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WINTER 2024





The experiences of limitless consciousness, bliss, being, and other feelings associated with samadhi are actually the projections of what we call the “great or expanded sense of self.” Until this particular impediment is removed, enlightenment has not dawned and one is still subject to the bonds of deluded existence.



CHAN MASTER SHENG YEN

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CHAN MAGAZINE

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FROM THE EDITOR

THE MAJORITY OF MASTER SHENG YEN'S western students do not understand or speak Chinese. We have had to rely on translation to hear his oral teachings. This meant listening through long stretches of incomprehensible (to us) speech while the Chinese-speaking audience reacted with delight. Shifu was a wonderful speaker with a wry sense of humor and, during his Dharma talks, it was not uncommon for half the room to suddenly roar with laughter and roll around on their cushions, while we non-Chinese-speakers waited patiently for the translation. More often than not the translation failed to deliver the punchline, and we were left scratching our heads. Longtime student Bob Lapides coined a phrase for this phenomenon: "It was funnier in Chinese."

In such a situation it would be easy for the mind to wander while Shifu was speaking. But I made it a practice to remain focused on him even though I could not understand the words. He was eloquent and amusing in his gestures and the way he used his voice. More than that, he was so genuine in his desire to transmit the Dharma that when he taught, something came through that was beyond words. Especially on retreats, when my mind was very clear, I felt I was receiving wordless teaching while waiting for the English translation.

I've sat through many hours of translated Dharma talks. I've always marveled at the skill of the translators. They sit through surprisingly long segments of speech before providing the English version. I know if I listened to someone speaking for several minutes, I would not be able to repeat back everything they said, even in the *same* language. Beyond that, these translators need to have their own understanding of the Dharma and of very specific Buddhist terminology.

Two articles in this issue are by senior students who discuss, among other topics, their experience as translators for Shifu. They describe a special energy in their relationship with him, and tell how the work of translation affected and enhanced their own practice. They needed to make themselves an empty vessel for his teaching to pass through; to channel the Dharma. Ming Yee Wang talks about the earliest days at the Temple of Enlightenment in the Bronx, NY, when Shifu had first arrived in America. I was in those early classes and I well remember Ming Yee translating Shifu's talks. I started with the third session, I think in November of 1976, and by then Ming Yee had quite settled into the practice. We used to call him "the voice of Shifu." He made himself so empty a vessel that afterwards, thinking back on the talk,



Shifu's first retreat in America, Bodhi House, May 1977. Front row: Buffe Laffey, Rikki Asher, Aranka Galgoczi. Back row: Dan Wota, Dan Stevenson, Venerable Ri Chang, Master Sheng Yen, Ming Yee Wang, Paul Kennedy.

it was easy to imagine it had been Shifu speaking those English words. Part of this may have been due to the softness and clarity of Ming Yee's voice, and the shortness of the intervals of speech that were translated. But it was also due to Ming Yee's ability to completely set aside his ego and become a hollow tube to channel Shifu.

Shifu did speak English. He struggled a little bit with some pronunciation, I think because he did not speak it often. Which is probably why he relied on translators for public talks. But I had many private conversations with Shifu in English and we did not fail to communicate. Still, I am enormously grateful for the causes and conditions that gave us many wonderful translators to help Shifu spread the Dharma.

In these two articles, the authors also talk about how Master Sheng Yen constantly adapted his teaching style to the needs of his students, and devised teaching methods that had not existed before. The seven diagrams of mental concentration presented in our first article are well-known to his students; I'm sure we all have notebooks with our own versions carefully copied from the white board. These diagrams helped me understand the distinction between thoughts and attention. Today they are being used by other American Zen teachers, a gift from our Shifu to Buddhism in the West. 🌿

