in terms of Chan teaching, it is correct to transcend existence and emptiness.



CHAN MASTER SHENG YEN

Liberated in Stillness and Motion, 1998

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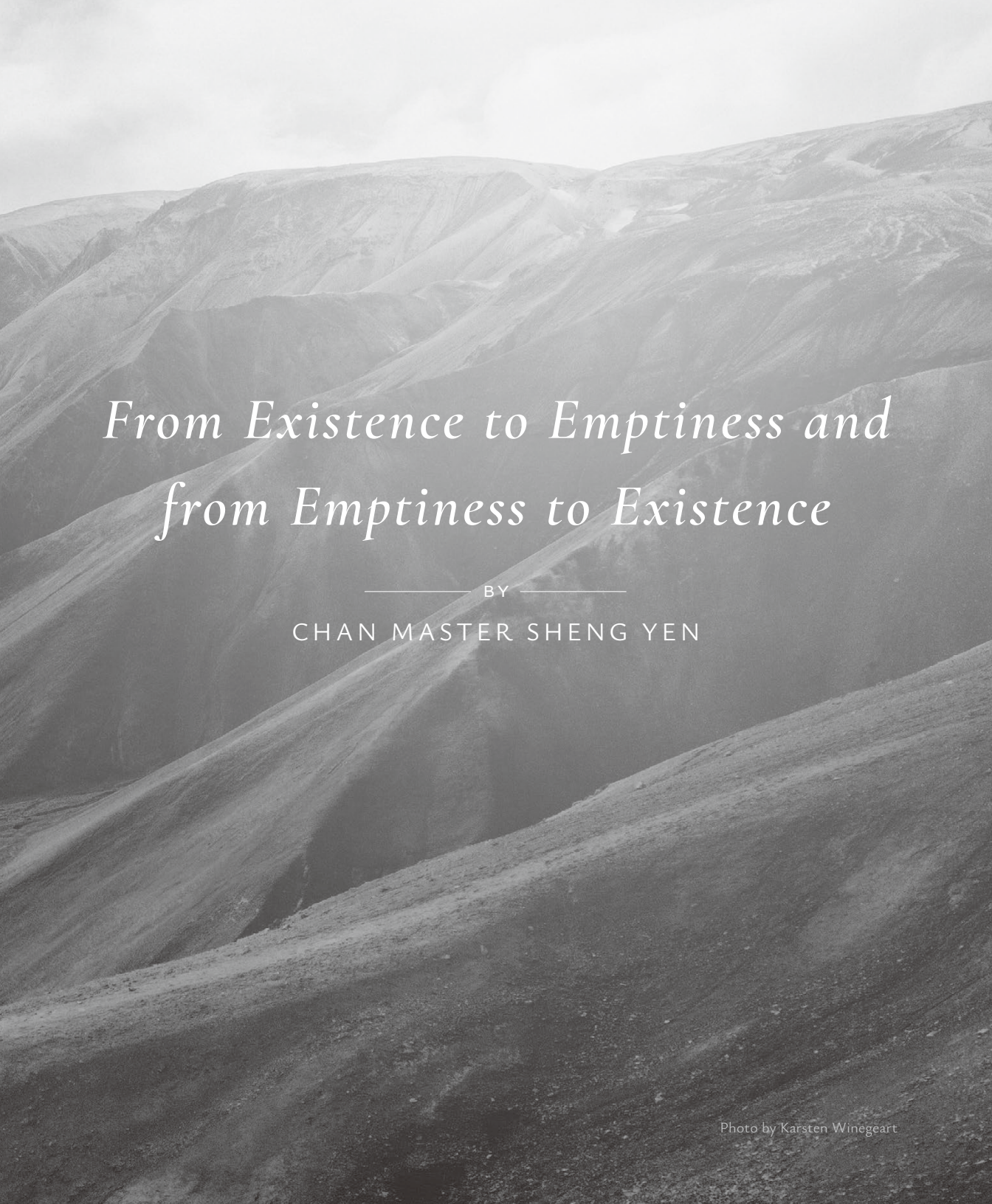
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*From Existence to Emptiness and
from Emptiness to Existence*

BY

CHAN MASTER SHENG YEN

This article is from a talk given at the DDM Chan Meditation Camp, April 16, 1995. It is excerpted from Master Sheng Yen's book, *Liberated in Stillness and Motion*, originally published in 1998 as “動靜皆自在” (*Dongjing Jie Zizai*). It was translated under the auspices of the Cultural Center of Dharma Drum Mountain, Taiwan. Translation by Venerable Chang Luo, and edited by Venerable Chang Wu and Ernest Heau.



Chan Master Sheng Yen DDM Archive Photo

BUDDHADHARMA TELLS US: “ALL DHARMAS originate from the mind and all dharmas return to the mind.” Buddhadharma also says: “All dharmas flow from the dharma realm (Sanskrit *dharmadhātu*), and all dharmas flow back to the dharma realm.” I have spoken before about how to affirm, develop, and dissolve the self, and I also spoke about how to go from the “small” self to the “greater” self, and then from greater self to no-self. Now I will discuss how one goes from self to no-self, and then from no-self back to the self. We will describe Chan as the process of going from self to no-self.

Existence Is Correct and Emptiness Is Also Correct

Yesterday, someone from my hometown in mainland China asked me, “Which is the correct view, existence or emptiness?” He was very confused because the Chan school talks about emptiness while the Pure Land school talks about existence. The faith of Pure Land exists and the western pure land of Amitabha Buddha also exists. On the other hand, the *Platform Sutra* asked: If people in the east wish to be reborn in the western pure land, where will the people in the western pure land go after death?”

I told him, “Existence and emptiness are both correct views.” Why? In terms of faith and practice, the existence of the pure land is correct because one needs something to rely on, a goal and purpose to devote oneself to learning and practicing Buddhadharma. Besides rebirth in the western pure land there is also the goal of becoming a buddha. However, the emptiness expounded by the Chan school is also correct because the environment we live in is itself an illusion and a dreamlike state, with nothing real.

This person then said that returning to his homeland was like a dream – everything was different. When

he was a child, his house was very large but now it is very small. He remembers Wolf Mountain as being very high and huge but now it is low and small. “What I saw as a child was not real; what I see now is real.” I told him, “What you see now is also not real.” When he was young his vision was limited, so he felt the house was very big. Now he has traveled outside and has seen a lot. His vision is expanded; therefore, the house as he remembered as a child has become small. Which one is correct? During the course of our lives since birth, we are forever growing old. Are our memories a dream, or is the present a dream? Only when we awake from a dream do we realize we had a dream, and though the dream did exist, it was also empty. Human life is like a dream; while life “exists,” we should realize and understand that it is also provisional, not substantial. The novel *The Dream of Red Chamber* is so named because the house of Jia once flourished, yet it eventually fell and declined, like a dream.

However, the emptiness (Skt. *śūnyatā*) or *wu* (in Chinese: “nothingness”) that Buddhadharma talks about is not emptiness that is separate from existence; rather, it is the emptiness *within* existence. When there is existence, there is also emptiness, so existence is correct, and emptiness is also correct.

Existence Is Incorrect, and Emptiness Is Incorrect

When we say that the western pure land exists, that buddhahood exists, that merit and wisdom exist, is it true existence? If we claim to be a bodhisattva at the level of a sage, then we would lack shame and should strive for improvement. A real bodhisattva on the path would only claim to be an ordinary human being. The difference is that a real bodhisattva who truly knows existence and emptiness would not assert both existence and emptiness. Existence and emptiness are

like two extremes; it would be incorrect to assert either one, and also incorrect to deny either one. The only correct way is neither to assert either extreme, nor assert the middle.

People may ask: “After one becomes a buddha, is that existence or emptiness?” It would be incorrect to speak of either existence or emptiness because buddhahood transcends both; it is a state that is not influenced by concepts of existence and emptiness. If I ask you whether your family exists or is empty, you would probably say, “They exist.” If I ask you whether your job exists, you would also say it does. What you say exists, is it true existence or just provisional existence?

