

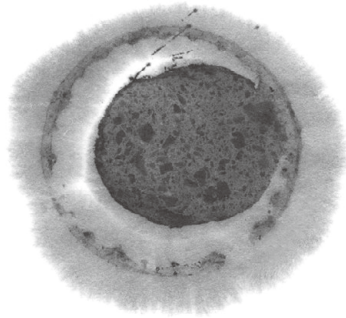
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CHAN MAGAZINE

SUMMER 2022







We dream at night and we dream during the day.  
When we think, we believe that our thoughts are clear,  
but nonetheless, we are still dreaming.

All thoughts, ideas, and conceptions  
that pass through our minds are dreams,  
and we will not awake to this understanding  
until we reach Buddhahood.



CHAN MASTER SHENG YEN

“Five Skandhas: False and Unreal”

*Until We Reach Buddhahood*

July 13, 1986

## CHAN MAGAZINE

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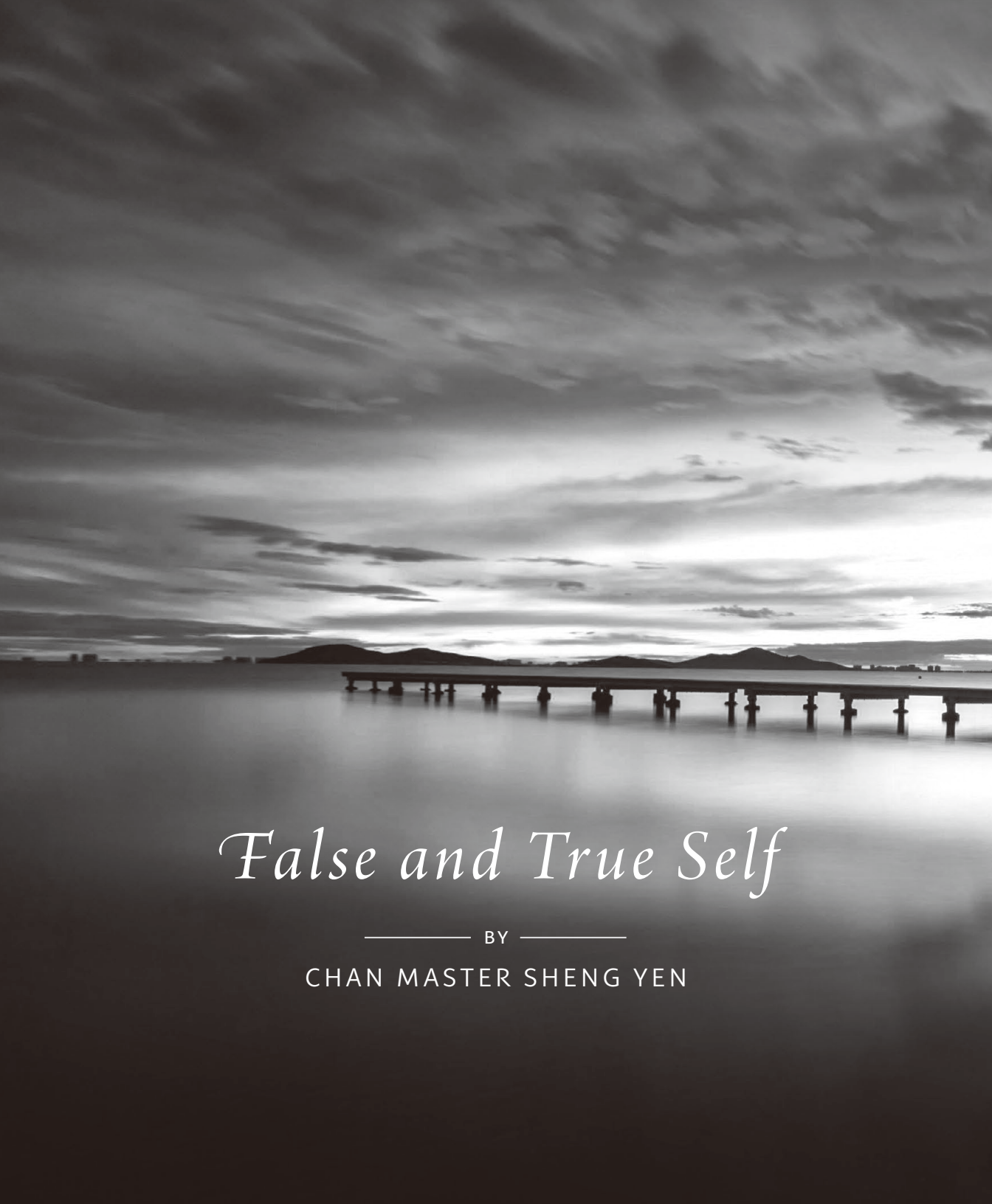
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**COVER ART & MASTHEAD BACKGROUND** Calligraphy by Thích Nhất Hạnh



*False and True Self*

————— BY —————

CHAN MASTER SHENG YEN



Photo by Antonio López



Chan Master Sheng Yen DDM Archive Photo

In December of 1984, and continuing through 1996, Chan Master Sheng Yen began a series of lectures on the *Śūraṅgama Sūtra* at the Chan Meditation Center (CMC) in Queens, New York. These lectures provided deep, learned, and insightful commentary on key passages from the sutra, placing them in the context of ordinary life for practitioners of Mahayana Buddhism. Oftentimes, he would use anecdotes from his own life experience and contacts with people to elucidate points from the sutra. These lectures were subsequently compiled by Ernest Heau and published in two volumes as *Until We Reach Buddhahood: Lectures on the Śūraṅgama Sūtra* (Elmhurst, New York: Dharma Drum Publications, 2016). This article is an excerpt from volume 1 of those books, based on two talks given June 1 and June 9, 1986. English translations provided by Ming Yee Wang, editing by Harry Miller and Linda Peer. Note: As his reference text in English, Master Sheng Yen used *The Śūraṅgama Sūtra*, the translation by Charles Luk (Lu K'uan Yü), with notes by Master Han Shan of the Ming Dynasty. It is available for free digital distribution by the Buddhadharma Education Association, [http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf\\_file/surangama.pdf](http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf_file/surangama.pdf).



**A**NANDA ASKS THE BUDDHA ABOUT THE nature of the self. Is there an all-encompassing ego, a true self that unites everyone in the world, or is there a self at all?

I'm going to talk about this question, and discuss how it is dealt with by "outer path" systems of thought and religion, and how it is dealt with by Buddhism. Schools of philosophy and religion other than Buddhism are categorized as outer path because the adherents to these views attempt to look outside the mind for solutions to the problems of the world.

When we use the phrase outer path, there is no connotation that such views are bad or heterodox. "Heterodox" is used in Charles Luk's translation [of the *Śūraṅgama Sūtra*], and this is perhaps unfortunate, because it connotes something that is wrong, whereas the idea of "outer path" simply signifies the idea of looking outside to resolve problems, not looking inward.

In the retreat that ended here at the Chan Center recently, there was a psychologist from England who told me that he heard things at the retreat that he had never heard before, and he believes that this knowledge will be of great use to him. I asked him, "What did you learn?" He said, "These lines in the evening service really impressed me: 'To know all the Buddhas of the past, present, and future, know that dharmadhatu nature is all created by the mind.'" I asked, "How do they help you?"

And he said, "For example, if your legs hurt, you need not be afraid of the pain. You can concentrate on it, and it will eventually turn to coolness. Pain is created by the mind, so it can be ended by the mind."

This psychologist told me that what he usually does to help his patients is either to use talk therapy or administer drugs. But he had never before understood that to accept pain is a way to resolve it. So I asked him if he thought this method would apply

to everyone. "Probably not," he said, "it would only be useful to a strong-willed, goal-oriented person. Otherwise I doubt that the method would be useful."

This method may not be applicable to everybody, but the principle behind it is valid. This is to say that problems must be seen as existing in the mind. Certainly, if you get a flat tire or you're wounded, that is a problem. That is to say it is an unforeseen occurrence which must be taken care of. But usually the reality of what must be done is nothing compared to the way such occurrences are seen and exaggerated by our minds.