by *Buffe Maggie Laffey*
Editor-in-Chief

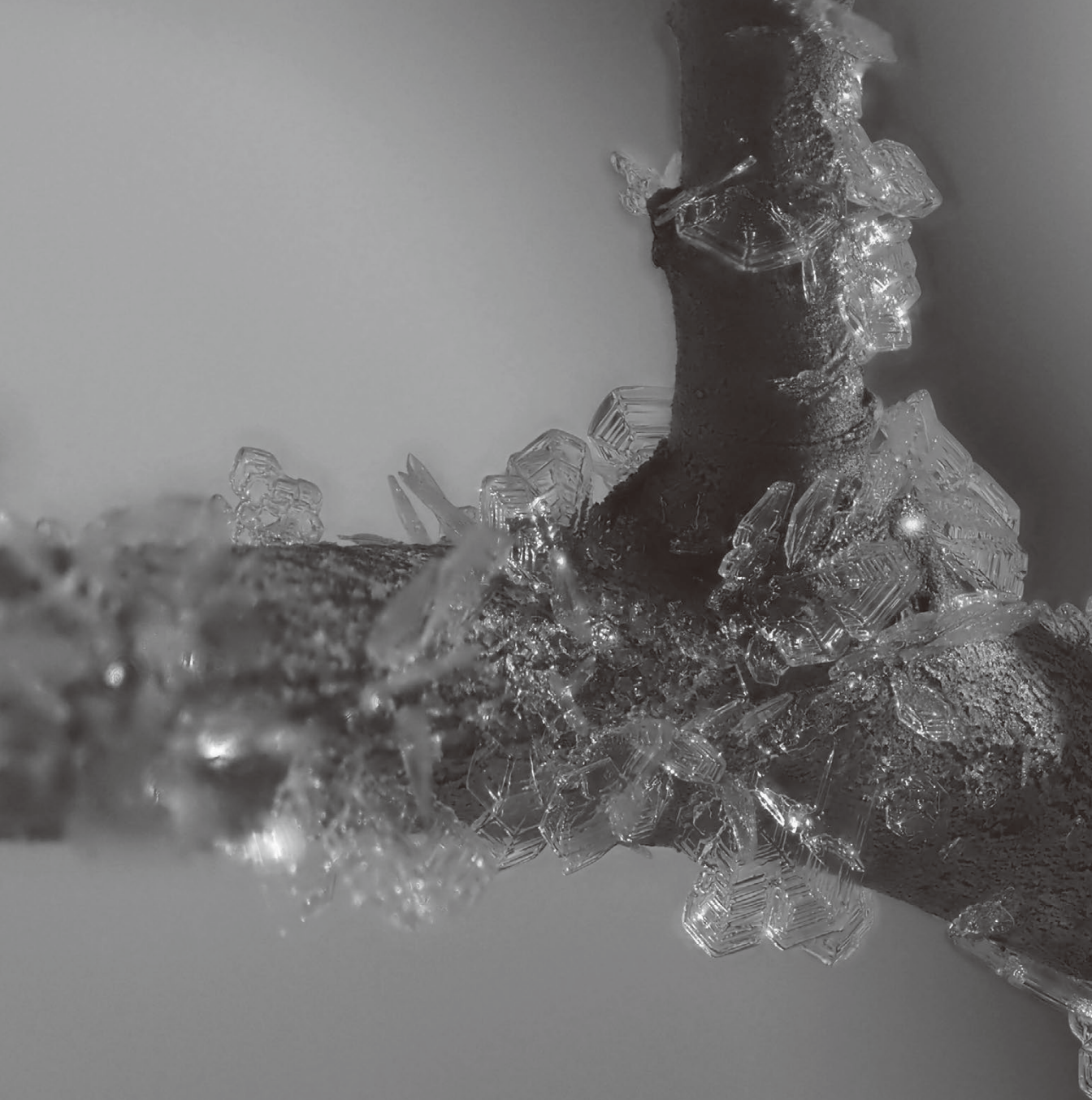
