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Mindfulness

While there are situations in life that one must deal with, when we have correct mindfulness we resolve them not with vexation, not with anger, hatred, or suspicion, but simply in an objective manner that is appropriate and necessary. Even though we experience events and things as constantly changing, we are mindful of the unchanging principle underlying phenomena. Thus the changing nature of events would not cause us vexation.



CHAN MASTER SHENG YEN
Chan Meditation Center, November 4, 1993

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On Mindfulness of Birth and Death

BY

CHAN MASTER SHENG YEN

In 1993, Master Sheng Yen began a series of commentaries on selected letters written by Master Dahui Zonggao (1089–1163) to his disciples. In a letter to lay disciple Luo Mong Bi, Dahui speaks about mindfulness of birth and death as a hallmark of a Chan practitioner who faces the daily onslaught of phenomena from the standpoint of the mind’s grasp of principle, or “inner truth.” Dahui’s advice still resonates today as wise counsel during a time when we may well ask: “How does mindfulness of birth and death empower us to deal with a world in upheaval and chaos while liberating ourselves from vexation?” (Lecture delivered at the Chan Meditation Center, November 4, 1993, translated by Ming Yee Wang, transcribed by Bruce Rickenbacher, edited by Ernest Heau.)



Chan Master Sheng Yen DDM Archive Photo

TODAY, I WILL COMMENT ON a key passage from a letter by Master Dahui Zonggao in response to layman Luo Mong Bi.

By keeping mindful of the matter of birth and death, your mental technique is already correct. Once the mental technique is correct, then you won't need to use effort to clear your mind as you respond to circumstances in your daily activities. When you don't actually try to clear out your mind, then you won't go wrong. Since you don't go wrong, correct mindfulness stands out alone. When correct mindfulness stands out alone, inner truth adapts to phenomena. When inner truth adapts to events and things, events

and things come to fuse in inner truth. When phenomena fuse with inner truth, you save power. When you feel the savings, this is the empowerment of studying the path. In gaining power, you save unlimited power. In saving power, you gain unlimited power.¹

In his letter to Luo Bong Mi, when Dahui refers to “*the matter of birth and death*,” he is not just talking about our birth and death in a given lifetime; he is also talking about continuing in our cycle of birth and death until all our vexations are terminated. Thus, if the cycle of birth and death continues, we are not our own master, and not being our own master, we will be prone to creating trouble for ourselves and others. Therefore, as practitioners we should be aware that until we eradicate vexations and attain great enlightenment, we are not finished with the matter of birth and death.

When phenomena fuse with inner truth, you save power. When you feel the savings, this is the empowerment of studying the path.

Here, empowerment means to benefit from one's practice. The premise is that if you are constantly aware of birth and death in the sense I explained, then all the various conditions of the passage follow. Eventually you get to the point when “*phenomena fuse with inner truth*.” At this point you can save power and thus get the benefit of practice; by saving power you gain unlimited power.

Ordinary people are not even aware of their own vexations. As a result they busy their minds with ideas and schemes that primarily benefit themselves. Dahui would call this incorrect mental technique. Someone who wants to make the world a better place is also busy with ideas, but such ideas would

not be considered incorrect mental technique. So a mental technique can be self-centered or it can be benevolent.

Chan Master Linji Yixuan (d. 866) said that seeking and rejecting belong to the realm of birth and death. In other words, if you seek enlightenment or reject vexations, such desires are still in the realm of birth and death. But by being always mindful of birth and death, you will have left behind the actions of birth and death. At that stage, it is not possible that you still have an improper mental technique. If you are always mindful of neither seeking nor rejecting, which are the causes of vexations, ultimately you will resolve the matter of life and death; it is the same as holding the great matter of birth and death in your mind.

A person who is not yet enlightened but who has this awareness would know that vexations are part of the activities of birth and death and would avoid them. If you understand what I have said up to now, you will understand what Dahui means when he says:

Once the mental technique is correct, then you won't need to use effort to clear your mind as you respond to circumstances in your daily activities.

The idea is that if we make a deliberate effort to discard vexations, this is itself vexation. For example, someone who is being criticized might wonder, “What can I do to fight back?” But if you are always mindful of birth and death, it will not be necessary to fight back when criticized. Or, someone might wonder, “How come so-and-so is well off and I am so poor?” But if you have true mindfulness, you don't have to come up with all these kinds of ideas, thoughts and maneuvers.

This does not mean that we should simply accept whatever happens to us. Some situations resolve

by themselves without our intervention. However, there are times when we need to engage a situation, but our mind should not be vexed; it should simply have an attitude of dealing with the situation. If you let yourself become embroiled in a mess, then you will have vexations. But if you can just deal with it very objectively, as if it had nothing to do with you, there is no need for vexation. It is not that you are trying to get rid of vexations, but that there are no vexations to begin with.

When you don't actively try to clear out your mind, then you won't go wrong.

Here, “*then you won't go wrong*” really means that there is nothing that is inherently evil or improper. If you try to reject certain things it is because you see them as bad, but if in your mind there is no need to get rid of anything; then for you there is no discriminating between right and wrong, good or bad. So, when you are not discriminating between good and bad, and all that remains is correct mindfulness, then your mind is very much alive, free, and unlimited.

What is correct mindfulness? Correct mindfulness means being in accord with whatever situation we may be in. We do not try to second-guess or discriminate. For example, if while speaking to someone we wonder if they are telling the truth, this added thought is not correct mindfulness, even if in fact they were lying. If we are simply attentive to what they are saying without giving rise to suspicion, that would be correct mindfulness.

While there are situations in life that one must deal with, when we have correct mindfulness we resolve them not with vexation, not with anger, hatred, or suspicion, but simply in an objective manner that is appropriate and necessary. So, that would also be considered as correct mindfulness.

When correct mindfulness stands out alone, inner truth adapts to phenomena.

Here, it is better to understand “inner truth” as meaning “principle,” referring to that which is unchanging. “Inner truth” suggests a dichotomy with “outer truth” and in Buddhism there is no such distinction. But rather, the phenomena that we see are part of the unchanging truth, and this is what I mean here by principle. In other words, when we have correct mindfulness, even though we experience events and things as constantly changing, we are mindful of the unchanging principle underlying phenomena. Thus the changing nature of events would not cause us vexation. So even in a difficult situation, when we abide in correct mindfulness, we can see the unchanging principle with the changing, and we will not be so perplexed.

When inner truth adapts to events and things, events and things come to fuse with inner truth.

Again we should read “inner truth” as referring to the unchanging principle which adapts to changing events. At this point, principle and phenomena have completely merged. If we put into use Dahui’s statement here, then principle and phenomena merge into each other. Now there arises this question: Can we also say that phenomena and phenomena merge into each other? It seems as if we cannot note any difference at all. One might say that eating a meal is the same as not eating a meal. We can also say they are different but connected. They are capable of merging into each other, but they are not the same. To use another analogy, all the waves in the ocean – this wave, that wave, they are all made of water. In that sense they are the same and they merge into each other. But from the perspective of space and

time one wave is different from another wave. They are not identical in every respect.

For the same reason, the money in my wallet is not yours and the money in your pocket is not mine. So, we should not just get caught up on the idea that since all phenomena merge into each other, we should not be able to notice any difference. That would not be correct thinking. So everything we encounter in daily life will be considered as events and things. These are the changing phenomena. If we are at that point, then whatever changing phenomena we encounter, we also see in them the unchanging principle. In that case, when phenomena in the form of events and objects, and principle as the inner truth have completely interpenetrated, then there is nothing else for us to do; there is no need to seek or to discard anything.

And that is the meaning of saving power, of having energy, because by that point you have completely removed any burden from your mind. You do not have any psychological burden. This does not mean that from that point forward you don’t have to eat, you don’t have to wear clothes, or you don’t need a livelihood. Those have to do with your daily life. But this “saving power” refers to the mental state when there is no burden on your mind. When you get to this point in your practice of merging phenomena and principle then you are saving power. It is also at this point that you have gotten the benefit of practicing the Dharma of Chan.

So this idea of saving power is important in our practice. It can be used in our daily life, especially when we practice with diligence. This attitude of saving power is very important when practicing the huatou method, where one continuously asks a question that seems unanswerable. Thus, by saving power, we gain the power of wisdom and we also gain the power of liberation.



Photo by Luca Baggio

Student: Is emptiness the unchanging principle?

Master Sheng Yen: Yes, you can understand it that way. Try it. So, have you gotten it or not gotten it? Grasp it. Try to grasp it.

Student: Is that also oneness?

Master Sheng Yen: It is neither one nor many, and it is literally not two. To speak of oneness or being unitary is mistaken. To speak of two or many is also a mistake. To speak of this unchanging principle as emptiness, yes, you can understand it that way. But if you hold on to that emptiness, then that also is incorrect. True emptiness is not separate from existence.