## Created by the Mind

There are also many things which we normally perceive as problems which have no basis in reality, which are entirely created by our minds. To someone whose mind is clear, a thing or an event which might strike another person as an "objective" problem will have no existence at all. Buddhadharma considers other philosophical and religious approaches to be outer paths, then, for the following reason: these schools of thought perceive a variety of things or phenomena as problems, and they see the origin of these problems in a variety of conceptual factors that lie outside the true domains of the mind. Thus, they will attribute the cause of a given problem to any of a number of factors: physical, psychological, social, familial, and so on. Such perceptions are not true. In the view of Buddhadharma all such problems and their causes exist within the mind.

Outer path views which seek solutions outside of the mind have an understanding of the self that is different from that of Buddhadharma. Some view the true self as something internal, a sort of primary essence. Others see it as something external, like a great over-soul that unites everyone and transcends

the personal self. People who hold this view consider the true self to be something that pervades the ten directions. To look for the answer outside the mind in this manner is to be on an outer path.

There's a joke that shows how people live inside their narrow views. Note that in China, surgeons are called "external doctors," since they approach the body from the outside. Others who treat disorders with medicine are called "internal doctors." The story is this: a surgeon, an external doctor, visits a patient sent to a hospital with the flu. The doctor takes one look at him, cuts him open, finds nothing amiss, and leaves, saying, "I've done all I can. It looks like you need an internal doctor." The internal doctor arrives and asks, "Do you feel any pain?" The patient says, "You bet, the pain is killing me." The internal doctor finds the patient's reaction to a mild case of influenza to be bizarre. He tells the patient, "You're suffering from delusions. I'm going to recommend a psychiatrist." The psychiatrist enters and asks, "What do you feel?" The patient answers, "Pain, a lot of pain, right here where the surgeon opened me up." The psychiatrist says, "That's not my turf. You'd better call back that external doctor."

What is the problem here? Each doctor treats the patient according to his own specialty. No one tries to understand the problem in its totality. Each acts according to what he knows, not what troubles the patient.

## True Self

Let me return to the concept of the true self. It is not something generally understood by ordinary people, who tend to know only their personal selves and what they can see, hear, taste, touch, and smell. This is really a very limited domain. What is beyond this narrow realm of the individual and the senses? Is

there a self beyond what we know, beyond what we can perceive?

It may seem that there is a true self that can reach through all space and time. Certainly ordinary people do not have the vaguest notion of the concept of such a true self. Only people who have practiced hard or read and thought deeply in philosophy arrive at such an understanding. A religious practitioner may be able to experience a higher plane of existence outside of him. A person with deep philosophical understanding can deduce a self beyond himself. Only such people as these can try to come to an understanding of a true self.

The other day I read about a man who underwent surgery to receive a new heart. He found out after the operation, that the heart was not mechanical, but was that of an animal. He may have thought, "What am I really, an animal or a human being?" He also lost a lot of blood and had several transfusions. Most of his blood was other people's blood. So he might have thought, "Who am I now?"

What do you think, is he his original self or not? Maybe there will come a day when even brain tissue can be replaced. Who knows? We might be able to become smarter. Or perhaps someone in an accident might suffer brain damage, and his brain will be replaced with a computer chip. Who would he be then? People will have to reflect on questions such as these. Usually, when you refer to a true self, ordinary people will point to themselves and say, "This is my true self. No doubt about it. Every part of what you see is me." But when parts of the body start getting replaced, people may begin to wonder.

When I first met Westerners, I was a child in China. There was something about the way they smelled that I had never experienced before. Later I understood that it was a question of diet. I, and those around me, had not grown up on a diet of meat and



milk. That's why I thought some of these Westerners smelled like cattle. But now I also drink milk, and I'm around many other people with a similar diet. I don't sense anything different now. Who knows? Maybe I have the same kind of body odor as the Westerners I first met.

Your body was given to you by your parents. First you were a baby; now you're grown. During these years you may have eaten all manner of different things: beef, pork, chicken, milk, cheese. You used the nutrients from these sources to build your body, but you do not doubt what you are. You are a human being even though parts of many animals have been introduced into your system and worked to transform your body.

Milarepa, the great Tibetan master, lived in the mountains in a place where there was nothing to eat but wild grass. As a result, his body turned green. I lived in the mountains also, and for a few years

I ate nothing but potato leaves. People asked me why I didn't turn green. It was because I cooked the leaves first.

## Body Is Not Self

A lot of people assume that their body is their self. But this cannot be. Before you were born, you did not exist in your body. After you die, the body cannot accompany you. In what sense, then, do you really exist?

Questions such as these cause us to distinguish between a self, meaning the self you can see and feel at the present moment, and a true self. Do you believe that there is an existence before birth and after death? Why do you believe what you do?

Many people ask themselves such questions. I read that after Richard Burton died, Elizabeth Taylor dreamed, or thought, she actually saw him. What do you think she believes? Does he still exist, or is he just a figment of her imagination?

I once spoke with a Christian, who asked me if I believed in heaven and hell. "Sure," I said. And he, too, said that he believed in them. But are there any differences between what he and I believe?

There are some paintings in the West that represent the visions of painters, who actually saw people in the afterlife. Interestingly enough, in these paintings there are only Western faces. How can that be? Since we know that Orientals die, too, and, according to the Christian view, they must go to either heaven or hell. Why weren't any Orientals seen there? In more recent paintings, Orientals do appear.

I pointed out to him that it didn't make sense for the heaven and the hell of the past to be different from the heaven and hell of the present. If there is a difference between the past and the present, these places cannot be considered eternal, and, therefore, they can't be real, because what is real is permanent

and unchanging. There was even a president of an African country who was a Christian and believed that God is black. He believed that only blacks, and not whites, go to heaven. Although he claimed to be a Christian, his concept of Christianity seems to be somewhat different from that of white Christians.

Then the Christian asked me what my views of heaven and hell were. That brings us back to the beginning of the lecture, when I said that everything is created by the mind. You have your heaven, and I have mine. You have your hell, and I have mine. You may see me in your heaven, and I may see you in mine. Nevertheless, they're not the same. We're all here in America, but I have come from China. The America I see is different from the America you see. Even two people that share the same bed really share two different beds. And the world we live in? Are we all in the same world?

## Perceptions Differ

Some of you seem to think that we all live in the same physical world, that we all see the same rain outside. Actually the rain that falls on you will not fall on me. Hence, what you feel and see is not what I feel and see. Perhaps the simplest example is that of a chair. If I sit here, you have to sit somewhere else. And, of course, the seats we sit on are different to begin with.

If we use food as an example, we may all have the same dishes in front of us, but what I eat and how much I eat is different from what you eat. You may find it delicious. I may not be so pleased. You may find it good today and not so good tomorrow. Our perceptions are different.

Only advanced practitioners, through much hard work and practice, can live in the same world. They must achieve the exact same mind. We call

this the state of one-mind. If your mind is scattered, you can't live in or experience the same world as another person.

Up until now I haven't really spoken about the true self. What most of us believe to be the self is an emotional self, so to speak. This is the self that we know when we are under the influence of emotions, feelings, and moods. This is not the self that wisdom can see.

Only someone no longer troubled by his emotions can seriously try to know his true self. Some people come to the Chan Center hoping to find enlightenment immediately. They hope I will provide a wonderful method to lead them to liberation, but I never do this. What I do is to first give a method that can be used to quiet the emotions. When there is some relief, I may then give a method to seek the true self. I might give the huatou, "Who am I?" or "What is wu?"

## Search for the True Self

Although I give methods to seek the true self, this does not mean that Buddhadharmas accept the doctrine or the existence of a true self. Of course, this search for the self is central to many outer path beliefs. But in Chan this search is also a necessary step. This does not mean that there is, in fact, a true self to be found. But many methods of Chan practice are devoted to the discovery of the true self.

If you ask an ordinary person about his conception of the Buddha, he might come up with something like: the Buddha is what is unchanging, all-pervasive, and most perfect, the ultimate true existence.

The purpose of Chan practice is not to discover the Buddha. In the course of practice you may try to use your power of reason and your understanding of Buddhism. To the question, "What is Buddha," you

might be led to answer that he is the awakened one, or the most perfect one. But such answers are wrong.

All such answers – that Buddha pervades through all time and space, that Buddha is that which never changes, the eternal, and the unmoving – are wrong. The opposing viewpoints – that Buddha is not in space or time or is outside all concepts – are equally wrong. You must try to not cling to either extreme and to let go of the center, as well – this is *Madhyamika*, the middle way. Could this be the way to find true self?