Many people think it is very painful to have to adjust to others, preferring that others should adjust to them. The husband hopes the wife will cooperate with him, and the wife wants her husband to adjust to her needs. Is this having a self or no-self? The self exists. In the minds of ordinary people, when the “I” exists, conflicts abound. We can demand that objects adapt to us, but we cannot always do that with people. Dealing with people requires negotiation; if we try to force others to adjust for us, there will be conflicts.

Buddhas and Bodhisattvas Have No-Self and No-Form

Bodhisattvas will try their best to understand and adapt to others while most people hope others will understand and adapt to them. Many people treat others as objects, not as people. Bodhisattvas see



*One Thousand Sahasrabhuja-arya-Avalokitesvara #20, by Tankei (1173–1256)
Collection of Sanjūsangen-dō Temple, Kyoto, National Treasure of Japan*

everyone as bodhisattvas, and see themselves as sentient beings. Sentient beings include ordinary people as well as saints and sages. Indeed, a buddha is also a sentient being. When someone thinks they are a great bodhisattva, we could say that though they have confidence, they are also arrogant.

Bodhisattvas see themselves as sentient beings and therefore they live among sentient beings. If bodhisattvas presented themselves as great bodhisattvas, how would we react? Would we, or could we, live with them? We wouldn't dare. Bodhisattvas wish to deliver

sentient beings, so they choose to live among sentient beings. Therefore, they would not often appear in the form of great bodhisattvas. Actually, bodhisattvas are indeed among us, and they appear as ordinary people. Have you ever seen someone with three eyes, or with three heads and six arms, as depicted in Buddhist art? Or someone with a thousand eyes and a thousand arms like Guanyin Pusa (Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara)? If you have, then you probably saw them in a dream or illusion. Some people who practice very hard may receive a spiritual response and see extraordinary phenomena. However, these visions do not often appear in daily life, and it is for the needs of sentient beings that such illusions appear, to strengthen their faith. Do great bodhisattvas look like that? No, great bodhisattvas have no fixed form; for example, in the *Lotus Sutra* Avalokiteśvara appears in thirty-three different manifestations, depending on who was being helped.

As I said, great bodhisattvas have no form, and the bodhisattvas that do have a form are not yet great bodhisattvas. The true great bodhisattva of no-form and no-self; the true body of the buddha is also of no-form and no-self. However, is no-form the same as non-existence? No, bodhisattvas do exist but without self-attachment; they manifest as suitable to the various levels of sentient beings. This is the true great bodhisattva.

I once visited a Japanese *zendo* in America. There was no fixed seat for the Zen master because in America, they emphasize equality. Therefore, in order to adapt to Americans, the teacher does not have a special seat. However, on one of the seats were the words of Chan Master Linji: “True man with no rank.” I asked the master: “Is there a seat or not? Is there a true man or not? If there is ‘no seat,’ then why is there a place here? Is the man sitting here real or not? Is it true to sit here? Or is it true when the man leaves? Is it

true when nobody sits here? Or is it only true when someone sits here?”

He laughed and said, “This is just there to fool people. Don’t say anymore and don’t tip our hand!” That Zen master’s reply really made good sense. If he had insisted that he was the true man with no rank, he would have been worthless.

Transcending Existence & Emptiness, Being Liberated & Free

We who study Buddhism should not be too attached to existence or non-existence. In an appropriate location, time, and situation, it may be correct to talk about existence. However, in another place, time, and situation one cannot talk about existence, and it would be correct to talk about emptiness. However, in terms of Chan teaching, it is correct to transcend existence and emptiness.

Returning to the question asked earlier, when you are working hard at your job, then it exists. However, after the work is finished, the job no longer exists. When you sit in the office dealing with your work, do you have a career? Yes, you do. When you go home to sleep, do you have a career? No. At that time, if you have a career, then you would not be able to fall asleep. Here is a question: When you go on a vacation, do you have a career or not?

Each one of us has much karma: career, planning, expectations, and worries; this is karma that is not easy to let go of. After you learn Chan meditation, try to keep the mind empty, be ready to deal with matters at any place and any time, but do not keep those matters in mind, otherwise they will bring karmic obstructions.

In a nutshell, it would be incorrect to say either existence or non-existence is true. There is neither emptiness nor existence, and emptiness is existence – that is the Buddha’s teaching. 🌿



Transmission *of*
Buddhist Teachings

BY

VENERABLE CHI CHERN



This article is from a Dharma talk given by Venerable Chi Chern, a Dharma heir of Chan Master Sheng Yen, at a fourteen-day retreat in July 2010. Translated by David Listen, edited by Buffe Maggie Laffey.



Venerable Chi Chern DDRC Archive Photo

Which Method Is Most Authentic?

PAST CHAN LINEAGE MASTERS USED MANY different expedient means to teach their disciples. Throughout the generations all the way back to the Buddha's time it was the same; the master used skillful means that were tailored to help particular disciples. The many different methods of Chan meditation that have been passed down to the present day evolved from those teachings. Some people may think they are using the method the Buddha taught during his time, and that this is the most genuine method whereas other methods are not. But how do we know exactly which methods are most authentic? We weren't alive during the Buddha's time. Regardless which method you use, there are specific fundamentals that go along with any method.

Through the generations these methods were transmitted orally and then eventually through the written word. When transmitted orally, it was much easier for the teachings to transform and they may have become very different from the original teaching. When these methods were written down, the texts and sutras were less likely to change, which makes these teachings more stable as they are passed down. Buddhist teachings were recorded the earliest out of many other religions. The collection that has been passed down to the present is incredibly large. When we look at the teachings that were transmitted from India, when Indian Buddhism came to China, we can see that there is a difference in the skillful ways that teachers taught their disciples. With the transmission of these methods it's inevitable that some things will change and maybe some things will be lost. This is the case with oral transmission, and even with written transmission through scriptures.

Teachings Appropriate to the Audience

Nowadays we might think that audio and video equipment can truly capture the essence of someone's teaching and preserve it. But that's not necessarily the case. For example many of you have attended retreats where they played videos of Shifu's (Master Sheng Yen's) Dharma talks from past Chan retreats. Everything is recorded, all of Shifu's words, even the image of him speaking. It seems that everything is preserved about the conditions surrounding that teaching. But when Shifu was giving those Dharma talks he was responding

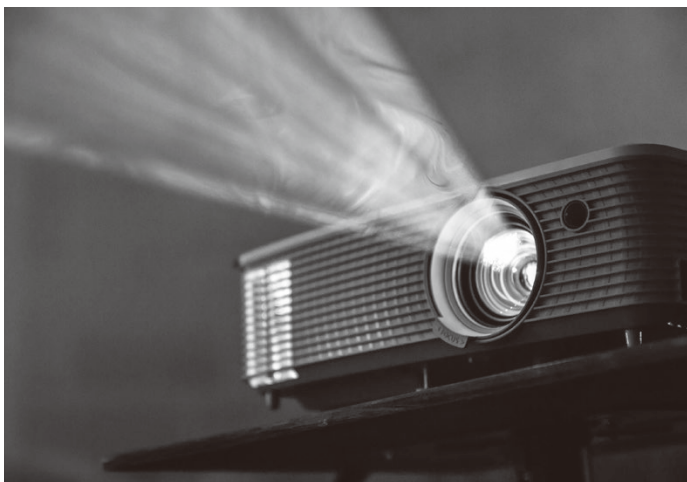


Photo by Alex Litvin

to a particular group of people at that time. Shifu was very sharp; he was able to observe and understand the level of the students who were present. He was aware of their conditions and gave teachings appropriate to them. If that group of participants who were present when the videos were recorded had particularly sharp karmic roots, and then we watch these videos now, would we get the same benefit? It's possible that we wouldn't understand or be able to use any of the teachings in those videos. Why? Because it may not really connect with us. Shifu was speaking to a group who had a particular level of practice, so he was giving those teachings in accordance with their needs. Whereas those who watch these videos later on are a totally different audience. So the effect is very different than being present there at that time.