Student: What is correct mindfulness in this situation?

Master Sheng Yen: Correct mindfulness is very lively and free from vexation. It is not that you do not have any thoughts; rather, whatever situation you are dealing with, you don’t try to second-guess it. You don’t come up with all kinds of thoughts that end up causing you to be perplexed. 🌿

1. Master Dahui Zonggao, *Swampland Flowers: Letters and Lectures of Zen Master Ta Hui*, Translated by Christopher Cleary, (New York: Grove Press, 1977).



Corona Pandemic 2020

— BY —
MAX KÄLIN

Max Kälin, a Dharma heir of Chan Master Sheng Yen, has decades of experience in science, engineering, medicine and Dharma. He is a former professor in earth sciences at the university level. He is also a medical doctor, the head physician of a medical center with family practice, walk-ins and emergencies (where he currently works about eighty hours per week). With this diverse and dedicated background, Max Kälin counsels us on how we as practitioners can understand the root causes of the current pandemic, and how we should rely on the Dharma to find our way to a kinder future. This article is edited by Michael Krieger.



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Prologue

THIS ESSAY GIVES AN OVERVIEW of the 2020 corona pandemic from a science, medicine and Dharma perspective. Scientific knowledge is currently advancing at such a pace that results from yesterday may need updating today. This is the nature of the scientific process in general, but the pace of scientific discoveries relating to the pandemic seems to be even faster than usual. Many scientific results are provisional. The same holds for medicine, but at a lesser pace, because there are, as of this writing (July 2020), no specific therapies available to combat the COVID-19 causing virus. The treatments empirically rely on proven ways to support and stabilize. Dharma is also evolving in subtle ways, but much slower. All efforts by man undergo change.

Science

June Dalziel Almeida (1930–2007)^{1,2} in 1966 identified a previously unknown group of viruses. She, a pioneer in immune electron microscopy³, found them to have crown-like spikes on their surfaces. The physician David Tyrrell (1925–2005) suggested the name corona.

Imagine a virus that has just succeeded infecting a human. The human is now host and the virus is the guest. Without a host to manipulate to match its needs the virus cannot exist. The first stage of an infection is called incubation, a period free of symptoms. Next follows the latent period, the phase between incubation and transmission of the disease to others. Until symptoms occur, or a test proves the disease to be present, the germ can jump ship undetected.

Imagine this human to infect two others, who again will infect two, and so on, a mushrooming

process. This number of humans that are infected on average from a single individual (here two), is called the basic reproduction number⁴, R_0 . It often is around two, but it can be more than ten as observed for example in measles. This is the reason that measles spreads fast in an unvaccinated population. If there is no or little immunity, as when the settlers brought smallpox to the indigenous people of America, entire communities can die, ending existence for both, host and germ. However, more common is the development of some immunity. When a person gets sick, antibodies will be developed. If the germ cannot improve its infectivity through change, it will eventually run out of welcoming places. Most places it tries to land, a defensive army of immunological molecules and cells will be already waiting. This leads to herd immunity⁵. Sooner or later the disease will taper off. On a world scale this process has led to the eradication of two important diseases, smallpox and rinderpest.

Herd immunity is a situation where the many with immunity “protect” the few without. It is not that the few cannot get sick, it is that the virus has a hard time to encounter a susceptible individual as they are getting more and more scarce. In other words, if all individuals that are encountered are immune, the disease has no place to go to and will eventually die out. Herd immunity also “protects” people refusing vaccines as long as their numbers are relatively small compared to the vaccinated population. In such a situation, their selfish position has no immediate consequences.

Now to the corona situation, the COVID-19 (Corona Virus Disease of 2019) pandemic caused by the virus SARS-CoV-2. Science and medicine are still learning. Today’s knowledge may need an update tomorrow. With this in mind, let’s continue with a few preliminary observations:

Most populations on earth screened show 10%–20% of the people to have antibodies. Herd immunity requires 70%–90%. Certainly, we are far from a protective immunity. We also do not know whether the observed immunity lasts. The epidemic as such can be modelled mathematically well⁶. In addition, epidemiological experience leads us to expect subsequent waves of the disease. My guess for the arrival of the second wave in Europe and North America is August 2020.

What can we do?

Science has no equal when it comes to explaining the physical world. Thus, explaining to others why the scientific method and its body of knowledge is extremely useful – as for example elucidating the mechanics of a pandemic – may help acceptance of science as an important method to lessen the consequences of ignorance in general. Non-scientists may observe what contribution science has made over more than two millennia, not only in its contribution to pure knowledge, but also in terms of the personal sacrifice some scientists made, as well as the trust that science remedies its own shortcomings as time passes (by applying the scientific method).

Medicine

The name SARS-CoV-2 needs some explanation: SARS stands for **S**evere **A**cute **R**espiratory **S**ndrome. Often the symptoms are not severe or altogether absent. Such individuals can spread the disease unnoticed. There are also superspreaders which are individuals who are much more likely to infect others, compared with a typical infected person. Being a superspreader depends on many factors such as excreting a higher than normal number of viruses during the time they are infectious or simply individuals with many social contacts. SARS-CoV-2 is

similar to SARS-CoV-1 (2002–2004) and to MERS-CoV (2012). All are zoonotic, a term used to describe diseases that are transmissible from animals to humans, with bats the probable reservoir for SARS and dromedaries for MERS.

The vehicles for transmission are respiratory droplets, roughly 10 µm (micrometers) in size, able to travel more than 5 meters. Firstly, the respiratory tract is infected and the mucus becomes hard to clear. Secondly, it may affect small blood vessels. This is important because depending which organ the blood vessels supply, there may be complications for that organ, like the heart, the brain or any other organ.

There is still no specific medication for COVID-19. There are medications for relief of symptoms and intensive care methods for stabilization. Mainly it is “heal yourself,” the immune system and the general resilience shouldering the burden. The search for specific remedies is in high gear, monoclonal antibodies may be a possibility. This effort is important because there is still no vaccine in sight. Developing a vaccine is complicated, first deciding which part of the virus to target, then testing for safety and immune response, and finally testing for stability and effectiveness of this response. In short, an effort that takes six months or more.

Today’s case fatality rates, deaths divided by number of confirmed cases, are around 5%. For individuals with conditions like diabetes, heart disease or old age, this number may reach 50%.

The case fatality rates for annual influenza is around 0.1%. Influenza viruses often cause primarily a viral pneumonia. Although there are no specific remedies, there is an effective vaccination. This vaccination needs annual updates because the influenza virus is able to mutate and change its recognition signature (antigen). Sometimes the changes are so extensive that much of the immune protection is

lost, causing pandemics like in 1918 with more deaths than caused by World War I. How SARS-CoV-2 is changing and adapting is mostly unknown. There is evidence for one mutation, D614G, unknown at the beginning of 2020 but to dominate the world six months later⁷. This phenomenon may help or burden the effort to find vaccines.

Derek K. Chu (et al.)⁸ and C. Raina MacIntyre and Quanyi Wang⁹ describe risk reduction of infection with SARS-CoV-2 due to physical distance, face mask and eye protection. They estimate a reduction of 82% given a distance of 1 meter, 67% given a surgical mask, 96% given a respirator mask, and 78% for eye protection. Increasing distances by another meter leads to risk reductions by about a half. From this it follows that a distance of 2 meters combined with a surgical mask leads to an infection risk of about 3%. This estimate is important for two reasons: First, this number, although not very accurate, is small. Second, it means we have to tolerate some significant risk of contracting COVID-19.

What can I do?

Respect the evidence for social distancing and wearing face masks. Know that a residual risk for



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disease persists. Know there is no cure yet and no vaccination. Practice equanimity, there is no other choice.

Dharma

Dharma looks at processes from the viewpoint of causes and conditions. The immediate cause of the pandemic is the SARS-2 corona virus. The conditions are also clear. Without a global network of fast and extensive human transport by air, SARS-2 would have jumped from human to human only locally. Instead of becoming a pandemic it would have remained a local epidemic centered around Wuhan.

The current view is that the virus came originally from bats but passed through an intermediary animal before infecting humans. The virus was likely first picked up at the live animal market in Wuhan, where live animals are sold or killed and sold. Through such markets and their modes of operation the virus made it into the human population. Were we not willing to cause and tolerate vast animal suffering, quite likely no epidemic would have started.

Why are we cruel? Why do we want a global conveyor belt system to take us anywhere and anytime? Dharma looks at us the way we are, beings of greed, hate and ignorance, the three poisons, ignorance being the root cause. I want a shirt from Vietnam, and tea from Japan, and I want to go shopping in London and... and... and... – unfortunately no end in sight. No wonder money and engineering tries to make this global village idea a reality. The consequence is consumption way beyond the carrying capacity of earth with an associated, massive dissipation of energy. This dissipation is a significant contribution to climatic change. Importantly, the consequences of COVID-19 pale in comparison to the consequences of climatic change.