If you continue to hold on to a concept such as a true self, or an idea of something that pervades through all space and time, then you are holding on to an attachment. *Buddhadharma* does not speak of true self; it speaks only of causes and conditions.

You might ask if causes and conditions are the true Dharma, the true way. No, these are only concepts, expedient ways of explaining things. Nevertheless, I will speak about these things further.

## Nature, or Spontaneity

Reasoning by his worldly sense, Ananda is puzzled about the nature of the self. Where, he wonders, is the self revealed? Can it be found in the nature of the senses themselves? Is the self manifested in the nature of seeing, for example? The Buddha explains to Ananda that this quest for the self is in vain.

Ananda is still confused by the “outer path” views of “natural existence” and “true self.” He believes that there is something behind the “true self,” which he takes to be “nature” or “spontaneity.” Yet even this idea of “nature” and “spontaneity” is involved with a self. Ananda knows that his views are not correct, and he asks the Buddha for instruction.

The Chinese word which is translated here as “nature” really refers to something in its true state,

the way it really is. The self in its true state is not the self we normally associate with someone’s personality. The true self is a totally natural and spontaneous state; it is just as it is, so to speak. But even the true self is not the “supreme reality.”

Earlier in the sutra the Buddha asked Ananda to explain what happens when he looks at the scenery outside the *vihara*. Who does the seeing? Is it Ananda’s true self that sees or does the act of seeing simply transpire spontaneously? This question has yet to be resolved.

Ananda does not see as the Buddha sees because of his attachment and grasping, which lead him towards erroneous views. First, the Buddha explains that there is no self involved in seeing. Ananda then tries the explanation that seeing simply arises, spontaneously and naturally. The Buddha shows that even this idea is wrong. Remember, we said previously that even nature and spontaneity are involved with self. Thus, Ananda has not totally understood the nature of the self.

This self is at base an illusion. To show this, the Buddha begins by asking Ananda to understand what happens when seeing takes place. Is there a self anywhere revealed when we see? The Buddha speaks of the conditions necessary for seeing. Light is one condition that must exist. But if there is light, there must be darkness, otherwise there would be no way to distinguish that something is illuminated – there would be nothing to illuminate if there were no darkness. Thus, if seeing arises because of a natural, spontaneous self, then light must be part of this self. And if light is a part of it, then darkness must be a part of this self, also. Then why is it that we can only see in the light, if darkness is part of the same self that is luminous, the same self from which seeing arises?

Space is also a condition for seeing. If there is something blocking your eye, or something right

in front of your eye, then you won't be able to see. There must be a certain space in order for you to perceive something. If space is part of the natural, spontaneous self from which seeing arises, then obstruction must also be part of this self. Space can only exist in conjunction with obstruction. Obstruction, which blocks space, must exist in space. Thus, both of these seeming opposites must also be part of the true, spontaneous self, if such a self truly exists.

## Causes and Conditions

Ananda thought about these principles and he agreed: there can only be seeing when there are opposites, light and darkness, space and obstruction. The totality must be present for seeing to occur. Thus, he began to understand that seeing does not arise from the self, nor does it simply arise spontaneously. He concludes that seeing must derive from causes and conditions; that is, the doctrine whereby any given phenomenon arises directly as a result of the influence of another phenomenon or phenomena.

But the Buddha does not accept causes and conditions as the reason for seeing. He explains that seeing does not exist because of light, darkness, space or obstruction. If seeing existed because of light, for example, darkness would not be seen. If it existed because of darkness, light would not be seen.

Trying to understand the nature of seeing through worldly knowledge, Ananda will forever be led astray. The Buddha compares this to trying to catch the void with your hand.

Buddhism does not speak of a true self, nor does it speak of natural, spontaneous arising, but it does speak of causes and conditions. Nevertheless, when Ananda said that it was causes and conditions that give rise to seeing, the Buddha still rejects the statement.

Ananda is somewhat puzzled by this. He asks the Buddha, "World Honored One, if the nature of wonderful enlightenment has neither causes nor conditions, why has the Buddha always told us that the nature of seeing exists because of the four conditions of voidness, light, mind, and eye? What does all this mean?"

The Buddha states that he spoke of worldly causes and conditions, which has nothing to do with supreme reality. He continues to question Ananda, and asks him what a worldly man takes seeing to be. Ananda replies, "When a worldly man sees forms by the light of the sun, moon, or a lamp, he calls it seeing, but in the absence of such light, he cannot see anything."

The Buddha continues, and shows Ananda that though it may seem that seeing ceases in the absence of light, the nature of seeing does not cease for an



Photo by Dyu Ha

instant, regardless of whether anything is actually perceived. Seeing, he tells Ananda, must be understood as it occurs through four states: light, darkness, the void, and obstruction.

Finally, the Buddha tells Ananda that when he clearly understands the seeing that is beyond seeing, his false ideas about the existence of self and the doctrine of causes and conditions will fall away.

## Western Worldly View

Now I will speak of the essential difference between the worldly view of things and the Buddhadharmic view, so that we may perhaps understand the difference between Ananda's "seeing" and the Buddha's "seeing."

The typical Western worldly view is that if something is this, then it's not that. If it's not one, then it's two. There are, of course, concepts of combination: one and two, inner and outer, self and others, few and many. But these are not the concepts of Buddhadharmic. In the view of Buddhadharmic, any attachment to phenomena, views, or ideas is wrong, is inaccurate. Any idea of an original substance behind all phenomena or of true emptiness within emptiness is wrong. But sentient beings will always attach to something.

The Buddha sees this attachment of sentient beings and how it prevents them from attaining liberation. Therefore, he teaches that any attachment, even to something which is perceived as the truest or most correct, will block liberation. It is this attachment and the way to break it that the sutra addresses.

Let me return to the discussion of nature or spontaneity and causes and conditions. There was in ancient India a particular sect that believed that all things arise naturally or spontaneously. This is a belief that all things in the universe come into being

not by the power of a god or the power of man, but by a natural power which exists in the universe in and of itself. All things come into being or pass away according to laws that accord with this power.

There's something to be said for this view. We know that no man or group of men have the power to cause all things in the universe to arise. And the average person, who normally does not interact directly with a god, necessarily finds it difficult to understand how another being could be able to bring things into existence. Thus, it makes a certain amount of sense that things should arise naturally by a natural power, because people see the workings of nature all around them. This sect does not only teach materialism; its adherents recognize a spiritual side to life, too.

But there are problems with these views. If everything transpires according to natural law, then no god or any man has the power to influence the comings and goings of things. Those who adhere to this view would not pray. It would be totally useless. Self-cultivation, also, would be pointless. However, this sect does promote self-cultivation, but only to the end of coming to an understanding of and a merging with this natural power. Thus, in following these precepts, adherents seek to obtain freedom from the constraints of the material world. In point of fact, they see the material world as arising naturally and spontaneously, and it is by understanding the principles behind the material world, that they seek to transcend it.

## Taoist Views

The corresponding Chinese school of thought is Taoism, as it is set forth by Lao Tzu. Concisely put, Taoism holds that man lives on the earth, under the rules of the earth. The earth abides by the rules of heaven, and heaven follows the path or *tao* of nature, or spontaneity. Ultimately, man must accord with the *tao*.

In the *I Ching*, it says that the tao is beyond the material world. The tao itself is immaterial. But Lao Tzu took this idea one step further, and said that the spirit and the material can be united in accord with the tao. Lao Tzu teaches naturalness and spontaneity, but he does not teach of a god or gods. There is no personal god in Taoism, only a power or force that underlies and controls the universe.

There is an understanding in Taoism that when one extreme is reached, there is a movement back towards the other extreme. When the apogee of goodness is reached, then, there is a backsliding toward the negative, toward disintegration. When the utmost negative is reached, there is movement towards the positive.

This concept is related to the idea of yin and yang, and is somewhat different from the Indian school of thought. According to Taoism, good and bad are not separate. If you wish to reach the good, then place yourself in the bad. To get something, you need only discard it. There is a famous Taoist saying: "The more you get rid of, the more you have." Thus, the more you help others, the more you help yourself. This is an interesting principle. Think about it. If you're poor, and you give away what little you have, are you acquiring wealth? If you have one wife, does that you mean you could give her away, and still have a wife? This would be a misunderstanding of the concept. What is really meant here is that you have the perfect wife when you are unmarried, because the potential exists for any woman in the world to be your wife. If you are already married, then you already have a wife; all other women are excluded.