Teachings Specific to a Situation

Back in Malaysia we just use audio to record my retreat talks. We don't use video because I don't really want to watch myself; I don't even listen to the audio

recordings afterwards. But some participants after the retreat will say “Can I get a copy of the retreat talks? They were excellent. I was so moved! I learned so much!” Then people bring them home and listen to them, or put them in the player in the car and listen while they drive. But interestingly there’s no flavor there; the power is gone. Why is that? Because their state of mind in their daily lives most likely is quite scattered. So they are listening to talks from a particular retreat when they are totally removed from that situation. Most importantly, they are not in the state of diligently applying the method while immersed in the retreat environment. So of course when they listen it doesn’t generate the effect it had for them as retreat participants. The teachings that different teachers give are expedient means directed towards a particular audience at a particular time in a particular state of body and mind. Those skillful means are useful for THOSE people at THAT time. Afterwards if they go back and listen to them it’s totally different.

Those recordings are incomplete in a sense because if you notice they don’t film the audience. You have no idea who the audience was or what condition they were in. Many things are impossible to capture or preserve in a recording. So we should know that within the teachings passed down to the generations, whether oral transmission or written transmission or now electronic, unavoidably there are certain causes and conditions missing. If we look at the sutras, what’s interesting is that they do note some particulars about the audience. For example the sutra will state “Thus I have heard when the Buddha was staying at such and such a place at such and such a time he was giving a talk to an audience of so many thousand people” and it describes who they were. In a sense it does somewhat include the audience. But inevitably there were elements in those teachings that were impossible to record.

Skillful Means and Foundation Teachings

The skillful means that were related to a particular audience are difficult to preserve, and not easy to apply to practitioners removed from that situation. However, the essential instructions which a teacher has inherited are easier to preserve and transmit as a set of foundation teachings. In teaching how to use the specific Chan methods, silent illumination and huatou, there are a few unchanging aspects passed down through the generations. We see that Shifu in leading Chan retreats eventually taught these two methods separately; for about the last twenty years of his life each retreat was dedicated to one particular method. Interestingly after so many years of focusing on these methods, we have just one book dedicated to each. Each book is about this thick [indicating a medium sized book] and you may think “Only one book after all these years of teaching?”

It’s true that these books contain the core of these two methods as Shifu taught them. These books were created by Shifu’s disciples recording and editing retreat talks given from around 2002 until 2006. Shifu also did his own reorganization; he took out some content, in other parts elaborated and explained in finer detail. Seeing all that went into these books you may think they capture everything we need to know about either of these methods. Is that necessarily the case? Actually it’s not. Because if you tried to practice silent illumination or huatou just based on reading the book, you may find that it’s quite difficult to get a handle on the method and to really gain benefits. One of the reasons is that although these books contain a great deal of information they are in a sense incomplete; they can’t contain everything.

Written words that appear in publications are different than the spoken word. If we were to create these

books as the spoken word would sound, with all of the details, the books wouldn't be just this big, they would be this big [indicating a very large book]. The books are different than a teacher using the spoken language at a retreat to elaborate and explain in fine detail. One thing is that when the teacher speaks in the presence of students a lot of what is not captured in a book are effectively those things that can help us grasp the method and put it into practice. You can't understand it as easily by reading the book because you're not within the causes and conditions where those teachings were given. So although these books are very complete, preserving the core and the essence of the teachings, still many of the expedient means which allow us to enter into the practice are not captured there.

Causes and Conditions

For example within Chinese Buddhism we have the great master Zhiyi (Chinese: 智顛, 538–597), the fourth patriarch of the Tiantai school. He gave a set of teachings once, I believe it was in a temple in Nanjing, a southern capital of China. During that retreat he spoke for an entire summer on what was eventually titled *The Explanation of the Perfection of Dhyana, a Sequential Method* (Chinese: 釋禪波羅蜜次第法門). This is quite a large book which contains all he taught during that retreat. He explains in great detail the sequential stages of the process of practice. It seems almost a perfect set of teachings. This was recorded by one of his disciples, of course not with audio but written down. Then it was given to another disciple to reorganize and compile into the book. But what's interesting is that however complete it may seem, he actually never finished his talk. He didn't finish it that summer; I guess maybe he didn't have time. We may think, well, where's the other book? Where's part two? Because it seems

that if he didn't finish it that summer then he would finish it the next retreat, right? But actually he didn't. Why? Because the following summer's retreat had a different set of causes and conditions, so it was not appropriate to give that teaching at that time. Getting back to this book, even if we were to read this book and try to really penetrate this method we may find that it's not so easy. Again, we weren't there, we weren't the audience that he was speaking to. We didn't have the set of causes and conditions of that time.

The main point to understand when studying the Dharma is that only a small aspect, the core teachings, can be preserved. The skillful and expedient means which were based on specific circumstances may not be transmitted in these teachings, so we may find them difficult to use. This points out the main principle of Buddhadharmā: causes and conditions. In all teachings of the Dharma we have to understand the causes and conditions of where these teachings came from. If we



can understand the situation from which these teachings arose, then through our study we should be better able to grasp the core of the teachings. What's more important, we should understand that when we study these teachings there may be things missing. There may be expedient means specific to our own present situation that we need to receive, in order to assist us in entering into the practice. We have to relate the principle of causes and conditions to our current circumstances, practice accordingly, and work towards understanding the core teachings of the Buddhadharma and of Chan practice.

Do Not Rely on Words

We find that in the Chan school the lineage masters proclaimed something very unique to Chinese Chan, which is, to not rely on words or be caught up in language. Does this mean that we don't use words or language? Because interestingly the Chan school has left behind the most words; Chan teachings comprise many volumes of records. Why is that? With this concept of not relying on words or being caught up in language, why are there so many records?

The important point is that we should use these words to transcend words. We should not get caught up or be bound by these teachings. The teachers have to communicate to their disciples without themselves being trapped by words. The disciples want to realize, not the words themselves, but what the words are pointing at. With this spirit of the Chan school we see that interactions between teachers and students are so lively and dynamic precisely because they can make use of words without getting lost in them. These interactions are something very unique to Chinese Chan, essentially the wisdom of the Chinese culture. When teaching their disciples, the teacher would use only a few words and say something so profound,

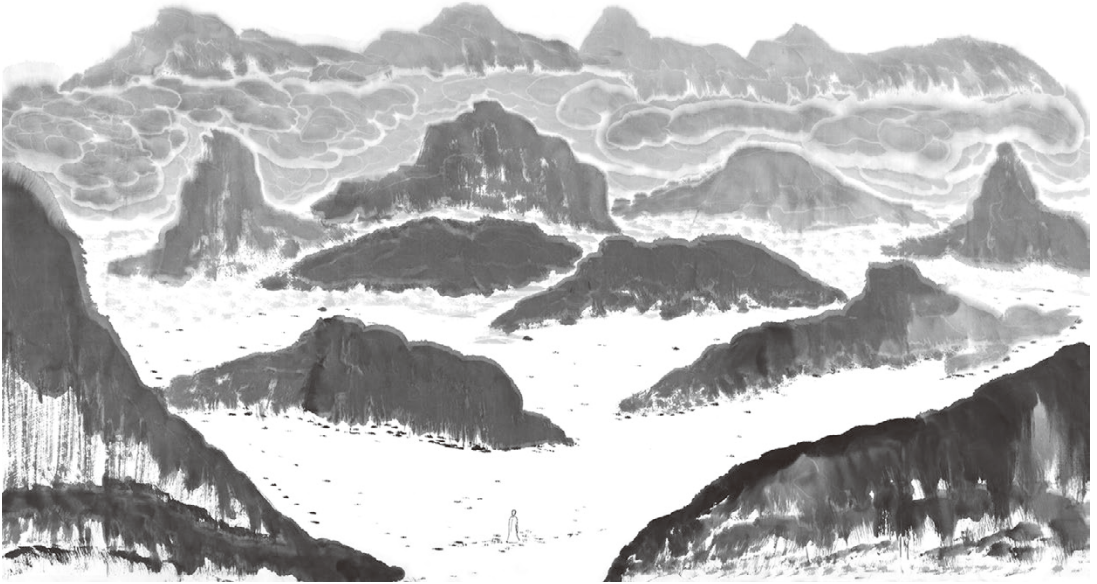
the way in which they said it could enlighten a disciple. Or they could do something spontaneous, just a movement or gesture and all of a sudden their student was enlightened. These interactions are so interesting and unique, how could you not record them? It would be a shame not to, so these circumstances have been recorded in the gong'an (Japanese *kōan*) records. We can read the way in which these teachers made use of language without getting trapped by it. They used expedient means to awaken their disciples. The spirit of not relying on words shows through these interactions, recorded and transmitted down through the generations.