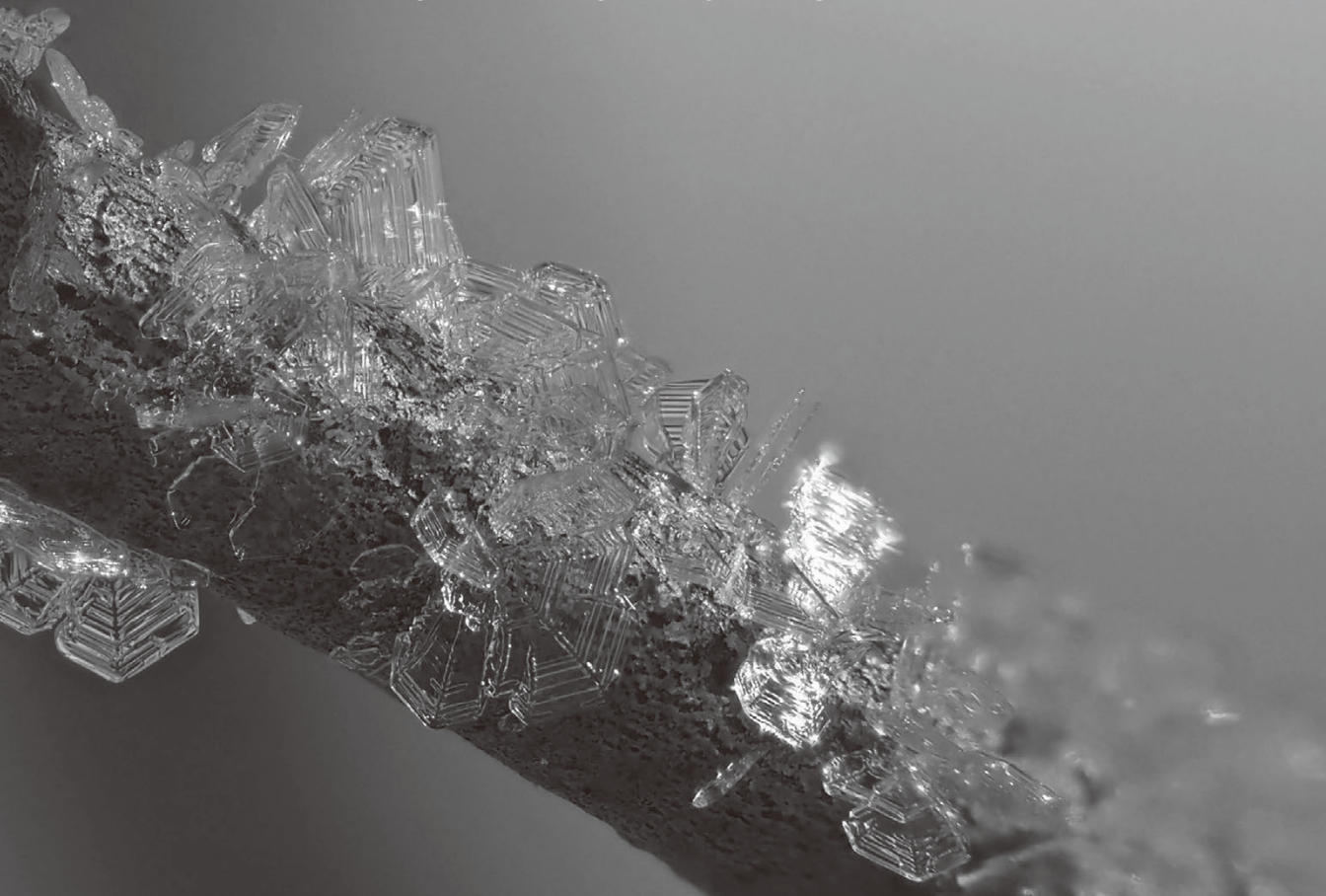