## No Real Opposites

When you distill what Lao Tzu is saying, it comes down to a doctrine where there are no real opposites:

no self and no other, no good and no bad. This comes pretty close to Buddhism. What about self-cultivation? For Lao Tzu, according with the natural and spontaneous is cultivation. To do so is to be in accord with the tao.

Lao Tzu describes the following as an ideal example of harmony with the tao: There are two distinct villages, so close that when the dogs and chickens cry out in one village, they can be heard distinctly in the next. But no one in either village ever visits the other. They are true and integrated unto themselves. This is the best way for the world to be, in his view. With no interaction, there is no competition, no strife. Everyone lives out his or her life peacefully. What does it mean to be in accord with nature? To be aware of and in harmony with the earth, water, wind – all natural elements, and with all the animals and beings that live among these elements. To alter this state by human interference is to stray from the Tao. If I live on one bank of a river, and you live on the other, and I build a bridge so that we can meet, then I depart from natural purity. I have my water, you have yours. Why interact with each other? In this Taoist ideal, there is no vexation. You act only in accord with nature. There is no need to remove oneself to high in the mountains to undergo rigorous self-cultivation. All that is a waste of time. It only causes trouble.

In the sutra, Ananda is referring to the Indian school of naturalness and spontaneity, not Taoism.

Most people are willing to accept some of the principles of these schools of naturalness or spontaneity. Some aspects of these teachings are correct, and are easily followed. However, these philosophies taken as a whole fall somewhat short, and the consequences of following them to the extreme would not be desirable. In India the natural philosophy was never dominant. In China, although there is much



Taoist literature, few actually strived to achieve the ideal Taoist state. Few would go that far. The man on the street is not likely to follow these philosophies all the way to their logical end. Only a very philosophically minded person would try to totally integrate such views into his life.

## All Phenomena Are Empty

Now, let's return to the teaching of causes and conditions. We said earlier that there is a difference between the worldly view and the Buddhadharmic view of causes and conditions. Let's look at the example given in the sutra. The Buddha speaks of four conditions necessary for sight: light, space, an eye to see, and a form to be seen. And for the ear to hear? Well, there's no need for light, but there are still three conditions necessary: ear, space, and mind. And the sense of touch or sensations in the body? There must be body, mind, and a sense of feeling.

For any phenomenon to be experienced there must be at least two conditions present.

However, if you think that reality can be experienced by virtue of the senses working through these conditions – the four for seeing, three for hearing, and so on – then there is a problem with your view of the self. We can understand what light is, what the eye is, what space is, but not what the mind is. Take seeing, for example. If you believe mind still exists when the other three conditions – eye, light, and space – are removed, then you are wrong. If you believe that there is no mind when these three conditions are removed, then you are also wrong. The seemingly logical, worldly view of causes and conditions is not true Buddhadharmic.

In Buddhadharmic there is a saying: "Causes and conditions give rise to phenomena, but the base nature of all phenomena is empty." It is the second part of this phrase that is important, that gives the essential difference between the worldly and the

Buddhadharmic view of causes and conditions. What is this emptiness? What does it mean? If you believe that it is the self, then that is wrong, of course. If you believe that emptiness is just emptiness – absolute nothingness, a state where there's nothing there – then that is also wrong. We will touch on emptiness many times as we continue reading in the sutra. 🍃



Photo by Nong

# *All Is Me, All Is Not Me*

————— BY —————  
VENERABLE GUO XING

Venerable Guo Xing is a Dharma heir of the late Chan Master Sheng Yen. He has served as the abbot of the Dharma Drum Retreat Center in Pine Bush, New York, as well as the Chan Meditation Center in Queens, New York. This article was first published in the Chinese *Śūraṅgama Journal*, Issue 18. English Translation by Jasmine Wang, editing by Keith Brown and Angela Yu.

CHAN MASTER SEN ZHAO once remarked, “An enlightened person has no self, yet nothing in the universe is not him. The dharma body has no boundaries – therefore, who said this is the self and those are others?”

Every moment is mind and phenomena. Every moment has both the ocean and the waves. The true mind is empty, yet simultaneously encompasses everything and manifests everything. Once the mind mistakenly takes that it needs an object to be aware of in order to have awareness, duality arises from the mind that originally had no duality. Once the mind intends to interact with an object, duality arises, and subject and object are created. Just as Descartes said, “I think, therefore I am,” the mind originally without

duality now gives rise to duality: “thinking” became object and “I” became subject. The true mind of emptiness gives rise to the empty space, the true mind interacts continuously with the empty space, and because of this interaction, it gradually forms the four elements (earth, water, fire and wind), and then forms the world. In fact, from the beginning to the end, there is only mind.

## Empty Void

The way empty space appears is like a wheel of flame. When the flame revolves and makes a circle, it appears that the circle is made with a single continuous flame. In reality, the flame only appears at one



particular spot on the circle at any given time. The flame image at the previous spot on the circle actually disappears as soon as a flame appears on the next spot. When the mind intends to be aware of an object, it continues to bring its awareness there. From the beginning to the end, it's only the mind there. The subject that is aware and the object of awareness are all just the mind. It's either a previous thought or a latter thought.

This is analogous to an old man who plays chess with himself: he walks to his opponent's side to place a chess piece, then walks back to his own side and places another chess piece. When he walks back, the previous old man on the opponent's side disappears. He then goes back and forth, again and again. With this continuous process, the old man on the opponent's side seems to become an actual person. In reality, it is only his disappeared previous thought. This disappeared thought is like the empty void. Empty void is analogous to the computer screen, it is void of any pictures (phenomena), like a stage which allows phenomena to arise. The mind continues to interact

with this empty void and gives rise to all types of phenomena. This is just like when the computer inputs sixty million pixels to the monitor, the input pixels now become pictures. The duality, which is the continuous interaction between the subject and object, generates empty space, the world, and sentient beings.

This is just like being in a dream consisting of pedestrian A, pedestrian B, leading male character, leading female character, and everything else. They are all creations of the mind. Therefore, all is me. However, we mistakenly take one of them as me and take the rest as existence other than me. This is described in the *Great Compassion Repentance Ceremony* as "Within all equal dharma, subject (me) and object (you) arise."

From daily life, we can analyze this. For example, when we talk to someone, we might think: "I don't agree with you." In fact, my mind first picks up your image as you, and then picks up your language (voice). Following the twelve links of dependent origination – contact, feeling, craving, grasping, and becoming, our mind starts to judge, to perceive, to

determine, and eventually, it takes on the form of “I don’t agree with you.” An ordinary person’s mind is quite coarse so he/she usually cannot observe all the detailed processing of the mind, (i.e., the mind grasps a form, drops a form, again grasps another form and then drops that form.) The whole process happens so quickly that we don’t see all the individual events. All we feel is: “I don’t agree with you.”

## Like Changing Clothes

The process of taking forms is like the non-abiding true person (mind) changing into different clothes. The non-abiding true person puts on this piece of clothing, immediately takes it off, and changes into a different piece of clothing. When I see you, it’s my mind taking on your appearance. It’s just like the non-abiding true person putting on the clothes of appearance; when I hear your voice, it’s my mind taking on your sound, analogous to the non-abiding true person taking off the clothes of your appearance and changing into the clothes of your sound. And it continues like this. From the beginning to the end, this non-abiding true person keeps changing clothes. It’s been always like this.

These forms are all perceived by me or illuminated by me, therefore, it’s all me. However, these forms arise and perish one after another, therefore, all these forms are not me. The true self, the true mind with the ability to be aware of everything, neither arises nor perishes. It’s like the ocean and the waves. The waves come and go but not the ocean. The phenomena come from Buddha nature (the true mind), just as the waves are from the ocean. The difference lies in that the Buddha nature has the ability to know, to choose, and to judge, etc.

Now we understand the concept. But the mind arises and perishes too fast to contemplate the

process. During meditation, we often believe we are observing our thoughts. In reality, ordinary people can only glimpse the perishing part of the thought, but not the arising part. Only enlightened people can catch the arising part of the thought. When the previous thought disappears, we then think there is no thought. In fact, a new deluded thought of “I don’t have any thought,” or “my mind is calm,” appears.