What can I do?

I can look carefully at what I need and what I want. I can look at my wants, how they are triggered, how they grow. I can act on my wants and buy that magnificent hat, or I can choose not to act. Unfortunately it is not that simple. Chan Master Sheng Yen, teaching in New York, attracted students from all over the planet, me being one of them. I would have said: "I have to go to New York, I cannot miss this life opportunity to learn from such an extraordinary teacher. This is very important." To be precise, what I mean is: my "I" is so important. Imagine me sitting in the plane to New York next to a traveler who simply wants to visit New York for tourism. In both cases it is the "I" that wants. I could not have claimed that my wanting is different from the wanting of the other traveler. We may have different motives, but we have the same kind of "I" that wants.

Lead a simple life, practice the Dharma, and the "I" will become less demanding. If we all do that the global conveyor belt of transport will shrink and future corona viruses will have less opportunity to hitch a ride.

Epilogue

Respect the findings of science. We have no better method to understand the way things are in the physical world. Understanding the world can help to lessen suffering (*duḥkha*) immensely. Respect the efforts of medicine. Although there is no cure we have many ways to protect and support. Imagine a world where this body of knowledge and skill is not maintained and developed – this world would be very harsh. Practice the Dharma, practice equanimity.

This essay has been carefully reviewed by Michael Krieger, scientist and Dharma student. I very much appreciate his valuable contribution. 🍀

1. J. E. Banatvala, "Almeida [*née* Hart], June Dalziel," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (accessed June 16, 2020) <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/99332>
2. Denise Gellene, "Overlooked No More: June Almeida, Scientist Who Identified the First Coronavirus," *The New York Times*, May 10, 2020, Obituaries, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/08/obituaries/june-almeida-overlooked-coronavirus.html>
3. Scientific progress is sometimes tool driven, like in case of immune electron microscopy, it made discoveries possible no other method was able to do.
4. This concept we mainly owe to the physicist Robert May (1936-2020).
5. Herd immunity and R_0 are related: Consider p to be the proportion of the population to be immune, then R_e may be replaced by the effective part:

$$R_e = R_0 (1 - p)$$

If $R_e < 1$, then the disease will taper off. Setting $R_e = 1$ yields the critical proportion of the population needed for herd immunity, the herd immunity threshold:

$$P_{\text{critical}} = 1 - 1 / R_0$$

6. Gassmann, F., "Mathematische Modelle für die Corona-Epidemie," *Naturforschende Gesellschaft in Zürich (NGZH)*, Vierteljahrsschrift 2 (2020): 12–15, https://www.ngzh.ch/media/vjs/165_2_12-15.pdf
7. N. D. Grubaugh, W.P. Hanage, A.L. Rasmussen. "Making Sense of Mutation: What D614g Means for the COVID-19 Pandemic Remains Unclear," *Cell* (2020), (accessed June 12, 2020) <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cell.2020.06.040>
8. Derek K. Chu et al., "Physical Distancing, Face Masks, and Eye Protection to Prevent Person-to-Person Transmission of SARS-CoV-2 and COVID-19: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis," *The Lancet* Vol. 395, No. 10242 (June 2020): 1973–1987, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)31142-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)31142-9)
9. C. Raina MacIntyre and Quanyi Wang, "Physical Distancing, Face Masks, and Eye Protection for Prevention of COVID-19," *The Lancet* Vol. 395, No. 10242 (June 2020): 1950–1951, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)31183-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)31183-1)



Do Not Invest in Fear, Hatred, or Ignorance

BY

GILBERT GUITIERREZ



Photo by Ven.Chang Hu

Gilbert Gutierrez is an attorney practicing in Riverside, California. He is also a Dharma Heir of Chan Master Sheng Yen with over forty years of experience in meditation, various martial arts, and Chi Gong. He gives introductory and advanced Dharma talks and leads retreats at DDMBA centers throughout the United States, and also gives weekly classes at his own group in Riverside, California. His website www.riversidechan.org includes a lively "meet up" site and a weekly Dharma Talk podcast. Gilbert teaches in a very casual and accessible yet deep manner, drawing on everyday life situations as well as on the works of great masters.

CERTAINLY, THESE ARE INDEED STRANGE and troubled times that we are experiencing. Like Charles Dickens wrote in *A Tale of Two Cities* “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair...”

The quote was written one hundred and sixty-nine years ago. It stands as a testament that the world is in constant flux. Now the fate of this world is a mixture of good things happening, bad things happening and neutral things happening. Certainly, the present conditions in the world are at best threatening and can be fatal, whether from COVID-19 or a knee on the back of the neck. These are the worst of times.

We generally believe that the way we think about ourselves is how we actually are. We cannot distinguish between our thoughts and the reality of who we are. If we're feeling negative, we don't see anything good about ourselves. When we're in a good mood, even a shortcoming is adorable. This projection happens so quickly that we don't usually recognize it. But this subtle feeling is what the passage above calls “thought.” So when you feel something within, you should recognize it but don't reify, identify, and solidify it into thing. Definitely don't build a whole narrative around it. This is the meaning of practicing “no-thought” amid thoughts. It's learning to have a healthier relationship with our thoughts, instead of being conditioned by them.

Yet the human spirit is resilient and there are those who rise to the occasion and serve selflessly, offering aid and comfort to others in spite of the dangers of contact. There are those who take to the streets to protest in a boiling kettle echoing the years of frustration, pain, death, and anguish. Then there

are those who take advantage to loot the stores of the rich. And the rich white communities now pay attention. “Can you hear me now!” shouted a protestor. Yet in the midst of protests some police choose to needlessly use unreasonable force against protestors. The difference now is it is caught on video and swift action is taken against the offending officers.

Likewise, the response to COVID-19 also reflects one's heart. Some people are staying at home practicing social distancing. Then some people are partying in clubs, taverns, at the beach without a mask! Latest results show that there was a spike in cases after the Memorial Day holiday, and again after the Independence Day holiday. Was this unexpected? And now it seems that wearing a mask has become a political statement. How does that make any sense? Some beer pubs are refusing service to patrons who wear a mask. Go figure this development.

In these troubled times we must take solace that the world has seen adversities before. The world has seen plague, war, famine and injustice. We know that cause and conditions never fail. The solution to our present strifes are to use wisdom, and compassion to be part of the solution. In my youth, in the sixties, the times were troubled and in all of the tumult Jackie De Shannon sang “what the world needs now is love sweet love” – this great love of *karuna*, this love of compassion.

Recently in my neighborhood Nextdoor (social networking service) forum there were fights between neighbors with ultra right-wing neighbors baiting those on the left. It was the usual exchange of rhetoric and the proposition of absurd accusations and illogical polemics. I wrote that those exchanges are not helpful as they only serve to draw anger within us and polarize us. I stated, “Hate loves to Hate.” Indeed, it is this raw emotion that is being fed by emotional arguments and positions. My comments

quelled the worst of the exchanges. This thin line of civility was restored although the latent racism still finds strength just under a person's skin color. We as Chan Buddhists must take a position without causing injury to others. If passive resistance is needed to support a position so be it.

We should not harbor hate nor create our own discriminations. If so, then we are no better than those that we perceive on the other side. We should support the needs of our community as you perceive it. Hopefully, you believe your community is not limited to your present household. Show compassion to all. This is often times difficult, but we must rise to the occasion; if not me then who?

At the very least do not be a cause of the problem. As we protect ourselves, we protect others. I know that this article is being written long before it will be published but I will venture to guess that the world, is still facing a crisis at the time that this is read.

Do not invest in emotions of fear, hatred, or ignorance. Let it go. And by all means use common sense. If you hear someone suggest that you gargle, or drink bleach at least read the warnings on the bottle label. We use Chan to practice the middle way and while the Madyamika school is very profound in its deep wisdom, we can still use the simple guidance to maintain a stable life. The middle way instructs that whatever we do, we do with sincere practice. Yet we never overdo something nor under do it. This applies to all body, speech, and mind. In these perilous times we must maintain a consistency and serve as models to others. When we wear a mask in public, we encourage others to do the same.

Our practice of Chan is very clear. Our practice of Chan is not for our benefit but for the purpose of uplifting humanity and creating a pure land on Earth. We do so in each moment; with each breath we are clear about what and why we are taking certain actions. All that we do in these times must be carefully measured. We take care of our health and we take care of others as well. We see this world is always in a state of flux. We adapt to the circumstances. Finally, we do not let the environment change us. We change the environment. This is the right view. 🌱



Art by Chien-Chih Liu



In This Burning House

— BY —
GUO GU

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 in Florida, and the initiator of the *Dharma Relief* project and the ongoing *Engaging Racism: Conversations for Change* lecture and discussion program.