Photo by Yuri Antonenko

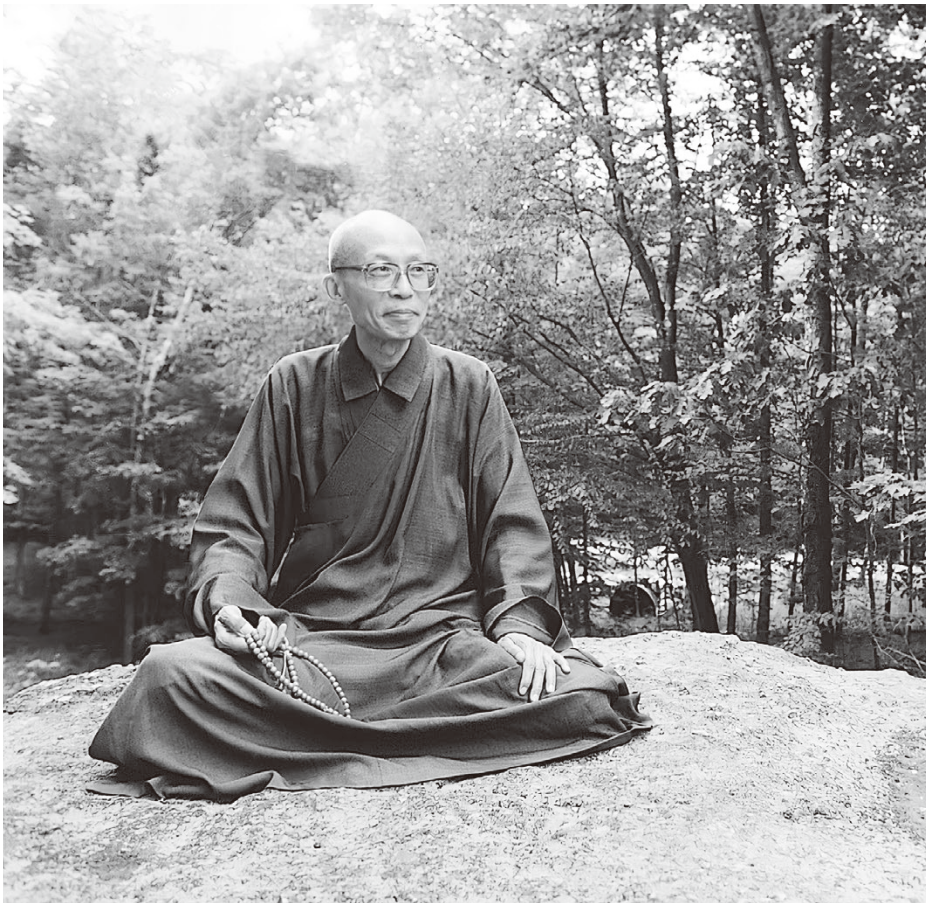
*Seven Phases of
Meditative Development*

— BY —

CHAN MASTER SHENG YEN



When teaching the cultivation of stabilizing the mind, and the notion of gradual cultivation and sudden enlightenment, Chan Master Sheng Yen realized that people need some kind of guideposts along the way, to break it down, instead of thinking of enlightenment as happening suddenly from zero. He devised a series of diagrams to illustrate the various states of mind. This article is taken from *Hoofprint of the Ox: Principles of the Chan Buddhist Path as Taught by a Modern Chinese Master*, written by Master Sheng Yen and Dan Stevenson, one of his first students in America. Published by Oxford University Press, 2001.



Chan Master Sheng Yen DDM Archive Photo

BY FAR, THE BIGGEST PROBLEM FACED BY meditators is the condition of a scattered and confused mind, and the majority of the techniques for taming the mind are designed to address this problem. The Buddhist scriptures describe many such practices, each with its own particular content and procedure. However, despite their apparent differences, these methods share the common aim of bringing the scattered mind to a condition of one-pointed concentration and, finally, to the realization of no-mind. For the purpose of conveying to my students some idea of this process, I use a series of seven diagrams, each of which illustrates a particular degree of mental concentration (or lack thereof). These seven diagrams are not meant to describe a set of fixed stages that every person must experience. Meditative development is highly individualized and cannot be so rigidly codified. At best, this scheme is meant to