In fact, our present thought has always been chasing the previous thought that had already disappeared. Since we don’t know that the previous thought has disappeared, we have always been interacting with it. Targeting at the previous thought, the present thought now becomes the “subject,” and the disappeared previous thought becomes the “object.”

## Cease Continuous Grasping

When we understand this, we now know we are wasting our energy to chase the disappeared previous thought. The correct way is to cease the continuation of the grasping mind. Through the practice of *samatha* (stilling the mind), when the thoughts come, let them come, and when the thoughts go, let them go. This practice also includes all kinds of sensations and feelings. No grasping or rejecting. No reacting. Simply illuminate without any objects.

Using the concept of “all is me, and all is not me,” we can transform our upside-down view of dividing everything into “self” and “others” in our daily life. First we need to establish the right view by seeing clearly the upside-down view is erroneous. Then, with the practice of meditation, we work on cutting off the continuation of the grasping mind. When the mind no longer abides in any objects, and the subject/object duality completely dissolves, we will then truly experience the right view through the unity of theory and practice. 🌿

# Until We Reach Buddhahood

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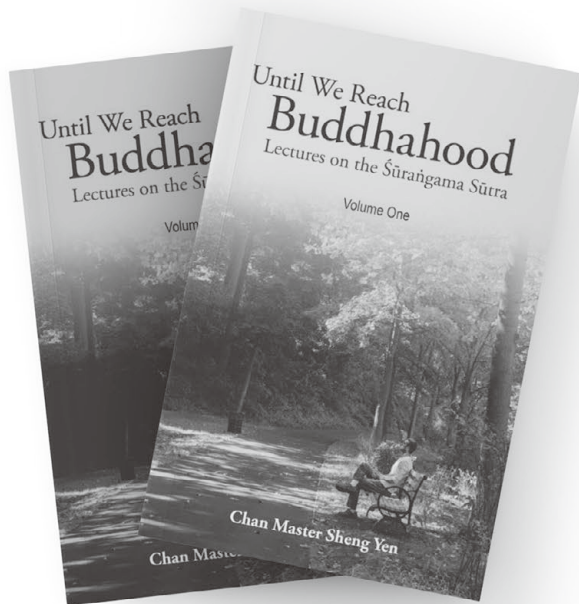
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*The* AWAKENING *of the* BUDDHA MIND:  
TURNING *the* MIND'S EYE INWARD

————— BY —————  
GILBERT GUTIERREZ

Gilbert Gutierrez is a Dharma Heir of Chan Master Sheng Yen with over thirty-nine 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. He also lectures weekly classes at his own group in Riverside, California. His Riverside Chan website ([www.riversidechan.org](http://www.riversidechan.org)) includes a lively “meet up” site and a weekly Dharma Talk podcast. Access to written transcripts of the weekly lectures is also available. This article is an excerpt from a lecture given to a Taiwanese audience over Zoom. Edited by Esther Leong and Buffe Maggie Laffey.

**T**HE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MAHAYANA concept of a bodhisattva has evolved over the years, from the description of the Buddha’s path of enlightenment, then to devotional and reverential, then pointing to the Buddhist practice itself, and then to both practice and devotional.

In awakening of the Mahayana practice, the bodhisattva concept served as the turning point (turning of the Dharma wheel) to embody the right view. By virtue of unexcelled transcendent wisdom the great compassion of the Buddha is demonstrated. It is shown beyond words and phrases, thus using Buddhadharma as the platform to avoid intellectualism and pass through the indescribable gateless gate.

In the Nikāyas, there were references to a bodhisattva, but they refer to the progress of Śākyamuni Buddha becoming a buddha, and so it predated his complete enlightenment. The concept of a bodhisattva, then Buddhist doctrine, has changed from one descriptive of the stages of practice, to a practice that was more than devotional. But this devotion was expressed in selflessness.

For instance, in an early sutra there was an example where one practitioner was so impressed with his master, that he actually sold himself in servitude to provide his master with whatever support he could give him. In fact, he invited five hundred others to join in doing that, selling themselves to

benefit this bodhisattva. You can see that there is a bit of change here from this devotional aspect of it, to the person with this ultimate gift that is being offered. But this is the direction in which bodhisattva practice began to head.

As a definition of a bodhisattva then: a practitioner who is able to reach nirvana, but delays doing so out of compassion. The practitioner delays doing so out of compassion, in order to save suffering beings. And in some definitions of a bodhisattva, it is said that they forego ultimate enlightenment and vow to be reborn again for the purpose of delivering sentient beings. Another source defines a bodhisattva as being one who has taken a vow to be reborn as many times as is necessary, in order to attain the highest possible goal, which is the deliverance of sentient beings.

This is very interesting because when we compare it to the *Diamond Sutra*, the sutra points out that there are no sentient beings to deliver. And concludes that this world an illusion, a phantasm, or a dream.

## Self Nature of Mind

I remember going to my first retreat, and listening to Samantabhadra’s four great vows. There were two verses of the liturgy that were identical except that the second version adds three additional words. The first version is: “I vow to deliver innumerable sentient

beings.” The second version is: “I vow to deliver innumerable sentient beings of self nature.” This is very interesting; in the retreat I was thinking, “What self nature? I do not know.” All four vows in the second version end with “of self nature.”

These two verses show the progression of Buddhadharmā. The first verse is making the vow: we can equate it to the four noble truths that there is suffering, et cetera. In the second verse, everything is the self nature of mind. There was a turning point in Buddhadharmā (and a turning point in your individual practice that I hope all of you will realize) that this is the self nature of mind. If one has a profound realization of this absolute truth, there is no way one could ignore the bodhisattva path. The turning point was demonstrated by the *Heart Sutra*. There is no suffering, as all is the function of the self nature of mind.

We do not follow the path to deliver sentient beings. [**Translator:** Sorry, can you repeat that?] Yes, because I know you are confused at what I said. There are a lot of people who will be confused, but I meant it to be this way: We do not practice to save sentient beings. That would be in conflict with every single Mahayana *vaipulya* sutra. We make a vow to deliver illusory sentient beings of self nature. This distinction is very important. It goes to the heart of Mahayana and *Ekayāna* [One Vehicle]. We know from the *Diamond Sutra* that all phenomena is an illusion. What is important about this is that we studied the four noble truths of suffering, the cause of suffering and cessation of suffering, and the deliverance from suffering.

We now see the prajñāpāramitā sutras, in particular the *Heart Sutra*, announcing something different. “Śāriputra, there is no suffering, no cause of suffering, no cessation of suffering, and no path.” What? How is that? It can only be if everything is mind, and not real. Now, many of you who have heard me before know what I am going to say, but

I will say this because some of you may have not heard it before. The *Heart Sutra* comes from the wisdom sutra class, prajñāpāramitā. And normally, when wisdom is being talked about, it is Mañjuśrī who is speaking. But here we have Avalokiteśvara, also known as Guānshìyīn Púsà, that is realizing this deep prajñāpāramitā. Avalokiteśvara is speaking to Śāriputra. Normally in a wisdom sutra, it would be Subhūti that Mañjuśrī would be talking to.

But this sutra represents a great shift in the Buddhadharmā, away from the Theravada practice. Theravada doctrine followed the *Abhidharmā*; the term “abhi” in Sanskrit means most excellent or highest, and contingent on the premise that everything is real. Here the Mahayanists are correcting Śāriputra: “No, Śāriputra, form is not other than emptiness, emptiness is not other than form.” Śāriputra is a great bodhisattva, but here he is being talked down to like a school boy. And the reason why is because to the Theravadins, Śāriputra’s wisdom and practice was at the highest level. To the Mahayanists, they wanted to take the top person in the Theravada doctrine and chop him down. Not only him but the *Abhidharmā* that propounded everything is real. The *Heart Sutra* advanced that all was empty and the highest wisdom produced was *anuttarā-samyak-saṃbodhi*.

## Goddesses Rain Down Flowers

The *Heart Sutra* was patterned after a negation of all that is put forth in the *Abhidharmā*. It was intended that way by the Mahayanists to clarify that this was a major shift towards the idea of emptiness and *Ekayāna*. With this shift, unfortunately, throughout the Mahayana sutras Śāriputra is humiliated. Now, in the *Vimalakīrti Sutra*, the chauvinistic aspect of the Theravada practice was exposed. Śāriputra suffered from those discriminations. You know the



word chauvinistic? It means a male preference. It is important: in the *Vimalakīrti Sutra*, there is an occurrence that exposes a preference in the Theravada practice for males. In particular, only males could reach enlightenment.