Dying at the Hand of the Word

Sometimes these encounters seem so interesting and fun that we want to give them a try ourselves. Especially those practitioners who read a lot of Chan records. They are really into the practice but they like reading the gong'ans. So they play around and try to re-create the situation that happened between a teacher and a disciple. What happens when they do that? You could say they die at the hand of the word. They are bound by language so they don't get the essence, they just play around. Even on this retreat we had a couple of people play around, they read a lot of gong'ans and they thought they were enlightened. So they tried to play games with us and put on a show. After they did it they felt remorseful and at the same time we all felt very sorry for them. But actually some of them even afterwards still thought they were enlightened.

Grasp the Core

In the course of our practice we need to see the teachings as a tool. Words are not useless, it doesn't mean that we totally throw them away. But we don't rely on



Art by Venerable Chi Chern

them; we are not caught up in them. The principle is that we make use of these teachings to give us direction in our practice. If we know the principle is to not attach to them or get lost in them, then in the course of our practice we'll be able to avoid this kind of mistake. We'll be able to use these words as a tool to eventually grasp what the teachings are pointing at and truly get the essence of the Dharma. If we can understand this principle of how to study the methods then eventually through the course of applying effort in our practice we will begin to achieve some results and benefits. We will be able to gradually understand these teachings and most importantly grasp the essence of Chan.

I have to remind everyone again, in the course of your practice please work with the present circumstances of the state of your body and mind. Work with these causes and conditions and apply the appropriate

approach whether it's on retreat or at home. For example when you go back home you may try to practice but find you're exhausted; well use the appropriate method for that situation. By using the method in this way you won't feel limited by some of these things that you're learning. You won't be trapped by the particulars of these teachings because you'll have already understood the core. Grasp the core, apply it in your practice, and gradually you will understand the totality of the teachings. In this way you can avoid getting pulled off course in your practice. You'll be able to get a handle on the main principles and stick with that. This is actually very similar to the principle of using silent illumination; relax the body and mind and you will be aware of the totality, not distracted by any particulars. If you apply this principle you'll be able to steadily understand the big picture. 🌿

Huatou Chan: **Have Faith You Are Buddhas!**

— BY —

CHAN MASTER GAOFENG YUANMIAO

Introduction & Translation BY GUO GU

Chan Master Gaofeng Yuanmiao (1238–1296) is widely regarded as one of the most influential Chan masters of the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368), particularly known for his teachings on Huatou Chan. He is the central figure in the famous gong’an, “Do you have mastery of yourself when you are in a dreamless sleep?” In this article, Guo Gu has selected and translated some of Master Yuanmiao’s teachings to share with the readers of *Chan Magazine*.

Guo Gu (Dr. Jimmy Yu) began studying with Chan Master Sheng Yen in 1980. In 1991 he was ordained as a monk and became Master Sheng Yen’s personal attendant. In 1995, he had his first Chan experience, and was given permission by the master to teach Chan independently. In 2000, Guo Gu left monasticism and re-entered the lay world. He is a professor of Buddhist studies at Florida State University. He is also the founder and teacher at the Tallahassee Chan Center, and the founder of the Dharma Relief.

Right: *Portrait of Master Gaofeng Yuanmiao* by Chūan Shinkō (around 1444–1457, Japan)
Freer Gallery of Art Collection, National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institution



GAOFENG YUANMIAO (1238–1296) was arguably one of the most important and influential Yuan dynasty (1279–1368) Chan masters who lived through the fall of the Southern Song dynasty. His dharma heirs included Chan masters Zhongfeng Mingben (1263–1323), Duanyai Liaoyi (1263–1334), and two other lesser-known masters. Born into a family surnamed Xu in Wujiang, Jiangsu Province, Gaofeng Yuanmiao left home at fourteen, a year later had his head shaved, and received the full precepts the following year.¹ For two years he studied Tiantai Buddhism, then turned to Chan. He first entered Jingci Monastery to study with Duanqiao Miaolun (1201–1261), setting himself a limit of three years to practice Chan.² Making little progress, Yuanmiao went to study with Xueyan Zuqin (1216–1287), a high-profile Chan master who promoted the practice of *huatou* as a method to awakening.³ He forged a close relationship with Zuqin and had two decisive awakening experiences, both of which occurred when working on the *huatou* method. Eventually Yuanmiao became Zuqin's dharma heir after a long period of study.

Yuanmiao was known as an ascetic. Among the notable features of his biography are his retreats into the mountains for long periods of protracted self-cultivation. The first of these took place in 1266. Vowing to reach understanding, Yuanmiao went to Longxu in the Tianmu mountains near Lin'an (in present-day Zhejiang province). After having spent five years there, one night while absorbed in the wonderment from his *huatou* practice, he heard the sound of a pillow falling to the ground and experienced his final awakening. He continued to stay there for a total of nine years, living austerely and enduring harsh weather. On one occasion, there was a brutal snowstorm, and snow buried his niche. For over ten days, the road was cut off, and he could not light a fire. People assumed he must have died, but when the snow cleared, they found him sitting in meditation like a *nāga*.⁴ Shortly thereafter, Yuanmiao began to attract students in great numbers, but the Mongol invasion led by Kublai Khan forced him into another reclusion:

“In the spring of 1276,⁵ his students and disciples scattered to the four directions to avoid the army. Alone, the Master closed the gate, and sat defiantly, self-possessed. When affairs had settled and the door was opened, they saw the master like a *nāga* in the midst of snow, just as before.⁶”

Yuanmiao was unyielding in the face of social adversities and natural disasters and is often presented as a master of his environment, like the supernatural *nāgas* or “dragons” in the Buddhist scriptures. He was solitary and stern, harsh and cold, even forbidding, and had no use for social niceties.

Below is his autobiography describing his practice and insights. This is followed by excerpts from his discourse record. These writings give us a glimpse into his style of teaching on the *huatou*.

I LEFT THE HOUSEHOLD LIFE at fifteen, and by sixteen I was ordained as a monk. At eighteen, I studied the Tiantai doctrine. By twenty, I changed my robes to enter Jingci Monastery and set out three years of death date to practice Chan under Venerable Duanqiao, who gave me the huatou, “from where I came, to where shall I go?” But when I practiced this, my mind was polarized into two directions; my mind could not return to one. Also, I didn’t receive any instructions from Duanqiao on how to practice. I was held up like this for over a year, and every day I [walked around] like someone who is lost. Because I gave myself three years, I became vexed. At that time, I met dharma brother Jing from Taizhou, who said to me “Venerable Xueyan always checked on students’ practice. Why don’t you go there?” Thereafter, I joyfully brought incense with me and headed up north to seek instructions from him.

When I saw him, I paid obeisance and lit incense, but was beaten and chased out, and he shut the door on me. In tears, I returned to the sangha hall. The next day, after I finished my congee, I returned to him and inquired about what had happened before. I conveyed every experience I had earnestly, and immediately he resolved and eliminated all the illnesses [from practice] I had accumulated in the past. He had me observe the word, “Wu” and begin anew in my practice. This was like obtaining light in the midst of darkness, or like being suspended and suddenly saved. From his instructions I knew how to practice. Moreover, every day I was summoned by him to see how I was doing in my practice. Like someone traveling, every day there must be progress; it can’t be the same today and tomorrow.