give a basic understanding of the meditative process and some measure by which to determine whether one's practice is correct. Buddhist teachers will generally assign different techniques of meditation according to the specific emotional disposition and meditative needs of the given student. We will have occasion to discuss some of these methods and their usage later. For the sake of the present illustration, I will discuss the phases of meditative development in relation to the method of counting breaths. Counting breaths is the most elemental practice in a traditional set of techniques known as "recollection, or mindfulness, of breathing" (Sanskrit *ānāpāna-smṛti*; Chinese *nianxi*). *Ānāpāna-smṛti*, and especially counting breaths, is particularly effective for counteracting a scattered, distracted mind. Thus, it has long been used by Buddhists as a method for beginners, as well as a foundational practice for other meditation methods.

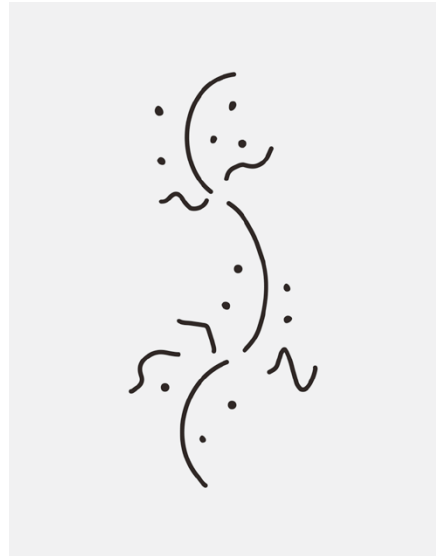


1. The Scattered Mind Prior to Meditation

Before taking up the method of counting breaths, there is no consistent object on which to focus the mind. Thoughts ceaselessly turn and stir. Attention is fragmented from one instant to the next, as it darts off in countless directions, in pursuit of one object after another. We hanker after sensory data and sensations from our surroundings, reminisce over the past, and anticipate the future. The scattered dots in the diagram represent the random thoughts and sensations of a confused and unfocused mind; the broken dashes, the fragmented stream of one's attention.

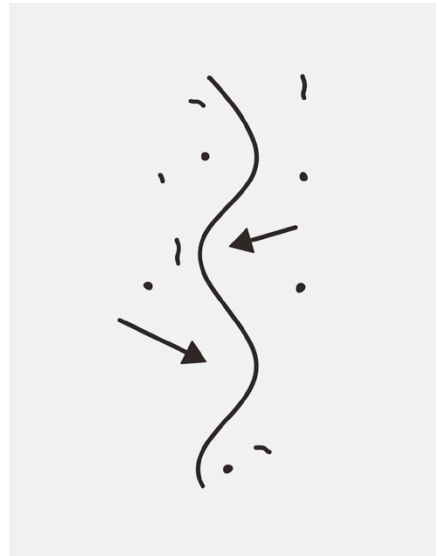
2. Initial Efforts to Apply the Method of Meditation

When first taking up the practice of counting breaths, your attention will often wander away from breath and number. Or, many associated thoughts will intrude, such as concerns over how to count the number or how to regard the breath. You are able to sustain the count for short stretches, but usually this is interrupted before long. By repeatedly bringing your attention mind back to the method, the confusion of wandering thoughts gradually is brought under control, and a steady stream of focus begins to develop, enduring for longer and longer stretches of time. The broken line running through the center of the diagram represents the fitful emergence of a steady stream of concentration; that is to say, the mind concentrated on the method. The surrounding marks and dots indicate the continued presence of distractedness and scattered thoughts, but the firm line developing in the center shows that concentration is beginning to assert control.