In one passage, the goddesses were raining down flowers on all of the bodhisattvas and buddhas. The flowers stuck on Śāriputra's robe, but only on his robe, not on anyone else's. After a while he looked like a parade float with so many flowers on him. The goddesses had to explain to this bodhisattva that the flowers stuck to him because his mind was still discriminating. This again represented the shift in Mahayana thinking of everything being empty. There is no apprehension of any phenomenon. Imagine, put yourself in that position: you are a true bodhisattva-mahāsattva and the goddesses are raining down these flowers, creating this beautiful scene. The bodhisattvas would be aware of it, but take no personal interest in it. Their minds would not move. But Śāriputra's mind moved, therefore the flowers stuck to him.

Why did they stick to him? Śāriputra was wearing a simple robe but it is now adorned with flowers.

He thought this is not proper. Śāriputra suffered the same fate when a goddess asked him a question, and he remained silent. But the reason he remained silent was he did not know the answer. Now compare that to another instance in the *Vimalakīrti Sutra* where somebody remained silent: all of the bodhisattvas were discussing what emptiness meant. Finally, Mañjuśrī said, "You cannot discuss emptiness in words. There is no way you can discuss emptiness." And then they turned to the great layperson Vimalakīrti and asked him, "What do you say?" and Vimalakīrti said nothing. Mañjuśrī already said you cannot talk about it. This is the aspect of Chan which is beyond words and phrases. It is the realization of the self nature of mind.

## The Shortcut

Now I am going to tell you something important so please take note. There is a verse in the Chan liturgy that goes as follows: "To know all the Buddhas of the past, present and future, perceive that dharmadhātu nature is all created by the mind." This is what the ancients called the shortcut. The practice of the four great vows, the five precepts, the six paramitas, the eightfold path, and the thirty-seven factors of enlightenment, are all secondary practices compared to this. These practices work from the dream (samsara) side out. There is not a single thing that appears outside of mind. All that appears is because of *prāṭhyasamutpāda* (causes and conditions never fail.) All is created by the mind.



Photo by Kerri Shaver

If one can truly turn the mind's eye inward and have a realization, then we cannot even call the Buddha the Buddha. Everything is appearing in accordance with *pratītyasamutpāda*. There are no sentient beings to deliver or they would be apart from the Buddha. The name of the Buddha, we could say the proper name for the Buddha, is not "the Buddha." The Sanskrit name is *Tathāgata*, or *Tathā-āgata*. The first means "thus gone one." It is where even the one returns to. The second, *Tathā-āgata*, means "thus come one." The best translation in



English for this word, is thusness or suchness. Can anyone define what thusness means, or suchness? It is undefinable. It is inconceivable. As I mentioned before: mind knows you, but you cannot know it. The realization of a bodhisattva is to discover that the whole phenomenal world is illusory. Yet we look at the *Heart Sutra* and say, then why is Guānyīn Púsà saying this and representing the *Heart Sutra*, why is that so? What difference would it matter?

## Buddha Mind Is the Dreamer

What difference would it make to awaken these sentient beings when we know that they are illusory? The difference is this; I can tell it in a story: Once I was at Ohio University giving a lecture. I had just talked about what I talked about right now. And this young student went, "I don't understand if you're saying this and if everything is just an illusion or a dream, why would we practice?" I asked her, "You are a student here?" and she said, "Yes." "And you

live in the dormitory?" and she said, "Yes." "And you have a roommate?" and she said, "Yes." And I said, "Suppose in the middle of the night, you observed your roommate having a bad dream. What would you do?" She said, "Of course, I would wake her up." And then I said, "What for? It's just a dream." You see this is a very important part. It is kind of humorous but it goes to the essence of the point. We do not wake up the sentient being. The sentient being is not slumbering. The sentient being is a dream. It is the buddha mind or part of it that is trapped in this dream, believing to be a sentient being, but all that is fabricated. The buddha mind is the dreamer!

I generally never talk about enlightenment unless it is a reference to some passage in a sutra or a treatise. I do not like people even calling me a teacher. Because they will say, "Oh teacher Gilbert, such and such." I have nothing to teach. But please keep listening until you realize I have nothing to teach.

We already know the phenomenal side of mind. That is the dream side of the conditioned mind. That

is a tough one to not only understand but accept. You had to go look at both sides together: the conditioned mind, and what the conditioned mind is projected upon. The phenomenal means the conditioned, the appearances that occur within mind.

While I do not talk about enlightenment, I talk about awakening. Who awakens? If you think that your corporeal body is going to become enlightened, that is not going to happen. You already possess the buddha mind. You are part of the Buddha. When there is a true, sincere realization of that, you are now deep into the bodhisattva path. Your only concern at that time is delivering illusory sentient beings, we can call it, but the true function is awakening the trapped buddha mind. It is this aspect that the bodhisattvas return to continually awaken their own clan.

## The Clan of the Absolute

There is a sutra called the *Ratnagotravibhāga Sutra*. As I was looking into it, I wanted to know what the name meant. *Vibhāga* means treatise or explanation or, let's say, the path in terms of that. *Ratnagotra* is very important: the term "ratna" means the highest or the absolute. The term "gotra" has many definitions, but the one that stuck with me was that it meant a clan, a class of people. This was very important to me, because in that instant I realized that beyond the sentient beings, the mind is the clan of the absolute. It changed my way of looking at people, so that whenever I saw a person, I saw Buddha: the mind that was there is the buddha mind. But it is just this mind that moves this body around, just the mind that you are using to listen is the buddha mind.

Even though we course through this world, knowing that it is a dream, it matters to awaken those buddhas that are trapped. This is the heart of a bodhisattva, this is bodhicitta. This was the evolution of

Buddhadharma, away from simply a personal goal of reaching nirvana. This is why the Mahayanists took such great pains to appear to humiliate Śāriputra. I have left out part of the story of Śāriputra in the *Vimalakīrti Sutra*. At one point because of Śāriputra's inability to understand the Dharma, a goddess changed him into a woman. In the early parts of Buddhism, one of the prerequisites was you had to be a man. Now you have this "lowly" goddess that has enough power to change Śāriputra into a woman. Can you imagine his surprise? How is he going to be enlightened in the body of a woman? The goddess eventually restored his appearance to the body of a man. But the point was made, it neither matters whether one is a monastic or a layperson, such as Vimalakīrti, or a man or a woman, like the Queen Śrīmālā from the *Lion's Roar Sutra*, it does not matter. Mind is mind. In the doctrine of Mahayana, they wanted to make it clear: "maha" meant the highest, above "ahbi," with "yana" being the vehicle. The Mahayana vehicle is one in which they say it is "no path" because it is a recognition that everything is mind. Please let it sink in and contemplate it, and it will help you to be able to understand pratītyasamutpāda and mind.

The final point I will make brings us back to the *Heart Sutra* and Avalokiteśvara. He is the key to the *Heart Sutra*. It is the shortcut. When Avalokiteśvara perceived that all five skandhas are empty, the key was the perception which is limited to observations of illusory projections.

Avalokiteśvara was using the mind's own perception. This perception is infinite and unlimited. It is the "knowing" aspect of the mind that transcends appearance and projections. It is intimate with the mind ground (dharmakāya). It is our self nature. Contemplate this. To contemplate we do not think, but just let the mind rest in the present moment. 🌸

Among Friends – In Memory of

# Thích Nhất Hạnh

11 October 1926 to 22 January 2022

———— BY ————  
DJORDJE CVIJIC

Thích Nhất Hạnh was a Thiền (Vietnamese Chan) Buddhist monk, peace activist, prolific author, poet and teacher. He founded the Plum Village Tradition, historically recognized as the main inspiration for engaged Buddhism. Known as the “father of mindfulness,” he was a major influence on Western practices of Buddhism. Djordje Cvijic is a tea master currently living in his native Croatia. Djordje was a long-time resident of the Dharma Drum Retreat Center, and prior to that had also been a resident at Thích Nhất Hạnh’s Plum Village Buddhist Monastery in France.