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IN THIS CHALLENGING TIME, IT IS easy to despair about the future of humanity. While each of us may experience differently the social and racial crises we are currently facing, as practitioners, we must individually recognize the deep-seated poisons that lay hidden in our hearts – greed, hatred, and ignorance. We must also collectively bring our resources together to transform our own world.

The three poisons keep us trapped in the cycle of suffering. It is easy to blame each other, but it is difficult to make space for a nuanced, interconnected appreciation of where we have been and of how to move forward together. Of course it is good to meditate and study the scriptures, but if we don’t examine deeply within ourselves, recognizing how these poisons subtly influence our everyday choices, privileges, and assumptions, then all the meditation and scriptural study amount to just furthering our own subtle self-referential attachments. We need to become aware of racism, educate ourselves about the history of racialization, learn to recognize the pain and suffering it continues to cause, and speak out against it. All these efforts are part of the necessary work of reducing suffering, promoting peace, and fostering reconciliation. Now is the time to begin this process.

Racism in America

The protests that erupted following the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis have brought attention to a culture of white privilege, oppression, and police brutality that affect so many in our society. Discrimination against those who are different has been part of human history. But the category of “race” specifically is a relatively new human construct that only first appeared in the English language in the sixteenth century. By the eighteenth century, during the rise of

the Industrial Revolution, as Western traders, Christian missionaries, and emissaries began colonizing and exploiting the goods and people of other regions of the world, theories of race emerged to justify the Western imperialist patterns of control, oppression, and violence.

In the United States, such patterns of control, oppression, and violence were put into practice with the genocide of indigenous peoples and the development of chattel slavery, which began with the arrival of the first African slaves in 1619. Slavery was the very economic backbone of America’s independence and wealth.

This discourse of white superiority is like the air that one breathes; it is everywhere and yet nowhere, so it seems. Rooted in history, racism toward Black, indigenous people, and people of color (BIPOC) is so entrenched and systemic that most white people are not even aware of it. Even immigrants to America have absorbed this discourse of whiteness unconsciously in order to assimilate. This absorption of whiteness is a form of auto- or reverse-racialization. For example, being influenced by history, theology, and the need for economic independence, most immigrants’ (including even the BIPOC) American dream means to have the same status and success of middle- or upper-class white people. This process entails giving up of parts of one’s own heritage to adopt the standards, values, and even religions of the white mainstream.

Buddhist Teachings on the Three Poisons

Patterns of control, oppression, and violence are the direct expressions of greed, hatred, and ignorance. Control stems from a greed to possess *things*, even turning people into objects of commerce, the epitome

of which is slavery. Oppression arises out of fear and hatred. It seeks to silence all those who threaten or challenge greed. Violence, of course, is the means of silencing. It stems from the blind ignorance of not realizing the interconnectedness of everything. In Buddhism, ignorance is literally translated as “no light.” It is the dark, myopic vision that sees only separateness of self and others, making it hard to realize that hurting others is in fact hurting oneself in the long run at all levels – individually, socially, economically, and politically.

Not surprisingly, the Buddhist canon has little to say about “racism” because it is a modern and, initially, Western construct. However, the entire Buddhist canon is focused on the removal of the three poisons, the driving force behind racism. The Buddha gave explicit teachings on the problem of “othering” people based on discrimination and self-attachment. In one Buddhist text, the Buddha criticized anyone who would foolishly exalt oneself or disparage others based on features of body parts such as skin.¹ The Buddha also criticized discrimination based on gender.² He said that everyone is worthy of veneration, irrespective of their birth, as long as that person possesses the five factors for exertion for liberation: conviction in the possibility of awakening; being physically fit for practice; being truthful, free from deceit; willingness to abandon harmful qualities; and having the discernment to recognize and end vexations.³ The list goes on, and his message is straightforward: The worth of a person lies in their action toward emancipation – not on any external bodily features.

When we discriminate against one another, we create a world that is uninhabitable for ourselves. *The Lotus Sūtra* uses the parable of the “burning house” to describe such a world.⁴ The good news is that because we have created this world, we have

the power to change it. In one scripture, the Buddha has revealed to his disciples that this burning house of saṃsāra is, and has always been, his blissful buddha land.⁵

Transforming Our World

The historical agenda to control, oppress, and exercise violence is still clearly with us today. Black people are denied their humanity every day in this country, a symptom of the three poisons. As Dharma practitioners it is time for us to come together to do something about it.

We have to recognize how the three poisons are manifesting everywhere in this burning house. They are entangled in every aspect of our individual lives, in the way we relate to people in our small circles of friends and family, in how we separate from those different from us, and in some of our outdated institutional policies that continue the pattern of control, oppression, and violence on BIPOC communities.

How can we dismantle racism, as part of our practice to uproot the three poisons? We need to recognize and work through the patterns of discrimination with our Dharma practice: expose, educate, change, and liberate. To make real changes, we begin with ourselves; then we can extend our practice to the world for social change.

First, we begin with our Dharma practice to expose the workings of discrimination, the social construct of whiteness that is intricately woven into all of us (not just white people) that manifests as subtle forms of racial discrimination.

Second, we educate ourselves by listening deeply, without judgement, to those who experience and are traumatized by racism. We open our hearts and let their stories in – their words and language embody the pain that runs through generations. We

also proactively learn how racial discriminations work systemically.

Third, we must actively change not only our own racial biases but also those in the broader world by creating a truly inclusive space in which everyone is treated equally. This is a slow process. Individuals and communities must first do their own necessary work, so they do not perpetuate vexations on others. We begin in our own lives, and then in our sangha. With a strong basis in our Buddhist practice, we can reach out and work toward a more just society where people are not afraid of oppression from law enforcement or being disenfranchised from society’s political and economic opportunities.

Lastly, we recognize that discrimination, racism specifically, can only be eradicated by going to the root of the problem: self-referential attachment, greed for power and domination, and by extension its impact on a societal level. Without uprooting the three poisons, the expressions of self-referentiality, discriminations of all kinds will continue to manifest. This does not mean we withdraw into ourselves, but it means if the world is going to change, we must liberate ourselves from the shackles of delusion.

Change is possible because all things change. Racism is a human construct, so it can be changed through human effort. The causes and conditions are now ripe to begin this process. Together, we can bring about change. To support this change, our second Dharma Relief initiative is extending its reach to build a platform for healing racial trauma and dismantling racism.

Dharma Relief Responds to Racism

Dharma Relief was created during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic to bring together dozens of Buddhist teachers, centers, and volunteers to raise funds to procure and send FDA-approved masks to frontline healthcare workers in North America. Thanks to so many donors and volunteers, we were able to raise over \$600,000 USD and send 1.2 million masks to hundreds of hospitals in different states.



Providence Health & Services – Portland, OR Photo by Marisa Luengas

The second Dharma Relief initiative aims to provide a platform to share and amplify Black Dharma teachers’ and leaders’ voices. One of our first steps will be to help these teachers and leaders deepen their personal growth through online training in resiliency-informed care, thereby helping Black communities to address trauma in themselves and using Buddhadharma to access inner resources for refuge and resilience. At the same time, Dharma Relief will host online workshops on inclusiveness and equality for all Dharma teachers at various Buddhist centers in America. We also hope to offer retreats

led by BIPOC Dharma teachers. Our intention is to begin with Dharma teachers and centers, so they can replicate these trainings for all practitioners – making Buddhist centers a place of safe refuge for BIPOC communities.

This initiative was the result of conversations with many Black Dharma teachers and leaders about the deep trauma that exists in Black communities. They have expressed a need for skills to work with their own trauma and that of their BIPOC sangha members. The non-BIPOC Dharma teachers have expressed, responding from another angle to racism, a need to learn more about the implicit white privilege that exists in our culture and how to provide a safe space for all practitioners.

Dharma Relief is currently fundraising to hire professional facilitators who have been leading both types of trauma resiliency and inclusiveness workshops to train Dharma teachers of different traditions. In other words, we are making an alliance with therapists, social workers, and BIPOC Dharma teachers to address racism. The workshops will be online, and graduates of these workshop can continue their work with different communities, in the forms of conversations, dialogs, workshops, and retreats through the Dharma Relief platform.

Drawing on the most effective workshops and retreats, Dharma Relief will offer a more nuanced, fluid, and embodied processes of learning and exchange of perspectives and life experiences.

We aim to create a ripple effect from the cadre of core Dharma teacher graduates, to their respective centers, their communities, and their broader social networks, changing the way we engage with, speak about, and reflect on racism.