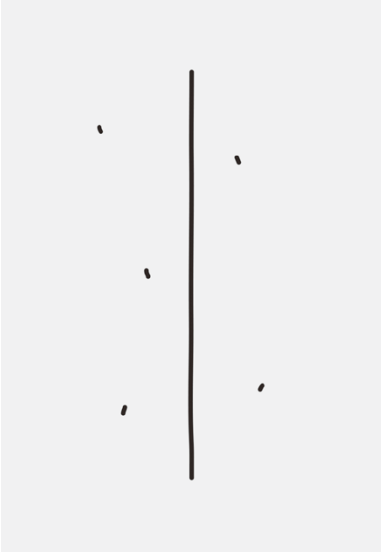


3. Coarse but Unbroken Application of the Method

By the third level, you are able to maintain uninterrupted concentration and count each number in perfect succession for a span of at least ten minutes. Nevertheless, concentration is coarse and there still exist many subtle wandering and scattered thoughts that impinge on the margins of your attention. Although concentration may ripple and waver momentarily, these thoughts are never powerful enough to cause you completely to lose sight of the number and the method. The solid line through the center represents the uninterrupted flow of concentration over time. The surrounding rounding dots and occasional slashes that intersect the line illustrate the subtle mental static and coarse thoughts that periodically invade your field of awareness.

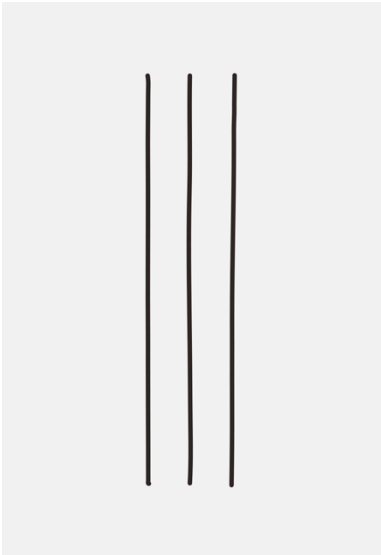


4. Subtle and Unbroken Application of the Method



Just as before, you are able to maintain concentration on counting breaths without interruption, but at this point, scattered thoughts are now greatly reduced. Distractions associated with the sensory environment pose almost no problem. Occasionally, wandering thoughts invented by the mind will come into consciousness and then slide away. To you, however, their presence and subsequent rippling effect remain peripheral to the main stream of mindfulness. In this respect, diagram four represents a more subtle stage of concentration than diagram three, and awareness is now quite clear and securely settled on the method. When a wandering thought does arise, you are clearly aware of it, from beginning to end, but the stream of concentration is too deep and strong for these eddies of thought to divert it.

5. Pure but Effortful Concentration on the Method



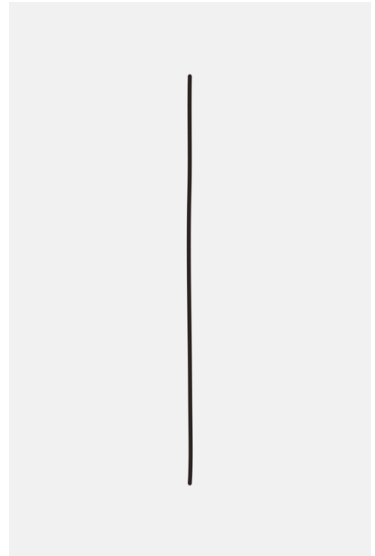
In the fifth diagram there exists only pure counting of breaths. There are neither scattered distractions from the sensory environment nor internal fantasies of deluded thinking. Nonetheless, there is still a lucid sense of the act or process of meditation itself. There is an awareness of a self that is counting breaths, the breaths that are being counted, and the number that is counted and seized upon as the main object of concentration. Concentration itself is pure and unified, but there is still an effortful and ongoing attention to the method. Though all other extraneous disturbances may have disappeared, the thread of this tripartite complex of thoughts remains and continues without interruption: inhale-exhale-count, inhale-exhale-count. Thus, the single thread of concentration, when investigated more closely, is really a complex weaving of three basic threads, which is represented in the diagram by the three lines together. At this juncture, your mind is highly simplified and concentrated. In fact, you will likely be on the doorstep of samadhi, or “unified mind.”