**M**ASTER SHENG YEN (SHIFU) FOUNDED the Dharma Drum Retreat Center (DDRC) in 1997. Ten years later, Thích Nhất Hạnh (known to his followers as *Thầy*, which means master or teacher) founded Blue Cliff Monastery. The two centers sit just a few miles away from each other in Pine Bush, New York.

In 2007, *Thầy* closed his Green Mountain Dharma Center in Vermont, and moved that community to the new Blue Cliff Monastery in New York. We learned of that move through some local members of our weekly meditation group; they were a little nervous to tell us, fearing that we might have some sense of competition. But we at DDRC knew all about Shifu and *Thầy*'s friendship, so when the news came that Plum Village folks were moving into our immediate neighborhood, we rejoiced. We gladly helped in that transfer and in the first days of their arrival, establishing a warm connection between the two centers which continues to this day.

We became so close that we would visit unannounced, sometimes bringing curious guests with us.



Thích Nhất Hạnh (right), Ven. Guo Ming (middle), and Djordje Cvijic (back) *Archive Photo*

We were always greeted cheerfully and with friendliness at every step. We even helped organize an entire retreat for them in our Chan Hall before they built their own meditation hall. To this day, the Blue Cliff folk rent DDRC dorm rooms for their overflow retreat guests.

At one-point *Thầy* shared a memory of childhood with us and that memory was full of enjoyment of Chinese cuisine. The next weekend, a whole team of cooks led by Venerable Guo Ming (who was at that time the abbess of CMC) were arranged to come to DDRC from New York City. They went straight to the kitchen to finish cooking what they brought with them. Without any prior announcement, a rich Chinese lunch was served at Blue Cliff Monastery, causing a joyful bustle among nuns and monks. While *Thầy* happily tried out and recognized varieties of Chinese food, Venerable Guo Ming read a letter of greetings from Shifu.

On another day, equally unexpected and unannounced, two cars full of nuns and monks accompanied by *Thầy* arrived at DDRC. This time we

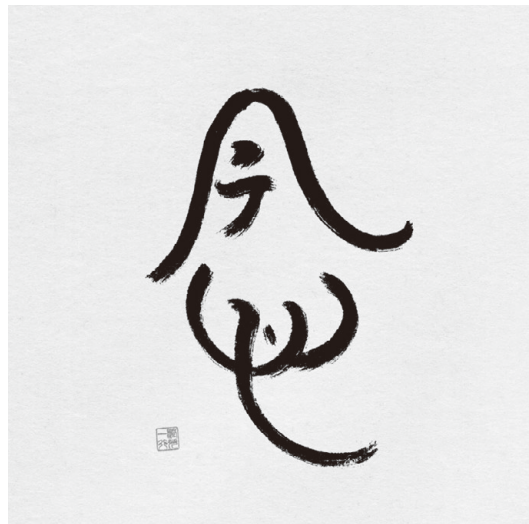
were happily surprised and, to be honest, consternated! For the first time, the grand middle door of our Chan Hall opened for a special guest, who inspected and questioned everything with child-like curiosity. The most famous tea lover in the world brought his calligraphy as a gift (it still hangs in the reception hall) and he was offered Chinese tea, together with his entourage. After that he received gifts which were thoughtful but had to be found quickly. To the question: How does he feel? He answered: Among friends!

In early autumn of 2007, a few of us joined Thầy's peace walk around the nearby Ashokan Reservoir. With the special atmosphere which always accompanied Thầy, the "ordinary walk" turned into an experience that would be remembered for a lifetime. In Thầy's presence, everything became spontaneous and yet everything was filled with the symbolism of the lifelong path of peace, not only for one group of people, but peace for all people. The boundaries and differences of East and West disappeared and the world became a community of all!

Although both Plum Village and Dharma Drum are bearers of the Buddha's teachings, there were traditional-historical differences in the approaches or as it is usually called, "methods." We have often heard Plum Village folks tell each other in amazement how our DDRC retreats were completely independent and completely "inside" organized. They were surprised that the day before a retreat at DDRC, there was "no one," and then the retreat started right on time, and everything went exactly on a schedule! They marveled at the complete silence which prevailed at DDRC even in the volunteer working groups.

We, on the other hand, marveled at the appearances of whole families with children at their retreats, and the presence of children at Dharma talks. These children, the whole group of them, usually accompanied by a couple of nuns, would leave after a short time during the talks. We were also amazed at the number of a few hundred, sometimes close to a thousand people on retreats. We were surprised that after lunch, the lay meditators would form separate smaller groups and exchange their experiences through conversations.

Thầy's Dharma talks were often interrupted by a well-known ritual – the message of drinking a cup of tea. Whoever witnessed it, saw it and experienced it, had a memory for the rest of their life. There was no



念 *Niàn*: *Mindfulness*, Chinese calligraphy by Thích Nhất Hạnh. The Chinese character for "mindfulness" is a combination of two separate characters. The upper part 今 *Jīn* means "now" or "here" and the lower part 心 *Xīn* stands for "mind" or "heart."

announcement, no call for "special attention". At one point during his talks, Thầy would slowly, calmly, set aside the white chalk which he used to write Chinese characters on the board as part of his Dharma presentations. We all knew he did this as a memento, out of gratitude to his Dharma teachers, who also used Chinese characters. Then he would set out with slow steps towards a table with a cup and a thermos of tea. Time ceased to exist, and everything would stop while he drank tea. Whoever saw this experienced and received the teaching "now and here" in a unique, direct Chan way. From mind to mind. From heart to heart. No wonder that heart and mind are the same symbol-character in Chinese!

The two teachers are no longer physically with us. We continue to grow old, busy with nothing to do, not coming and not going. May the two traditions continue to enrich and nourish each other, among friends. 🌱

# Incomplete Enlightenments

— BY —  
THÍCH NHẬT HẠNH

Thích Nhất Hạnh (Thầy), the founder of the Plum Village tradition, and our founder Master Sheng Yen (Shifu) enjoyed a long and friendly relationship. Thầy visited Dharma Drum Mountain in Taiwan for the first time in 1995, when he and Shifu held a public talk on *Chan and Environmental Protection: The Mindfulness of Pollution and Protecting the Spiritual Environment*. Thầy visited Taiwan again in 2011 where he and Shifu held a joint calligraphy exhibition. This article was written by Thầy as the foreword for Shifu's book *Complete Enlightenment* (New York: Dharma Drum Publications, 1997).

**I**N THE TRUE TEACHING OF LORD BUDDHA, complete enlightenment is made of incomplete enlightenments. This means that in the heart of your daily mindful actions, thoughts, and speech, complete enlightenment is already there, and you should not strive to look for complete enlightenment anywhere else.

Suppose you are on the road between Boston and New York. Looking in one direction is Boston; looking in the other direction is New York. If you want to go to Boston, you should turn in the direction of Boston. Once you have turned in the direction of Boston, Boston is already in you. But if you turn in the direction of New York, Boston is lost. Lost,

but it is still there for you, if you know how to turn around. Every point of the road contains Boston. And any point of the road contains New York. Complete enlightenment and complete ignorance are exactly the same. They contain each other.

In our practice, we listen to the Dharma, we participate in Dharma discussions to deepen our understanding, and we find ways to apply the Dharma in our daily life: sitting, standing, walking, eating, drinking, cleaning, cooking. . . . *The Sutra of Complete Enlightenment* is a Dharma discussion between the Buddha and several great bodhisattvas in the presence of a large sangha. If you know how to be there and how to listen, you will be able to actually





Thích Nhất Hạnh visited Taiwan for the first time in 1995, when he and Master Sheng Yen held a public talk. *DDM Archive Photo*

participate in it. It is still going on. And if you do well, you will not get caught in words (like *samatha*, *samapatti*, and *dhyana*!), sentences, and ideas. Many people just enjoy ideas, even great ideas, and are not able to put them into practice. This is something the Buddha does not want us to do.

We should also not be caught in the idea whether such or such sutra was truly spoken directly by the Buddha or by one of his disciples, right in the time of the Buddha or hundreds of years later. If a disciple of the Buddha practices well, and gets the true insight, then his or her words will be the same as the words of the Buddha. If you bear this in mind, you will learn and profit greatly from this well-known sutra.