Dharma practitioners must come together, recognizing our shared humanity, and consoling those affected by racism. The purpose of Dharma Relief is to focus on exposing and transforming the three poisons with wisdom, and healing trauma while helping indigenous, Black, ethnic, and POC people to build inner resilience. With this as the foundation, our endeavors can stem from a place of genuine compassion. In this process, our burning house can become a cool refreshing wellspring that will continue to nourish humanity for posterity. I urge you to support Dharma Relief and join our effort to create a more just, compassionate, and peaceful world.

For more information and to donate, please visit our Dharma Relief website:

<https://dharmarelief.org/race>

1. See the *Vijaya Sutta* in the *Sutta Nipāta*, 1.11.
2. See Chapter 7 of *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra*.
3. See the *Kaṇṇakathala Sutta* in the *Majjhima Nikāya*, 90.
4. See Chapter 2 of the *Lotus Sūtra*.
5. See Chapter 1 of the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra*.

Photo by Cay Banks

ENGAGING RACISM

Conversations for Change

Starting on September 15, 2020, the Tallahassee Chan Center and the Social Justice and Innovation Lab at the Askew School of Public Administration and Policy (Florida State University) will inaugurate an online series of educational programs, focusing on racism from multiple perspectives:

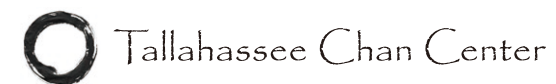
- racial trauma
- history of slavery
- criminal justice discrimination
- gender inequalities
- health and education systems

And also amplifying the agency of black literature, arts, healing, and transformation.

These lectures are followed the next week with an online discussion group to help process, absorb, and ask questions about the lecture. More topics and dates will become available as more speakers are invited. You do not have to join each week, and we will use the same Zoom link each week.

All talks and subsequent discussion meetings will start at 7:30 PM, with an optional guided meditation led by Guo Gu (the founder and teacher of the Tallahassee Chan Center) starting at 7:00 PM.

For a list of speakers and to register: <https://tallahasseechan.org/educational-series/>





Restoring Meaning to Our Lives in the Pandemic

— BY —
REBECCA LI

Rebecca Li, PhD, is the founder and guiding teacher of Chan Dharma Community. She began practicing with Chan Master Sheng Yen in 1996, and in 1999 began serving as his translator. In 2016, Rebecca received Dharma transmission from Simon Child (Dharma heir of Master Sheng Yen). Rebecca is a sociology professor at The College of New Jersey where she also serves as faculty director of the Alan Dawley Center for the Study of Social Justice. She teaches meditation and Dharma classes, gives public lectures, and leads Chan retreats at Dharma Drum centers in North America. This article is based on a Dharma talk given on May 22, 2020.



DDRC Archive Photo

IN THE EARLY DAYS OF THE current pandemic, we were focused on managing the sudden disruptions to our daily routine. There was a lot of fear and deep sadness owing to the staggering number of deaths and loss of livelihood for many. With the fragility of life and impermanence of our seemingly orderly world on full display, it has been a great opportunity to practice. During the lockdown, I came across an interview with Joanna Macy conducted by *Tricycle Magazine*. She spoke about the great turning of life-sustaining culture in the choices we make moment-to-moment as the old way of life unravels. While she was referring to the unraveling brought about by climate change, the world as we knew it is also unraveling during the pandemic and much more visibly so. We may find ourselves wanting to return to our old life. As many of us have discovered, however, the world to which we have reopened is not the one we left behind when the lockdown took effect. Whether we accept it or not, rapid changes are under way. How do we contribute to co-creating a culture in which we can better nourish ourselves and support each other? Joanna Macy spoke about four Rs which I find very helpful for contemplation and reflection on mental shifts we can make to build a more meaningful life lived in accordance with wisdom and compassion. The four Rs are resilience, relinquishment, restoration, and reconciliation.

Keeping Values

The first R is what she calls resilience. What she meant by resilience is the practice of identifying values we want to keep. The lockdown has taken away external distractions that filled our life and given many of us more time to be with ourselves and the opportunity to really reflect on what is important. It is important to identify what is truly dear to our

heart so that we can direct our moment-to-moment thoughts and actions to keeping these values. During the pandemic, the inequality and injustice in our society has been deeply disturbing, reminding us that equality and justice are among the values we want to keep. The pandemic forces us to face our shared vulnerability as human beings. Compassion is another value we want to keep and try to actualize. Compassion, informed by wisdom, has to do with refraining from causing harm and committing to bringing benefit to all sentient beings. Joanna Macy talked about this compassion as the opening of our heart. It starts with practicing the cultivation of compassion and kindness towards those close around us, such as our family members. She cited a poem that resonated with me greatly. The poem *Widening Circles* by Rainer Maria Rilke, which she translated from the original German, articulated this practice beautifully. The first two lines of the poem read: “I live my life in widening circles that reach out across the world. I may not complete this last one but I give myself to it.” We do our best to contribute to the actualization of values such as equality, justice and compassion. Knowing that we may not get to the end, we give it our best effort.

What would this effort involve? It is part of the practice of cultivating compassion. It involves not turning away from suffering, which we are so tempted to do because it is so much more pleasant to turn away. One example is the inadequate supply of personal protective equipment for healthcare workers, many of whom were working without them and living in fear of getting infected and infecting their loved ones. We can forget about it or not read about it and not care about it because it is too aggravating. Or we can remember to practice not turning away. When we do not turn away we are more likely to notice the opportunity for us to do something to help.

Compassionate action involves maintaining and cultivating this awareness toward all kinds of suffering.

Other Forms of Suffering

While we focus on the pandemic, other forms of suffering are still going on. Here are a few examples: Vaccination programs in some countries are halted because of the pandemic, and as a result there could be eighty million children who die from preventable diseases. The oppression of marginalized people in the United States and across the world is still going on. The Rohingyas are still forced to leave their homeland. Black Americans continue to live with racism that is lethal at times. Authoritarian regimes violate the human rights to which their citizens should be entitled, resulting in political persecutions. I also read about the victims of war in Yemen whose healthcare system collapsed because of the war, and about a nurse in Brooklyn whose family mostly lived in Trinidad and she kept going to work and died from the coronavirus alone, without any of her family with her. It is tempting to not think about

them because we feel so helpless and overwhelmed by all the suffering.

It is difficult not to turn away from all the sufferings out there and difficult to remember the humanity of everyone involved. It is very difficult because of our urge to give rise to hatred of those who we believe to be the bad people, those who are inflicting suffering on others. The cultivation of clear awareness is to recognize and notice these very strong urges to succumb to the entrenched habit of giving rise to hatred. Instead of giving rise to hatred and turning away, we can bear witness to the suffering and to the many outrageous actions happening in the world to strengthen our resolve and to help us act effectively. Hence, it is not a passive, feel good practice that we are engaging in.

Paying Attention, Staying Engaged

When I started attending seven-day intensive retreats in the 1990s with Master Sheng Yen, he often spoke of giving rise to angry determination. He was not talking about anger and hatred. What is this angry determination? Determination to commit to the practice so that we can have this stable, clear mind of compassion to be part of the solution of reducing all kinds of suffering and atrocities happening around the world. In this way, we can resist the temptation to turn away. We can remember to uphold the value of compassion. This resolve is strengthened through our commitment to bearing witness, to keep paying attention and staying engaged. Sometimes there may not be very

much we can do besides paying attention, but paying attention is a lot. By paying attention, we are not ignoring it and turning away. We can understand what is actually happening so we know what it is that we may be able to do. We can then initiate useful actions if we have the skills and means. Staying engaged allows us to recognize when others come up with a constructive idea that we can support, instead of ignoring it. In this way, we do not lose heart and become hopeless or cynical.

Part of our practice is to commit to cultivating this clear awareness of all forms of the dehumanizing actions that are occurring, as it is very easy to participate in them ourselves unknowingly. When we identify someone as the “bad” people, we start developing these dehumanizing thoughts about them. The practice allows us to remember that our world is changed for the better by our compassionate thoughts and actions collectively, not just by a change of leadership. Have you ever had thoughts like, “if only this problematic person would disappear, then everything will be fine?” I invite you to reflect on whether it is true that everything will be perfect after that person goes away. Upon reflection, you will probably realize, and maybe you have experienced, that it is unlikely to be the case. Because our world is co-created by all of us, if our thoughts and actions do not change, what we perceived to be problems would just show up in other ways.