Each day I entered his quarters he would ask, “How’s your practice today?” One day, because



Wu Chinese calligraphy by Venerable Chi Chern

every time I had something to say [in response to his inquiry], he didn’t ask me how I was doing. Instead, as soon as I entered, he just asked, “Who’s dragging this corpse around?” Before he even finished his sentence, he started to beat and chase me out of the room. After that, every day he would ask me this question and beat me, pressuring and pushing me to my limits.

The master was later invited to Guiyang. Before he left, he said to me, “Once I’m at the cloister, I’ll have someone fetch for you” but I never heard anything back. I accompanied dharma brother Ze to temporarily stay with his lay relatives for a while to lay down our belongings. But his relatives thought we were too young to sojourn by ourselves so kept our belongings and ordination certificates. When February came

around, we were able to convince them that monastics cannot stay with them. Consequently, we were able to pack our bags to leave for Jingshan Monastery. By mid-February, we entered the Chan Hall.

The following month, on the night of the 16th, I suddenly dreamt of Duanqiao's words in his quarters, "The myriad dharmas return to one; where does the one return to?" From these words the wonderment burst forth, everything became one pervasively whole, where east and west became indistinguishable and I'd forgotten to eat and sleep. On the sixth day morning, as I was walking in the corridor, I saw the monastic assembly exiting out of the sangha hall. Without awareness I just joined them, and we ended up at the pavilion of the three pagodas reciting the scriptures. When I looked up, I saw a portrait of Wuzu Fayan (1018–1104) with verses. The last two lines read, "One hundred years and 36,000 mornings, and it's still this same old fellow." At that time, the former question of Xueyan, "Who's dragging this corpse around" suddenly shattered – I felt like my soul and spirit had completely dispersed and exterminated, and yet came back to life, as if I had put down a hundred and twenty pounds of weight. At that time, I was twenty-four years old and had just fulfilled the third year [that I had given myself to investigate Chan].

I left for Guiyang to seek out Xueyan. Having arrived where he was at, even though I continued my practice and was able to understand all the gong'an without being deceived by anyone, whenever I opened my mouth, I felt muddled. In the midst of the day, I was not free. It felt like I owed some debts. I wanted to attend to the master for the rest of my life.

At that time, brother Ze left for another monastery and didn't stay. When the old master began teaching again, I was fortunately able to attend to him, and accompany him to Tianning Monastery. On the way there, he asked me, "Amidst the chaos of the day, are

you able to be your own master or not?" I replied, "I am able to." Then he asked, "What about in your sleep are you able to?" I said, "Yes." Then he retorted, "What about in the midst of sleep when there are no dreams or thoughts whatsoever, when there are neither seeing nor hearing, where is the master then?" When I heard that, I had no words to respond and nothing to say. He then told me, "From now on, there's no buddha to learn from, no dharma to study; there's no need to examine the teachings of the past and present. Just eat when it's time to eat and sleep when you're tired. But when you awake from sleep and feel refreshed, look into this wakefulness and ask, "Just where is this master, and how is he established?"

Even though I had conviction of these words and observed them closely, due to my dull natural aptitude, it was difficult to fathom their meaning. Following this, there was an opportunity to go to Longxu in the mountains near Lin'an [in present-day Zhejiang province]. I vowed to live like a fool and only to observe this question until I fully understood it. After five years, one night I was in the midst of this wonderment and my companion's pillow fell to the ground; suddenly, the sound shattered the great ball of wonderment. It was like leaping out of a web of an entangled net. Recollecting the gong'an of the buddhas and the ancestral masters and the differences between the ancients and the present, this is like Sizhou meeting Dasheng (628–710) [i.e., they're the same person], or like a traveler returning home. Originally, it's the same old person; without changing, the old one travels at will. This is the way to bring peace and stability to the nation, where under heaven all is good. A single moment of non-contrivance and the ten directions are all put to rest.

Below are excerpts from the *Recorded Sayings of Chan Master Gaofeng Yuanmiao*:

Prerequisites of Chan

In order to genuinely investigate Chan, you must fulfil three prerequisites: First, you must have the faculty of great faith or conviction. To be patently clear about this matter [of awakening] is like leaning against Mount Sumeru.⁷ Second, you must have great ferocious determination, like meeting the wrongful murderer of your father, and right then and there you want to cut him in half with a single strike of your sword. Third, you must have great wonderment. The feeling is like having covertly done something heinous and you're about to be exposed. If you're able to have these three essentials during the twelve time periods [24 hours of day and night], then for sure you will succeed within the timeframe you have set out to accomplish this task. There is no need to be concerned; it's like catching a turtle trapped in a jar.⁸ However, missing any one of these essentials would be like a three-legged cauldron with a broken leg – it would end up being useless. Even though it's like this, when someone has fallen into a ditch, I still need to try to save this person. Duo!

How to Steady and Persist in the Method

Regarding this matter [of practice], it's like throwing a rock into a ten thousand meters deep lake, and the rock sinks down to the bottom without interruption. If you are able to sincerely practice like this without interruption for seven days and not resolve this matter [of birth and death], then I, [Yuan]miao, shall forever plunge down and dwell in *avīci* hell.⁹

Have Faith You Are Buddhas!

Regarding this matter, there is no difference between sacred and profane, old or young, men or women, and sharp or blunt. For this reason, our teacher Śākyamuni at the site of his awakening, on the eighth night of December exclaimed, “How odd, sentient beings are replete with the wisdom and virtue of the tathāgatas!” He also said that “Mind, buddhas, and sentient beings are not distinct from one another” and that “all dharmas are equal – there are no distinctions of high or low.” Yet, for all the buddhas and ancestral masters

of the past to all the exemplars, and even all the elder venerables, who have attested and gained realization, how is it that there are those who arrived slowly or quickly, experienced it difficultly or easily? For instance, all of you present here with your own “family [karmic] affairs.”¹⁰ If you're able to suddenly revert your perfect luminosity and shine [within] to recall where you came from, some of you may have arrived here when you were quite young, some old; some of you took months to get here, while others only took days, and some even



Photo by Hong-Jun Fu

took only an instant. Still, there are those who died trying to get here. It is because your home is far or near that there is a difference of how slowly or quickly you arrive. Even so, amidst of it all, there is someone who is without a home to return to, without a path of Chan to learn, with no birth and death to relinquish, and no *nirvāṇa* to realize. This someone is prancing around freely from morning to night. Examining this person closely, Śākyamuni and Maitreya are none other than you picking up your cup or holding your bowl. How is it not like this? [Yuanmiao] hits the platform twice with his fly whisk. *Haaa! Haaa!* When you arrive, don't make any mistakes about this!

On Determination and Persistence

The myriad dharmas return to one, but where does the one return to? Wakefully latch onto this uncertainty until this wonderment reaches a point where all emotions are forgotten, and your mind has extinguished. The Golden Crow¹¹ would then soar in the sky at midnight.

If you're able to thoroughly examine into this matter by bringing your practice to its pinnacle, then it would be like plucking flowers in the sky, or like scooping out the moon in the water – there wouldn't be any place to lay your hands, nor apply yourself. Typically, when practitioners encounter obstructions, five out of ten would start beating the battle drum for retreating. They fail to realize that those [obstructions] are precisely a sign that they're about to arrive home. If you're bold and fearless, then right where you stand, where you can't put your hands on it nor can you apply yourself, go forward. Like the general Guan Yu (d. 219), who amidst hundreds and thousands of soldiers in the chaos of the battlefield, without any concerns of gain or loss, directly beheaded Yan Liang (d. 200). If you're able to be sincere and carry

yourself in this fashion, with ferocious power, then you would be able to succeed with a snap of a finger. In an instant become a sage. If you're unable to be like this, then, even if you investigate this matter until Maitreya descends, you would still only be just another venerable monk.