Chan Master Sheng Yen is a great teacher and I have great confidence in his scholarship and wisdom. I feel privileged to be his friend, and admire what he has been doing for the Buddhadharma in the East as well as in the West. These few lines, written as the foreword to this book, are a wholehearted dedication to that friendship. Please enjoy this beautiful translation of the sutra and also the valuable commentaries and instructions offered by this great and rare teacher. 🌿

Thích Nhất Hạnh  
Plum Village  
December 6, 1996

SMALL SELF

*versus*

NO SELF

BY

NANCY BONARDI



Photo by Marek Piwnicki

Nancy met Chan Master Sheng Yen in 1978, when he was a student in her English class. She became his meditation student shortly thereafter. She has taught metta contemplation and beginner meditation classes, and she has led one day retreats at the Chan Meditation Center (CMC) in Queens, New York. At the Dharma Drum Retreat Center (DDRC) she co-led the Beginner's Mind retreat. She has been a guest speaker at the Insight Meditation Center in Fort Wayne, Indiana. Nancy lives in Virginia and Indiana. This article is an excerpt from her new book *Accept and Continue*.

## The Huatou Method

SINCE COUNTING THE BREATH WAS TAUGHT in the beginners' meditation classes, it was the method used for retreats as well. Shifu had introduced another approach called the *huatou* method, whereby practitioners asked a riveting question without stress yet with urgency – really wanting to know the answer. It could arise naturally, or it could be given to the practitioner by the teacher. On one retreat, Shifu suggested that I try the method by asking the question “Who am I?” To my way of thinking, it was a very advanced method, and because it was not really my question, I felt reluctant to give it a try. I barely got to the point of counting reasonably well, of facing the pain in my legs, and of accepting the challenge of not moving till the bell was rung. So it felt inconceivable that I could attempt Shifu's suggestion. I felt it would bring me closer to the states that terrified me, such as enlightenment, samadhi, and the worst one: no self. What did they mean anyway? Shifu addressed “no-self” during one of the lectures.

He said, “Many people don't understand what it really means. When we give up entangling vexations, there's a sense of great freedom. What did the Buddha do when he was enlightened, freed from the snares of delusion? He delivered his family. He shared his insights with his five companions. He returned to his wife, son, and father to teach them the path.”

I felt that by using the comforting word *family*, Shifu wanted us to see that there was a down-to-earth outcome to our practice, a practical outcome by giving our best self to others, best because it had been purified and made sincere. This helped me a great deal because I had the fear that I would be emotionally removed from my daughter, parents, family and friends. Instead, the fruits of insight would create tangible, spontaneous, lively connections without attachment and the need to cling.

Despite these adjustments to my understanding, I expressed some wishful thinking. When I spoke to Shifu next, I wished he were in my head and could redirect and help me when I was doing the method incorrectly. Since that was ridiculous and certainly impossible, I asked myself: What would I say if I had a student like me? I would tell her: Be patient. Many sittings will be clumsy. There will be a few settled minutes, and that's quite normal. Watch what kind of thoughts were popping up. That would diminish their appeal and their power.

The time had come for me to integrate my own advice.

## A Different Approach

As time went on, I could measure that my hesitation was slipping away. “What the heck am I doing here?” was coming up less and less. A big part of

me knew that some essential aspect of my life had to be there – to face and apply the wisdom of the teachings. Stumbling was also a part of it. Still, I was over-powered by the feeling that the teachings were too confusing. That the leg pain never went away, and the method always went away! Once again, however, I was encouraged by one of Shifu’s evening lectures: “We must isolate ourselves from the past and from the future. Sit with the present.” From that, I tried a different approach with the method. I was still using the counting method, and instead of considering counting numbers as figures 1,2,3..., I pictured them as words floating down a river. Whatever other thoughts floated by, I pushed to the banks of the river and resumed the focus on the ones, twos, and threes.... This was another strategy I tried just as I had with thoughts of my daughter and my husband by safely bringing those thoughts to the side of a river as well. I was still experimenting with expedient means.

When one of the participants expressed his frustration with the method and said he could do it only

sixty percent well, Shifu responded, “The Buddha does things one hundred percent well. We should be glad to do sixty percent!”

That exchange took some of the pressure off myself too. As clumsy as I felt, some aspects of my efforts were very strong. I was determined. I couldn’t give up despite my resistance, confusion, anxiety, laziness, restlessness, selfishness, vanity, and my not being quite “ripe” yet. With that stronger attitude, I told myself that the question “Who am I?” would be an essential next step in my training, a willingness to trust my teacher and the new method.

### Small Self versus No Self

One of the hardest frustrations to face was the idea of *small self* and the idea of *no self*. The distinction intimidated me. At this particular time in my life, I was still teaching in a business college in NYC. I taught not only English grammar and writing, but also professional development, which encouraged a person



Photo by Leon Ephraim

to create a base of self-confidence, self-esteem, and a positive self-image in order to be competent and mature in the everyday world. This contrasted with how we were trained on retreats – to let all that go. I brought this up in an interview. “Does the fear of not letting go mean I am selfish?”

Shifu answered that I was insecure. I felt I had nothing to fall back on. He said I should be like a person willing to leave her house and go outside. The house would still be there, but the view would also be expanded. Shifu had once told us that he meditated every day and as a result, “Even though I have vexations, I know my mind.” I found that compelling, so I asked him to explain that. He continued to say that if he was on an airplane, he didn’t feel afraid. There was no point. On the other hand, he didn’t cross a street carelessly either. He reminded me that we had to practice with a joyful, grateful mind. There was no point in being nervous about conditions that we could not control. He said Westerners have a hard time understanding “no self.” What we held onto – the small self – was limited; when we let go, it’s limitless.

To the group, Shifu later explained that there were three stages of the self.

1. affirm the self
2. mature the self
3. dissolve the self

These stages go on simultaneously! Then he clarified the contradictions when he often told us to “relax” and then to “work hard.” “Relax means you’re not seeking after anything. Work hard means be patient.”

## Emptiness and Non-Attachment

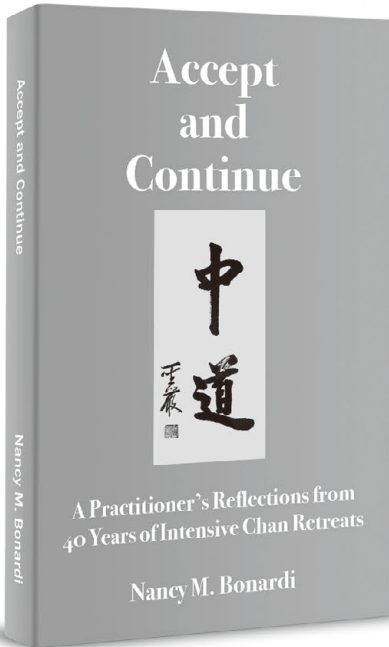
He went on to say, “Many Westerners misinterpret the idea of emptiness, which essentially means that all phenomena are ever-changing and interrelated,



but some practitioners assume it means a void. It actually means non-attachment, whereby a person could react and act selflessly and compassionately. A life that was useless and selfish was truly empty. If one thought ‘What’s the point in this life?’ that was nihilistic.”

Over the years, I had heard many participants claim that during Shifu’s lectures, they often felt he was speaking to them directly by answering a question that had been plaguing them. I had that impression myself, especially with the instances I just described.

During a later interview, I confessed again how the *huatou* method still didn’t fit me at all – all that repetitious questioning. Was I stunned and relieved to hear him tell me, “You yourself don’t ask the question; you ask the *huatou* itself.” I found that shift in looking at it incredibly doable. 🌿



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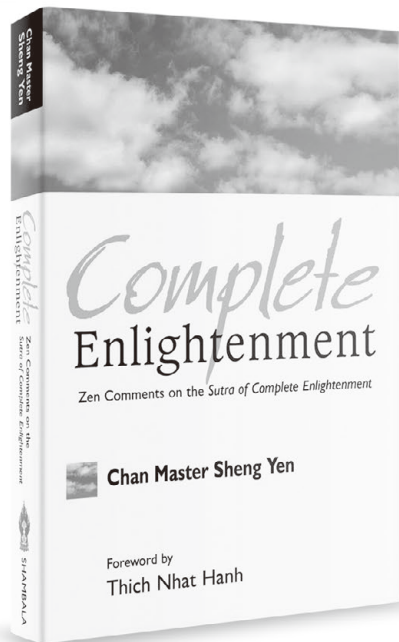
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