Collective Recognition

In fact, what we think of as the problematic actions of some “bad” people are enabled by a system supported by many people. Their actions are merely manifestations of many, many causes and conditions. We are in one way or the other part of it. We may not know how we are taking part but we have all

co-created this moment with our past actions. In the practice of cultivating this resolve, we also commit to remembering that the perpetrators of cruel actions, too, are suffering. They are suffering from their craving, hatred and delusion. When we notice how people suffer, we will also notice how their suffering causes suffering in others. It is important to remember that the powerful who use their authority to inflict suffering in others, are themselves suffering. They deserve our pity, not hatred. Practicing this way, as we recognize the harmful and destructive actions committed by others, we do not end up giving rise to hatred in our heart and contribute ourselves to suffering in the world. It does not mean that we agree with these people and condone or support their actions or ideas. Compassionate action would mean that we do what we can to reduce or limit their ability to continue to do more harm. Practitioners commit to reflecting on what we can do that is in accordance with wisdom and compassion and not be driven by our compulsive feelings. It may mean calling out what they are doing instead of remaining silent.

It is easy to think “What is the point? They have so much power. What will my saying something do?” This kind of thinking breeds cynicism and hopelessness as well as the erroneous view that power has an independent existence as an entity possessed by the powerful. In reality, when people call out an inappropriate action, the power holders’ authority will be eroded as their authority is based on our collective recognition of the legitimacy of their authority. For those of us who are fortunate enough to live in a democracy, maybe we can vote such people out. Sometimes it will involve the wisdom of staying out of harm’s way so that we are limiting the ability of these people to do harm, including to ourselves. We can see that even with perpetrators of unjust and cruel actions, we can use our wisdom to cultivate



Photo by Hasan Almasi

compassion in our actions of trying to limit and reduce their ability to do harm. Such actions are not driven by hatred, but by compassion. That is the resolve that I am talking about. It is very difficult because our culture pushes us in the opposite direction. That is why it is crucial to cultivate this clear awareness moment after moment – so we do not fall into the unhelpful habits of vexatious reactivity.

Essential vs Nonessential

The second R that Joanna Macy talked about is what she calls relinquishment. Relinquishment is to reflect on and identify what it is useful to let go of. With the stay-at-home order, we had to stay away from many distractions offered to us by our consumerist society that compel us to run around, do this and that, eat at the new restaurants, go shopping to stay fashionable, drive or fly around for vacations – all to keep us from looking inward. With shopping malls and entertainment facilities closed and restaurants offering takeout only, most of these distractions were no longer available. During the first few weeks of the lockdown, we were reminded of which services are essential and justified in remaining open and which services are nonessential and justified in being closed. It became obvious that the list of essential services includes mainly places that sustain our physical survival and safety such as grocery stores, home repair, and emergency medical care.

A big shopping mall near my home has remained closed since the beginning of the outbreak. Many of us probably always knew that the stores in our shopping malls are mostly not essential. It does not mean that there is anything wrong with working at or patronizing these businesses. It is just that in this pandemic, it has been publicly announced that they are indeed not essential. There has never been such

clarity in our consumerist culture as to what is essential and what is non-essential. We should feel very blessed by the clarity made available by this extraordinary situation. This clarity allows us to reflect on many unhealthy habits that we have developed by living in a consumerist culture which we can let go of. Being encouraged by this consumerist culture and conditioned by our society, we may have allowed these habits to be perpetuated, and even to grow, over the years. We can use this opportunity to reflect on these unhealthy habits and identify ones that we would like to relinquish and go of.

Mindless Consumption

You may have your own list. Here I offer some possible candidates based on some of the things I have been reading. One of the unhelpful habits we can let go is mindless consumption. Retail stores are designed to make us go in and buy things that we did not know we needed. That is how we often ended up purchasing things and did not know why we bought them after spending time in shopping malls. Reflecting on what is essential and nonessential can help us unlearn the habit of mindless consumption. Another unhelpful habit is being wasteful. Before this pandemic, most of us have never needed to worry about whether there is toilet paper or milk or flour in the store. During the early weeks of the pandemic, we all had to learn to pay a little more attention to whether we had enough food in our pantry. When purchasing limits were placed on certain items in the store, we realized that perhaps we should not throw away that glass of juice or milk that is almost full because many grocery stores only allowed us to buy two cartons of milk per shopping trip. Hence, we should be grateful for that period of scarcity to help us learn not to be so mindlessly wasteful.



Photo by Wesley Tingey

With budget airlines and discounts for hotels and car rentals, our consumerist culture has promoted, for many people, the habit of mindless vacationing. Some people would take a long road trip or flight every time there is a short break. These travels often left us more tired, defeating the purpose of breaks. But we kept doing that because we have been conditioned to “get away” by the travel industry. Meanwhile, we generated a lot of carbon emissions contributing to climate change. There is nothing wrong with traveling. It is however worth reflecting on whether we are taking a trip just because we are conditioned to do so. The drastically reduced flight schedule and travel restrictions during the pandemic have given us an opportunity to reflect on our travel habits to identify ways which we may have been traveling mindlessly. I recently read an article talking about how, for those of us who have a backyard, we can set up a tent to camp in our backyard. With a shift in perspective, it can feel like we have taken a break from our routine without generating any carbon emissions. I am not campaigning against traveling for vacations, but we

can reflect on our habit of mindless vacationing and begin to unlearn this unhelpful habit.

Mindless Workaholism

For many of us, the period of having to work from home also provided us with an opportunity to recognize our habit of mindless workaholism. Before the lockdown, many of us have highly compartmentalized work and family life. We would commute into the office and work like crazy all day and maybe into the evening at times trying to meet the endless deadlines. We gave others the job of looking after things at home. We may outsource the cooking to restaurants and childcare to daycare centers and all sort of sports and enhancement activities for the kids. These arrangements were, or are, no longer possible during the lockdown.

As we spend more time at home with our loved ones, we may discover things about them that we never had the time to notice before. This experience of spending so much time together at home

may allow us to recognize how this unhelpful habit of over-striving and mindless workaholism has been perpetuated at the expense of really getting to know our loved ones. We are not talking about quitting our job and just staying home but we can reflect on our attitude towards our job and see if there are traces of mindless workaholism. We may be able to begin to unlearn this habit and recognize that the habitual thought pattern of wanting to get one more thing done before going home can be the manifestation of the craving mind. For some, mindless workaholism is related to the mindless pursuit of status. Surely we need to fulfill our responsibilities at work. As part of our practice, we can also look deeply into our mind to examine our motivation in the moments when we feel compelled to stay at work longer. If the motivation involves suffering, such as greed, jealousy or resentment, we can use it as an opportunity to unlearn these unhelpful habits by not acting on that compulsion. We are not talking about quitting our job or changing career. As we cultivate clear awareness of the moment to moment activities of our mind,

we would realize that it mainly involves adjustments in our mindset by recognizing that we have these unhelpful habits that can be unlearned.

Reconnecting

The third R Joanna Macy talked about is restoration. It is about reflecting on what to bring back from the past. We can think about things that we have forgotten to do, perhaps because of new technologies, that are quite wonderful. For those of us old enough to remember life before texting, we may notice that we have forgotten we can talk to our loved ones on the phone. In fact, talking on the phone made a comeback during the lockdown as we looked to connect and reconnect with people important to us in our life. I recently read that research has shown that talking on the phone allows for deeper emotional connection than other mediated means of communication. We are not advocating talking on the phone all the time but we can restore this means of communication as a way we connect with our friends and loved ones. Many families and friend groups started having regular videoconference calls during the lockdown. Frequent gatherings among family and friends were commonplace in the past but our highly individualized life enabled by personalized devices had pushed these gatherings down our list of priorities in life. For many people who suffer from loneliness and social isolation, restoring communication by actually talking can be helpful.

During the lockdown, some people have discovered or rediscovered their neighbors. As we spent time at home, talking with our neighbors while following social distancing protocols fulfilled our emotional need through social interactions. I have read many articles on how having face-to-face interaction with someone even just for fifteen minutes can lift

our mood. Talking to our neighbors also used to be commonplace and is another thing we have forgotten in our culture that is worth restoring for many of us. As we stay home with our loved ones, we can also restore the practice of spending time with each other over meals during which we can share our experiences of the day. It provides us with the opportunity to connect with and support each other. Due to our busy work life, overscheduled children, and personalized entertainment and communications viewed on our own devices, the percentage of American families eating dinner together has been declining. Sharing our day over dinner used to be a daily family ritual that has largely been forgotten in our culture. We can also consider how this practice can be restored to nourish our family life. Our life circumstances may not allow us to share dinner daily, but the key is to prioritize setting aside time to connect with our loved ones.

Rediscovering

During the lockdown, we may have also rediscovered forgotten hobbies or practices that we used to have that brought us joy or allowed us to conserve our resources. I read about people repurposing old clothes and toys at home for craft projects. Others recalled how their grandmother soaked the green onion to keep it fresh. Many rediscovered the joy of planting a vegetable garden. We may also rediscover hobbies and practices such playing music, painting, or reading great works of literature such as that volume of *War and Peace* that has been sitting on the bookshelf gathering dust. Some of us reconnected with the chanting practice. I read that singing stimulates the part of our brain that lifts our mood, which could be very helpful when we are kept physically away from our loved ones due to travel restrictions.