Wonderment

Attendant Jing: It has taken 24 years to arrive here. Being sickly, I have sought out physicians and taken lots of medicine, experiencing much hardship. It was a struggle to realize that the illness I had was difficult to treat. Later, when I went to Jingshan Monastery, one night I dreamt of master Duanqiao's medicinal pill, which lasted for six days until I was unexpectedly triggered by Xueyan's poison, causing me to disperse my soul and extinguish my spirit. I came back to life after having died. Just then, the four great elements became pliant and light, as if I put down a hundred and twenty pounds of weight. Today, I give you this medicinal pill. If you wish to take it, then take your six emotions (of joy, anger, despair, happiness, love, and

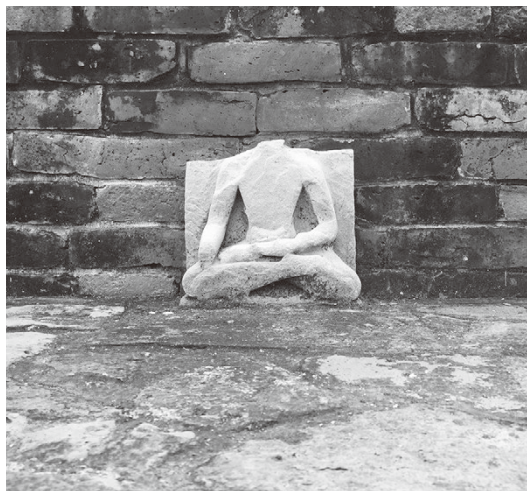


Photo by Ven. Chang Zhai

hatred) and six consciousnesses (arising from eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind), the four great elements and five aggregates, as well as the mountains and rivers and the myriad forms in all its magnitude, and smelt all of that into a single ball of wonderment, blocking your sight. No need to go to war with anything using your spears and flags. Just very quietly [bring it forth] and the whole world is at peace.

In walking there is just this ball of wonderment; sitting, there's just this ball of wonderment; putting on clothes and eating a meal are all this ball of wonderment; taking a dump or a piss are also just this ball of wonderment; seeing, hearing, perceiving, and knowing are just this ball of wonderment. Coming and going in this this ball of wonderment until this wonderment reaches a place where you're saving power – that's when you're gaining power. Even when you don't want to wonder about it, the wonderment continues; even when you don't bring it up, it persists. Stuck to this wonderment from head to toe – one pervasive whole. Not a single gap. Shake it, and it doesn't budge; avail yourself to it, and it never goes away. Luminous and potent, ever present. It's like a boat floating down the river – there's no need to use your hands [to row the oars]. This is when you're about to gain power from your practice. This is when you must earnestly bring forth the correct thought and be careful not to give rise to other thoughts. Again and again, polish this [wonderment]; again and again, wash away [everything else], until all sublime states are exhausted and the mysterious is extinguished. To the utmost, to the most subtle, like taking shelter at the tip of a hair. Solitary and lofty – motionless and unwavering; not coming, not going. When a single thought does not arise, before and after are cut off. This is where the dustlike defilements suddenly cease, and confusions are terminated. Walking you won't know you're walking; sitting you won't know you're

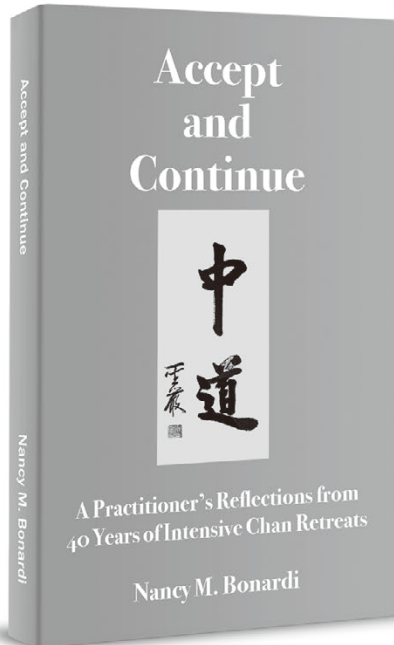
sitting; when cold you won't know it's cold; when hot, you won't know it's hot. Drinking tea, you don't know you're drinking, having a meal you're unaware that you're eating. Dull like an imbecile, like a clay statue or a wooden carving. Indifferent like a wall. Just this state is a harbinger that you're about to arrive home. You're not far from it. It is within your reach and totally obtainable. It's only a matter of time.

However, you can't, upon hearing this, get all wired up and seek after this state. Nor can you simply wait for it to happen or just let things be. You also cannot give up. Just bring forth the correct attitude. Take awakening as the standard.

In this process there are eighty-four thousand demon soldiers of Mara waiting upon you at your six senses. Every miraculous, auspicious, extraordinary, and dreadful phenomenon is your own projection. These states are born of the mind, arise from craving, and manifest through thoughts. Whatever you crave, don't follow it. If you have the slightest interest in discerning them, giving rise to even the subtlest wandering thought, then you will be enslaved by them. They will order you around – causing you to say erroneous things and think of wicked acts, like criticizing people to advance your reputation. Then the direct cause of *prajñā* will perish as a result and the seed of bodhi will never sprout. You will wallow in *samsāra* kalpa after kalpa. All of these demonic states arise from the mind. If your mind doesn't arise, there would be nothing to oppose. Tiantai [Zhiyi] has said, “The exhaustion of your ploys is the boundlessness of me not caring.” How true are these words!

Under all circumstances, just be cold and steady, pure and spotless; one thought for ten thousand years. Be a zombie, guarding your own corpse. Observe and guard this wonderment. Then this wonderment will, in its own accord, explode. Then heaven will shake, and the earth will shatter. Apply yourself this way! 🍀

1. Age fourteen is by Western reckoning; in Chinese calculation, he left home at age fifteen. For biographical information on Gaofeng Yuanmiao, see those biographies appended to his *Gaofeng Yuanmiao Chanshi Yulu* (*Recorded Sayings of Chan Master Gaofeng Yuanmiao*), in Manji Shinsan Dainihon Zokuzōkyō (Tokyo: Kokusho Kankōkai, 1975–1989), a.k.a. Xuzangjing (The Supplementary Buddhist Canon), X.70, No.1400: 698c–701b. See also his letter to Xueyan Zuqin, in which he offers a spiritual biography, X.70: 711c–712c, translated in Pei-yi Wu, *The Confucian's Progress* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 239–42. His biography is also redacted in *Jideng Lu* (*Records of the Succession of the Lamp*), X.86: 529b–530a, and *Nan-Song Yuan Ming Chanlin Sengbao Zhuan* (*Biographies of the Treasured Chan Sangha from the Southern Song to the Ming Dynasties*), X.79: 621b–622b.
2. Jingci Monastery is one of the several Chan monasteries located on Jingshan 徑山, in the northeastern part of the Tianmu range. Duanqiao Miaolun is a monk in the lineage of Wuzhun Shifan; his biography is appended to his discourse record. See *Duanqiao Miaolun Chanshi Yulu* (*Recorded Sayings of Chan Master Duanqiao Miaolun*), X.70, No.1394: 548c–573b.
3. Zuqin himself had been contemplating the character “wu” when he had his first major breakthrough. See P. Wu, *The Confucian's Progress*, 82, and *Xueyan Zuqin Chanshi Yulu* (*Recorded Sayings of Chan Master Xueyan Zuqin*), X.70: 607a. Zuqin's arguments about practice were in response to what he saw as laxity in the Chan practice of his time. On this issue, see X.70: 612c.
4. See X.70: 699b.
5. In 1276, the empresses of Southern Song surrendered to Kublai Khan of the Yuan Mongols at Lin'an. There were still some Song loyalists who established the Song state in Fuzhou, installing two emperors in Fuzhou and then Lantau Island (Hong Kong) but on March 19, 1279, the Mongols defeated the last of the Song forces at the naval Battle of Yamen.
6. See X.70: 699b. Although his immediate concern may be self-preservation, this passage suggests his retreat into the mountains was motivated by objections to Mongol rule. Such a response to displeasure with the government is well attested in the history of reclusion. For one discussion of various types of recluses, see Alan J. Berkowitz, *Patterns of Disengagement* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2000), 17–63. Yuanmiao, unlike many recluses, retreated not to avoid government service but to flee potential harm from representatives of the government.
7. Mount Sumeru is the mythological *axis mundi* of the Buddhist cosmology. It is a mountain, in the center of a great ocean, in the center of the world surrounded by four continents oriented toward the cardinal directions and eight subcontinents. It is also on a golden wheel, and it rises 80,000 (or 160,000) *yojanas* 由旬 above sea level. Surrounded by eight mountains and eight seas (and thus there are nine mountains and eight seas 九山八海; but some works list only seven mountains), and the sun and moon 日月 circle around it, with the six realms 六道 and various heavens around and above it. On its peak is Indra's heaven 帝釋天 (Trāyastriṃśa Heaven 兜率天), below this on its slopes are the Four-Quarter Kings 四天王; around are eight circles of mountains and between them the eight seas, the whole forming nine mountains and eight seas. To its south is the continent of Jambudvīpa 閻浮提, home to human beings.
8. “A turtle trapped in a jar” or *Wengzhong zoubie* 甕中走鼈 means easy, as in the Chinese expressions: 輕而易舉 (light and easy to lift), 十拿九穩 (nine chances out of ten), 易如反掌 (as easy as turning over your hand), or the English expressions: shooting fish in a barrel, a piece of cake.
9. *Avīci* hell is the hell of incessant suffering and uninterrupted scorching. In Buddhism, hell, the lowest of the six realms of existence, is divided into eight categories, with the *avīci* hell being the last and deepest of the eight hot hells, where the culprits suffer, die, and are instantly reborn to suffering, without interruption.
10. “Family affairs” or *jiaye* 家業 here refers to karmic stock.
11. Golden Crow is a mythological bird from ancient China that resides in the sun; later the term came to refer to the sun.