6. The Unified Mind of Samadhi

In the sixth diagram, your mind is so concentrated that the act of meditation itself – both the counting of the number and the presence of the breath – is forgotten. As the mind becomes truly calm and concentrated, the act of effortful meditation itself seems coarse and distracting. Letting go of it, number and breath vanish, and body, breath, and mind meld into a single unity. At this point, you may feel as though spatial distinctions no longer pertain among body, mind, and the world. The opposition between self and other people seems to vanish, and the boundary between the internal and external dissolves. The previous sense of dividedness is replaced by a feeling of pure and harmonious being that is so wondrous as to be indescribable.

This is the basic experience of samadhi, or what we variously refer to as “meditative absorption,” “unified mind,” and “one-pointedness of mind.” However, there are many levels of samadhi, some shallow, some deep. They can range from the simple and relatively shallow experience of purity and oneness described above, to experiences of infinite light and sound, boundless space, limitless consciousness, limitless emptiness, and even the inconceivable experiences of enlightenment described in such Buddhist scriptures as the *Avatamsaka*, or *Huayan*, *Sūtra*.

Regardless of how sublime the content, such states of meditative absorption are still defiled by the presence of discriminating thought and attachment. This defilement is none other than the subtle sense of “selfhood.” At deeper levels of samadhi, the mind becomes so supple and powerful that even the subtlest thought is experienced on an extraordinarily vast scale. Because attachment to self is still operating in samadhi, samadhi actually entails the magnification of self to a cosmic scale. The experiences of limitless consciousness, bliss, being, and other feelings associated with samadhi are actually the projections of what we call the “great or expanded sense of self.” Until this particular impediment is removed, enlightenment has not dawned and one is still subject to the bonds of deluded existence. samadhi experiences of this ilk will be no more than a mundane or worldly samadhi, and the spiritual insights generated from them, a mundane wisdom still tainted by defiling outflows.



7. No-Self, No-Mind

In the seventh diagram there is no line of concentration, no thought, no mark of any kind. Body, mind, and environment have all genuinely disappeared. Time and space are blown apart, and any sense of existence or nonexistence has vanished. You have entered a realm of emptiness and quiescence, a realm that transcends all subjective emotion and point of view. This is the experience of supramundane samadhi and wisdom of “no-mind” that is free of the defiling illusion of self. There is no way to effectively describe it. All words and images are useless, but you will have tasted true freedom and peace.

Just as with the experience of mundane samadhi, you should be aware that there are also many levels of supramundane samadhi and many degrees of insight into no-mind, or no-self. Sometimes the influence of the root illusions and defilements is merely lessened or temporarily suspended. Sometimes it is severed, but only to a partial degree. In all these cases, the insight of emptiness or no-mind will qualitatively be the same, but the intensity and clarity will vary.

Imagine, for example, that you are stuck inside an old well, the mouth of which has been boarded over with planks and covered with dirt. A wind comes up and blows some of the dirt off, allowing a flicker of light to shine through the boards before another wind covers them over again. Suppose, then, that someone brushes away the dirt and removes a plank, so that light begins to stream steadily into the well; or that one is finally able to hop out of the well and see the full sun. Then, suppose that one actually becomes the sun itself. All of these experiences of sunlight are qualitatively similar and may be called “illumination,” but the difference in degree is vast. The same holds for the experience of emptiness and no-mind. In principle, the first glimpse of no-mind is the same as the enlightenment of a Buddha. One has seen the buddha mind, knows its character, and has developed a firm faith that this enlightenment is intrinsic to all beings. But there is still a big difference between this experience and the full and perfect enlightenment of buddhahood itself, in which this enlightened potential is fully actualized. Indeed, the Buddhist tradition has many different systems for describing enlightenment and its stages, from the four fruits and the concept of arhat in Hinayana Buddhism, to the schemes of ten, thirteen, forty-two, or fifty-two stages of the Mahayana bodhisattva. 🌿




MASTER SHENG YEN:

His Life and My Practice with Him

— 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). She teaches meditation and Dharma classes, gives public lectures, and leads Chan retreats at Dharma Drum centers in North America and Europe. Rebecca is also a sociology professor and lives with her husband in New Jersey. Her newest book, *Illumination: A Guide to the Buddhist Method of No-Method*, was published by Shambhala in late 2023. This talk was given at Great Vow Zen Monastery on August 12, 2022, in response to the residents' interest in Master Sheng Yen's life and Rebecca's journey in Chan practice. Great Vow Zen Monastery is a training monastery in the White Plum lineage of the Japanese Soto Zen tradition. It is headed by Roshis Jan Chozen Bays and Hogen Bays. Edited by Beth Adelman and Buffe Maggie Laffey.