The travel restrictions also afford us the opportunity to reconnect with the natural world around us. My husband and I discovered a few small ponds in the local natural preserve. We took walks there and paid regular visits to watch the tadpoles hatch and grow every few days. Simple activities like that bring a lot of joy and do not cost anything. We can also reconnect with people in our life that we kept telling ourselves we do not have time to email or call, especially when the fragility of life is in full display during the outbreak. As we cultivate clarity of our mind, we can look deeply into our heart to identify things that we would like to restore in our life. We are not talking about turning our life upside down. These will be subtle adjustments in how we spend a few minutes here and there. Instead of turning on the television as we usually do, for instance, we can play the piano or check in with our loved ones. Living life more intentionally allows us to integrate how we would like our life to be and how we spend our time. This reduces a major source of internal conflict, rendering our life more fulfilling and meaningful. As we are more content and at peace, we are also more available to our loved ones and capable of bringing benefits to other sentient beings.

Making Peace

The fourth R is reconciliation. With whom do we want to make peace? This is very important. During this period of lockdown, we have gone through a lot and we are able to witness how easy it is to inflict harm on our loved ones when we are stressed out and irritated. Perhaps we can make peace with our past self who has done things to hurt someone we loved because we were suffering. When we are able to make peace with this past self, we are also committing not to repeat the same mistake of inflicting



Art by Chien-Chih Liu

pain on our loved ones when we ourselves are hurting and we do so by remembering to practice. With more clarity as we practice, we fall into the habit of suffering less often which in turn allows us to inflict less harm on others.

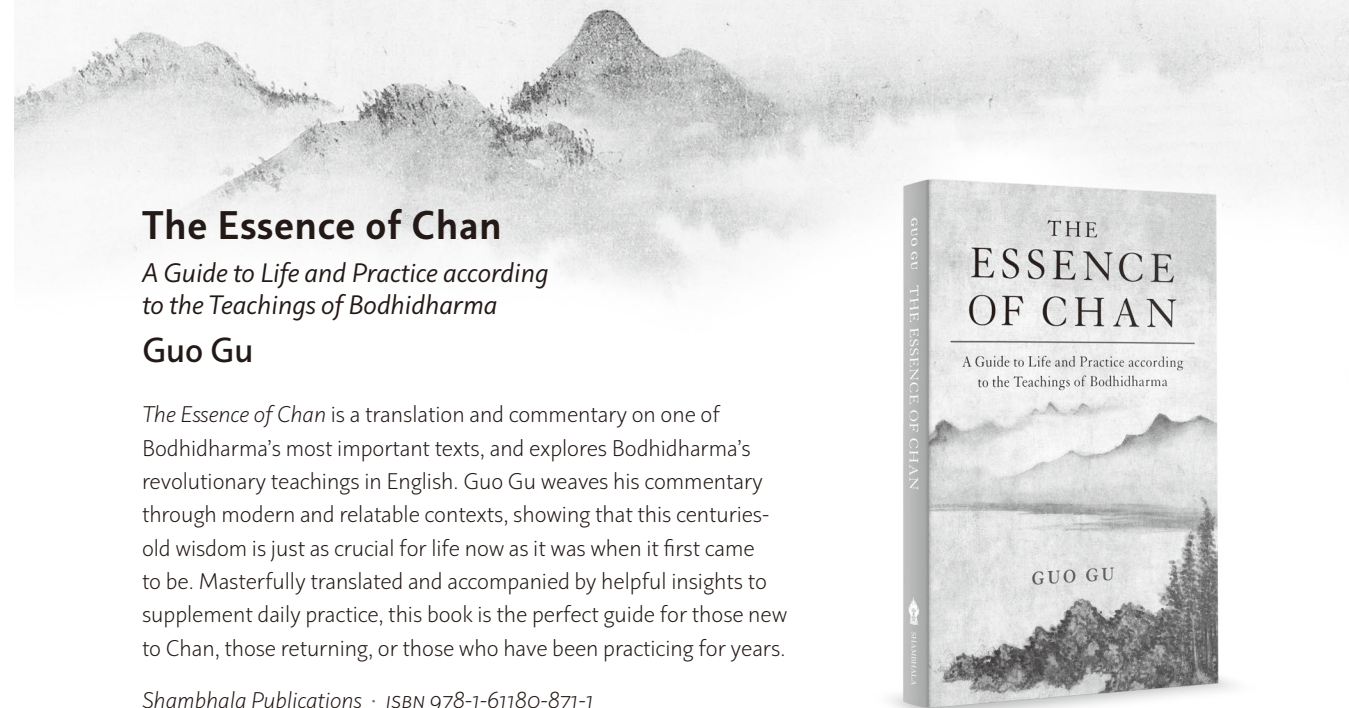
We can also make peace with other people who have hurt us in the past. As we spent a lot of time at home with our loved ones during the lockdown, we can see more clearly that when we are under stress and suffer, we do unwise things and say unkind words that hurt other people. When we can see how we do that, we can also see how other people can be unkind and unwise when they are under stress and how they can hurt us. We do not pretend that they did not do what they did and that we were not hurt, but we make peace with that person because we know they made the mistake because they were suffering. We may have experienced resentment or hatred or we may even blame ourselves for what that person did, wishing to change the past. Wishing to change the past, which is impossible, causes agitation in the mind and that is why we experience no peace.

We can make peace with what has happened and the person who hurt us. It does not necessarily mean that we become best friends with that person. We may not even have a relationship with that person anymore. The person with whom we have the non-peaceful relationship is actually our own idea of the person who hurt us. By recognizing this, we can choose to make peace with it and reconcile with our past.

The pandemic has been devastating in many ways. For many of us, it has also provided us with the opportunity to reflect on our life. Joanna Macy's four Rs – resilience, relinquishment, restoration and reconciliation – provide useful guidance for our reflection. As long as it is here, we can make good use of this period of social distancing and learn from our reflection as part of our practice. In this way, regardless of what happens to our job, the economy and other aspects of our world, we can live a more meaningful life where our actions and values are integrated as we practice to make moment-to-moment choices that are in accordance with wisdom and compassion. 🌿