Accept and Continue

*A Practitioner's Reflections from
40 Years of Intensive Chan Retreats*

Nancy M. Bonardi

Nancy Bonardi's intimate account of her path of learning the Buddhadharma from Chan Master Sheng Yen and his disciples gives these teachings new life. Her articulation of her own experience expounds how the wisdom of the Buddha can deeply impact and transform us, as long as we make the commitment to practicing it wholeheartedly.

—David Listen, LMHC, and Buddhist teacher

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STREET RETREAT

— BY —

RIKKI ASHER

Rikki Asher is one of Master Sheng Yen's earliest American students; she attended the first meditation classes he gave at the Temple of Enlightenment in the Bronx, in the 1970s. She has a Masters in Fine Arts (MFA) in painting from City University of New York (CUNY), and a Doctorate in Art Education (EdD) from Columbia University. Rikki taught college classes for art education training, and though now retired, continues to work with inner-city teenagers and various adult and senior adult groups. In her teaching style Rikki combines her art and education background with meditation, mindfulness and yoga techniques. She currently volunteers at Lenox Hill Hospital in New York City, working with cardiac patients in Art by the Bedside, a project that combines art and meditation. Transcribed by Madeline Leung.



HOMELESS

I HAVE LIVED IN NEW YORK CITY for all of my life. At times, it seems as if the homeless have always been around. Some hold cups and ask for offerings. Some exhibit depression or embarrassment. They usually seem isolated. They frequently appear demoralized and dehumanized. Some are barefoot or wear threadbare sneakers. Their clothes are often tattered and inappropriate for inclement weather. Their skin is often ashy and their hair is typically unkempt. Some are missing teeth. They are frequently hunched over, even when they sit. They sometimes give off an odor of urine.

When I encounter a homeless person, I feel immediate empathy. I silently wish them safety and peace. I feel compassion for their struggles and curious about who they are, who they were, and what brought them to live this way. Do they have family, I wonder? Will a few dollars help? Will a sandwich? I once bought a homeless man a coffee and he became angry, telling me he didn't want it because coffee causes diarrhea. It was cold and I assumed it would warm him. This was a time when my best intentions were not very useful. However, I almost always feel for their struggle and daily suffering. Making eye contact, saying hello are things I feel are important and I practice them with almost everyone. If a homeless person seems like they want to talk, I stay for a few minutes and do so. I believe it reaffirms their humanity.

I was drawn to Buddhism through my own suffering, and constant difficulties I experienced as a child, teenager and young adult. Growing up, I witnessed numerous deaths and violence. The death of my parents at a young age represented a loss in family, love and security. Buddhism offered compassion and stability through meditation, the teachings of impermanence, and loving kindness, including a deep understanding of life and death.

As a teenager, I walked daily on my way to school to the subway from Canon Heights, on Fort



Independence Street, where I lived, to the 231st Street and Broadway Station. On the way, I would pass a low terracotta brick building with a moon shaped door, which was closed whenever I went by. The door intrigued me – what lay beyond it? – as did the very large gold Chinese characters on the upper part of the facade and the building's architecture. One day, out of curiosity, I rang the doorbell. A Chinese man of about fifty years old with a crew cut, dressed in a dark blue suit, opened the door, and gently said, "Can I help you?" I asked if this was an abandoned Chinese restaurant. He explained that this was the Buddhist Temple of Great Enlightenment and the Buddhist Association of the United States (BAUS), which was what the Chinese characters meant. He invited me in and showed me several framed posters of Buddha Śākyamuni's life that hung on the walls. I was struck by the cleanliness and spaciousness of the place and the rows of meditation cushions on the floor. He explained that there was a new Buddhist teacher from Japan who was starting meditation classes, and would I want to join? I didn't think I had anything to lose and signed up. This would be a life-changing event.

Classes began on August, 28, 1976. The Dharma talk that Master Sheng Yen gave impressed me so much that I have continued studying Dharma for forty-eight years. My life embraces Buddhist concepts, which include cultivating compassion and loving kindness, patience, and not causing harm to others or myself. I am always finding new venues where these concepts can be explored.

A Different Retreat

In 2022 I read about a multi-day retreat which Roshi Brian Joshin Byrnes of the Vermont-based Bread Loaf Mountain Zen Community planned to lead on the streets of Washington, DC. I immediately wanted to be part of it. As a Buddhist, I'd participated in countless retreats, in this country as well as India, Nepal, and Taiwan. These were usually held indoors with facilities designed for that purpose: a meditation hall with pads and cushions, sleeping areas, bathrooms, a kitchen, and dining hall. Even before joining this one, I realized it would be very different. I knew that the downtown streets of our nation's capital, like many streets in my own hometown, were filled with indigent, homeless people. And I knew that this retreat would lack the relative comforts and safety of the others I had joined, putting me directly in the midst of a human hardship and suffering I had observed and wondered about, but often found difficult to understand and powerless to affect. I had, of course, read about homelessness in newspapers, social media, and magazines and heard about it from social workers and health care professionals. But I wanted to bear witness, to better understand its reality, to test the limits of my empathy and perhaps most importantly, to see what the Buddhist practices that have had such a deep impact on my own life, would mean in a vastly different context.

I overcame whatever doubts I had about being on a street retreat among homeless people in the heart of an urban center and committed to it. That it would be under the guidance of a prominent Zen teacher was also encouraging. Brian Joshin Byrnes is a Zen priest and a student of Joan Halifax Roshi; she was a student of Bernie Glassman's who also trained another priest named Genro Roshi. It was Genro who introduced Joshin Roshi to the idea of leading street retreats. Joshin participated in a number of street retreats, and then began to lead them himself. Out of that process emerged a street ministry program where he worked regularly at a drop-in shelter in Santa Fe. Joshin did bi-weekly meditation there and at two or three other sites for people experiencing social alienation because of mental health issues, addiction, poverty, or the intersection of all three. He keeps street retreats as a regular part of his practice. He continues to value that experience of plunging into the places that I've alienated out of my heart and my own perception, my own sense of who I think I am.

Bearing Witness

Joshin Roshi designed a schedule that acted as a container for what was happening on the streets, and within ourselves. We followed this program daily. Prior to the retreat we were introduced to these specific guidelines: Do not shower, shave, or wash your hair for five days prior to the retreat. Wear old clothes, as many layers as appropriate for the time of year, and do not bring any change of clothes for the duration, except possibly an extra pair of socks, and a change of underwear. Bring a poncho or a large plastic garbage bag, in case it rains. Wear good, but not new walking shoes. Bring one piece of government issued photo identification. Bring a one-dollar bill, but do not bring any additional money, illegal drugs, alcohol, weapons,



Art by Rikki Asher

or cell phones. Do not wear any jewelry, including earrings, bracelets and watches.

The Bread Loaf Retreat happened over the course of four days and three nights. There were seven of us. Each participant brought only the clothes we wore, a small bag, a poncho, a blanket, and any medications we needed. Without a phone, money, soap, or toothbrush, we witnessed street life as it is. We met for the first time in front of St. John's Episcopal Church, the same Church where President Donald Trump held up a Bible one summer and ordered peaceful protesters to be removed with tear gas. We then walked past the upscale stores, tall, shiny buildings, gourmet restaurants, and manicured public spaces that line many streets in the nation's capital, which represent one side of the city. Our first destination was McPherson Square, across the street from the United States Capitol Building, which represents another side. It is lined with tents, occupied by homeless people, which provide them with

shelter, some privacy, space for quiet conversation, and a safe place to sleep.

Sleeping on Streets

On the first evening, the retreatants and I bedded down in a circle, under a tree in this square. A flattened piece of a cardboard box and a blanket did not protect me against the cold. It began to drizzle. The square got quiet. Ducks waded in puddles nearby and their sounds amused me. At first, I experienced a calming sensation, which I thought of as a baptism. As the rain got heavier, however, I wondered if we would stay. My calmness began to ebb. Soon, Joshin encouraged us to find a drier place. We walked to the nearest Metro station which was clean and warm. Unfortunately, the Metro closes at midnight, so we had to leave as the gates went down. Reminding myself of Buddhist impermanence, I felt stable again.

We walked a few more blocks and settled on grates in the sidewalk. The steam heat from the grates warmed us temporarily before it went off at around three AM. This meant we had to move again. A few blocks away, we found a scaffold. Safety lights hung from above it, which were on all night. They glared directly into our eyes, but we did our best to settle in. Some of us slept, snored, or moved around. I couldn't sleep. My eyes were wide open as I watched the others. I stared at the inky blue sky, waiting for the light of day to appear. A chill went through my bones, which added to the pain I felt as if my hip bone dug into the concrete, through the cardboard. My mind kept repeating the words, when will light come? The night felt unending. I kept thinking of other street people living in tents on the cold ground. I could not find acceptance in my situation. During the first few days of this retreat, the pain and discomfort of living in the streets had me feeling that I had lost my sense of what practicing Buddhism meant. At sunup, however, I was better. We took turns using the clean bathroom facilities in Starbucks to wash up and relieve ourselves. Afterwards, we walked to a local soup kitchen for a warm breakfast in an old church. We then headed back to McPherson Square.

Joshin led a thirty-minute morning meditation session in the square. After sitting in silence, the group was invited to reflect on how we were doing: mentally, emotionally, physically, and with our practice. Mostly, we talked about experiences we had during the previous night and day. Finding a nearby place to urinate was an issue shared by myself and the other woman in our group. During the night we accompanied one another to a local port-o-san. As funky as it was, it provided relief, and we were grateful for it. These counsels and closures were useful. As participants, we felt held by Joshin Roshi, as he encouraged us to process what we were experiencing.

After sharing, we split into pairs, and found a corner in order to beg for money. One challenge for me was knowing what to say to people as they walked by. I asked a homeless man, whom I met at the church breakfast, for advice. The three words he shared, "Got any change?" seemed practical and succinct. I stood in front of a Starbucks and held out a plastic cup I'd taken from a trash can. It seemed clean enough. "Got any change?" I started asking. People often walked by quickly, others were curious and several stopped to talk. Some gave me dollars, while some others gave change. Most who spoke told me they only had credit cards. A young man dropped a twenty-dollar bill in my cup, which truly surprised me. It was the first example of the unexpected acts of kindness, compassion, and generosity we would witness as the retreat unfolded. On that one afternoon, the seven of us raised over one thousand dollars, money which was donated to one of the organizations that prepared food in a soup kitchen and another that donated blankets.

Feeling This Practice Was Lost

On the second night, we returned to the scaffold and each of us made our beds of blankets and cardboard as we had the night before. Aware of the pain in my side and the cold in my bones, I was once more unable to fall asleep, or quiet my mind. Once again, I stared at the dark sky and could not wait for it to turn to day. Thinking about how my discomfort added to my suffering, my mind was making things worse. A basic Buddhist expression teaches us that pain is inevitable, and suffering is optional. Forgetting that, it felt like my practice was lost. Being in a meditative and sharing community helped. We talked about begging and the impact it had on us. Most people had a relatively positive experience, though some had difficulty asking for money. The experience of

pooling both our cash and our reflections improved my morale.

On the third night, we returned to the spot under the lights, as we were worried it might rain again. I realized that my meditation practice was eluding me, that whenever night came, my body was cold and sore, and I longed for rest. Unable to practice, I forgot to observe my breath or notice uncomfortable sensations as impermanent. At one point, I looked up at the sky and thought of Śākyamuni who sat under the Bodhi tree all night. I then remembered the teaching of acceptance and impermanence, that this pain shall pass, but I was still unable to sleep. The difference on this night was that I relaxed in the pain and stopped holding onto the tension. I suddenly felt joy, just being there, with the others, wishing that they were comfortable as well. Pain was inevitable, suffering was optional. When I remembered this, I felt compassion towards the pain, and myself. This led to acceptance in the sense that I changed my attitude and stopped thinking about lying on top of my cardboard bed on the cold concrete as torture. I understood that it was impermanent, and it was not just the body that was causing my pain and longing for a comfortable resting place. It was my mind as well, which had forgotten about suffering being optional. I felt emotionally connected to the others sleeping on the sidewalk and wished them comfort and freedom from whatever their suffering may have been. It sparked more compassion towards them as well as to all those who would not be able to leave the streets in four days.

Finding My Practice

After a while, the sun appeared. I was finally at peace as I had stopped waiting and the grasping subsided. Grateful to witness this change, I recalled talking with some homeless people in Macpherson Square, who'd experienced similar feelings of finding peace with the

cold by coping with what is. I bore witness within myself that accepting and letting go of suffering can bring joy. Rediscovering this very old teaching, I found my practice.

Upon coming home, I understood that even though we were on the street for four days, clearly we were not homeless. We bore witness to those who are homeless, and gained an awareness of what it is like to live on the street, and not have resources. I noticed that people on the street did not have many hygienic materials. At one soup kitchen, they had a table with toothbrushes, toothpaste, soap, shampoo, condoms, razors, etc. and people were allowed to take as many as they wanted. So upon coming home, I had a deeper understanding that homeless people don't have easy ways to clean their teeth. So I decided to distribute toothbrushes and toothpaste to any homeless person I encounter (I volunteer at Lenox Hill hospital, doing meditation with the cardiac patients, and the director lets me take as many toothbrushes as I want.) I am aware not to say, "Oh, here's a toothbrush!" because I think that's really intrusive. So rather I ask them. I say, "Hello, how's it going? Would you like a toothbrush and toothpaste?" Nine times out of ten, they say yes, and they're very happy to have it.

Beyond the need for more compassion that this world so sorely lacks, I do not presume here to offer solutions to the growing problem of homelessness in our society. Nor did I experience homelessness as it is lived by millions of people throughout the world. What I gained was a greater understanding of my own practice, that opened a deeper sense of self-awareness. It is important to acknowledge that every individual's experience may vary. My palms are joined to Roshi Joshin for his wise leadership and compassion. Specific benefits of this Zen Buddhist Street Retreat may depend on the individual's commitment to the practice, circumstances and other factors. 🌿



Art by Rikki Asher

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Calming and Contemplation

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