Photo by Ven. Chang Duo



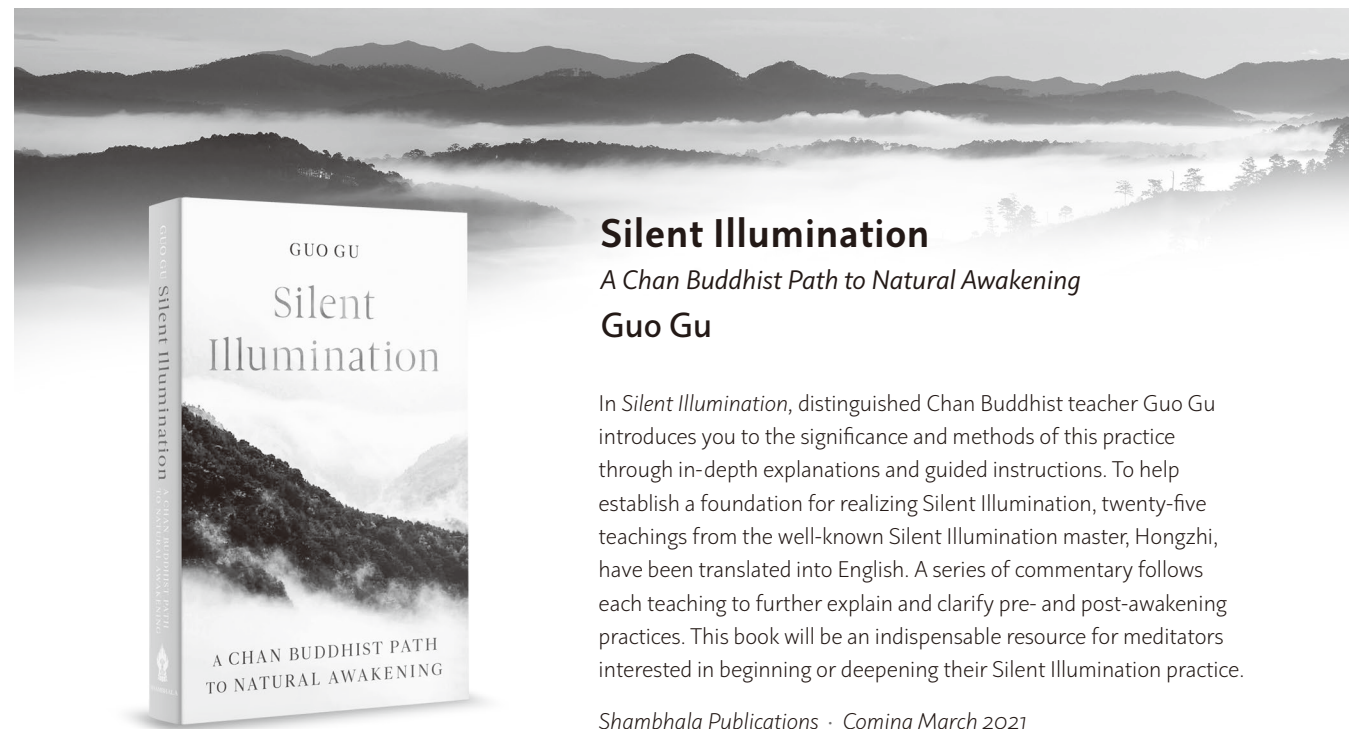
The Essence of Chan

A Guide to Life and Practice according to the Teachings of Bodhidharma

Guo Gu

The Essence of Chan is a translation and commentary on one of Bodhidharma's most important texts, and explores Bodhidharma's revolutionary teachings in English. Guo Gu weaves his commentary through modern and relatable contexts, showing that this centuries-old wisdom is just as crucial for life now as it was when it first came to be. Masterfully translated and accompanied by helpful insights to supplement daily practice, this book is the perfect guide for those new to Chan, those returning, or those who have been practicing for years.

Shambhala Publications · ISBN 978-1-61180-871-1



Silent Illumination

A Chan Buddhist Path to Natural Awakening

Guo Gu

In *Silent Illumination*, distinguished Chan Buddhist teacher Guo Gu introduces you to the significance and methods of this practice through in-depth explanations and guided instructions. To help establish a foundation for realizing Silent Illumination, twenty-five teachings from the well-known Silent Illumination master, Hongzhi, have been translated into English. A series of commentary follows each teaching to further explain and clarify pre- and post-awakening practices. This book will be an indispensable resource for meditators interested in beginning or deepening their Silent Illumination practice.

Shambhala Publications · Coming March 2021

Remembering Virginia Tan

October 11, 1936 to May 4, 2020

VIRGINIA TAN WAS BORN IN Xiamen, Fujian province in 1936, the youngest of seven children, with three sisters and three brothers. She, her mother, and her siblings fled China when it became communist in 1949. They stowed away aboard a ship in Shanghai that was strafed by Japanese fighters; several crew members were killed. Virginia, her mother and siblings barely escaped but were reunited with the rest of their family in the Philippines, where Virginia grew up.

Later she made her way to the United States where she obtained a degree in nutrition and, with two other friends, published a nutrition newsletter for several years. For a time she lived on the Upper East Side of Manhattan and worked at the Children's TV Workshop (Public Broadcasting Service / Sesame Street) as a secretary and administrator. Later she lived in Queens, New York.

Virginia loved to sing and was involved with the Sweet Adelines chorus group and an off-Broadway production of *Bells Are Ringing*. And, although English was not her native language, she loved to play Scrabble and was very good at it. She used her free time to volunteer as a docent for the Museum of Modern Art and invited her friends for tours.

Virginia also volunteered as an aide to end-of-life hospice patients.

Virginia was a centralizing force. She brought disparate people together and was the connector causing many people to become friends who would never have met otherwise. She organized a ski retreat for a number of her women friends in Frost Valley, NY, a tradition that lasted many years, attracting as many as twenty-five women on several occasions. She also organized banquets for her friends in Chinatown for Chinese New Year.

She became a devout Buddhist after her father died and she saw him in a vision and at peace. She then became an integral member of the Chan Meditation Center (CMC). For many years, she was the coordinator of the *Chan Magazine*. Without a doubt, she was one of the best volunteer coordinators at CMC. She was one who made visitors feel welcomed and cared for, especially the English-speaking community. At the chanting services, she would gather the English-speaking members in one place and sit with them, making sure they were on the correct page and verse during the fast-paced chanting.

Virginia was very attentive and friendly to everyone, always gracious, caring, compassionate, and



Virginia Tan (right) with Ven. Guo Yuan (center) and Wei Tan (left) Photo by Wei Tan

sensitive to others' feeling. She was always available to lend an ear and give guidance. She was truly a luminary at CMC and her warm presence will be greatly missed.

Her nephew Jonathan Bergman says of her: "Aunt Virginia was very special to me. She had a light about her and I remember how her gentle touch had a way of making things feel that it was all going to be okay. She had so little but gave so much and I personally feel a deep loss. One of my friends described her as a 'lovely butterfly' just full of genuine gentle kindness; yes, that feels right."

Her nephew James Tan writes: "Aunt Virginia (Seko) loved unconditionally and truly was one of the kindest people I've ever known. She would rather release flies or spiders outside than kill them. I have so many fond memories of visiting her in Manhattan as a child in the tiny apartment she loved. She had a beautiful, gentle spirit and we all will miss her very much."

From nephew Joseph Tan: "One thing I learned from Aunt Virginia was to always speak what's on your mind and be honest with people. People will say she was stubborn, but I feel that if you have an opinion about something you have to hold your ground

and stand firm in what you believe in! I never met anybody who really cared for others as much as she did. Her heart was like gold."

Her neighbor Jessie Wong writes: "I am forever indebted to Virginia. She was my rock and guardian angel when I first arrived in New York City. She was my first neighbor, my first friend, then became my family in a foreign land. She shall forever be considered family to us. She is a beacon of pure kindness and righteousness. Always ready to speak out in face of injustice and always just wanting to lend others a helping hand but never wanting anything in return."

Alice Rouse writes: "She was a strong, independent, intelligent and vibrant woman. I will miss her wisdom and smile."

Wei Tan writes: "I know that she will be shining a light on us from the Western Pure Land, in the company of Amitabha Buddha and the bodhisattvas. Dear big sister, you will forever be my inspiration. May you continue to inspire us from the Pure Land."

To see more photos and read more memories and anecdotes about our dear Dharma sister Virginia Tan, please visit: <https://memories.net/timeline/virginia-tan-73549>

Contributors: *Harry Miller, Josephine Verceles*

Brahmavihara

In Memory of Virginia Tan
by Ernest Heau



*Within the circle of light
the stillness is supreme.
The cloud of karma
is translucent, clear.
In the heart-mind
the Four Immeasurables arise:*

*Loving kindness arises thus;
Compassion arises thus;
Joy for others arises thus;
Equanimity arises thus.*

*In the wakeful universe
no being remains untouched.*

*In this manner
may sentient beings be delivered.*

Online Retreats, Workshops & Group Meditation

Saturday Online One-Day Retreat

Hosted by Dharma Drum Retreat Center
www.dharmadrumretreat.org
Led by Ven. Guo Yuan
Saturdays Ongoing 8:45 AM to 5:00 PM (ET)

Online One-Day Retreat

Hosted by DDMBA–Vancouver
www.ddmba.ca/ddmba
Led by Rebecca Li
November 22, 2020 • 8:00 AM to 4:00 PM (PT)

Online Beginner's Meditation Workshop

Hosted by Tallahassee Chan Center
www.tallahasseechan.org/events/
October 25, November 1, 8 & 15, 2020
2:00 PM to 3:30 PM (ET)

Morning Meditations

Hosted by Tallahassee Chan Center
www.tallahasseechan.org/events/
One meditation period followed by chanting.
Led by Guo Gu
Monday–Friday 7:30 AM (ET)

Sunday Morning Meditation & Discussion

Hosted by DDMBA–Los Angeles
www.ddmbala.org
Every Sunday 10:00 AM to 12:00 NOON (PT)

Sunday Online Meditation Group Session

Hosted by DDMBA–San Francisco
www.ddmbasf.org
Led by Ven. Guo Yuan
Sundays Ongoing 2:00 PM to 4:00 PM (ET)

Monday Lecture & Sitting Meditation Class

Hosted by Riverside Chan Meditation Group
www.meetup.com/riversidechan/
Led by Gilbert Gutierrez
Every Monday 6:00 PM to 8:00 PM (PT)

Monday Evening Dharma Talks by Guo Gu

Hosted by Tallahassee Chan Center
www.tallahasseechan.org/events/
One meditation period followed by a short talk.
Every Monday 7:30 PM (ET)

Tuesday Online Sitting Meditation Session

Hosted by Chan Meditation Center
www.chancenter.org/en/
Led by Ven. Chang Zhai
Tuesdays Ongoing 7:30 PM to 9:00 PM (ET)

Thursday Online Meditation

Hosted by Dharma Drum Retreat Center
www.dharmadrumretreat.org
Led by Ven. Guo Yuan
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