Early Years

WHO WAS MASTER SHENG YEN? He was born in China in 1930, and he became a monk at the age of thirteen, largely because his family was very poor. A monastery was looking for young people who would like to become novice monks, and so he did that. At first he was very slow, unable to learn and memorize anything. His master told him to make prostrations to Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara for help. He did – hundreds and thousands of prostrations – until one day he was able to memorize the chants and the liturgy. So he considered Avalokiteśvara to be a very important bodhisattva for him.

In his teen years, the monastery where he was ordained sent him to a branch monastery they had in Shanghai. At that time in China, monks earned income to sustain the monastic livelihood by



Young Master Sheng Yen DDM Archive Photo

performing rituals for the deceased. This was also a time when Buddhism was in decline in China. He felt very sad about this because he believed the Buddha-dharma is so wonderful, but so few people know of it, and a lot of people who do know of it misunderstand it. This gave rise to his vow to really explain and teach the Dharma, so that more people would have correct understanding and could truly benefit from the precious Three Jewels.

This was a time when Buddhist institutes were forming to train monastics in formal Buddhist study. In Shanghai, he found such an opportunity. It was not easy to get admitted, since he had very little formal education. But his great vow drove him to try to gain admission, and he was admitted and ended up doing very well in his studies.

Revolution and Military

In 1949 the communist revolution took over China. Master Sheng Yen understood that under communism, many monastics would be forced to return to lay life. He was worried about that, so he decided to follow the Nationalists to Taiwan. The only way for him to do so was to join the military. He wanted to be able to stay on the path; if that involved taking a detour in the Nationalist Army and enduring all that hardship, that's what he would do.

He was able to be flexible with how he could practice in the military. He maintained his vegetarian diet. He used all his time off to practice with and visit Buddhist masters, many of whom had fled to Taiwan from China for the same reason he did.

During the time Master Sheng Yen was in the military, he worked very hard. He was in the communications department, meaning he wasn't in combat. He also strived to advance within the ranks. Why? Not because of personal ambition, but to show

people that he was someone who was intelligent and willing to work hard. He was trying to find the right people to help him get out of the military so he could become a monk again. At that time, in that very oppressive regime, it was impossible to leave the military. But a miracle happened: Someone helped him return to monastic life after ten years in the army. This illustrates the importance of vow power, which enabled him to go through that whole process.

Return to Monastic Life

When Master Sheng Yen returned to monastic life, he was ordained by Master Dongchu, who had a very special way of training his students. Master Dongchu sent him on a lot of impossible errands, made him angry, and humiliated him, trying to help him dissolve his self-centered attachments. Master Sheng Yen said that sometimes he felt frustrated, but he also saw how compassionate his master was being in putting him through that training.

After some time with this master, he asked for the opportunity to enter a six-year solitary retreat. It was not easy to find someone who was willing to support him in a six-year solitary retreat. So he worked on the necessary causes and conditions until he found someone, and he took his leave. During that solitary retreat he wrote his first book, *Orthodox Chinese Buddhism*, on the heart of Buddhist teachings. At that time Chinese people largely thought Buddhism was just some superstitious religion for uneducated people. He wanted to make the Buddhist dharma accessible to many people who couldn't understand what it was really about. That was one of the first books I read by Master Sheng Yen when I encountered his teaching.

After he came out of his solitary retreat, Master Sheng Yen realized that what was really needed for

Buddhism to be respected in Chinese society was for monastics to become more educated. So he took it upon himself to travel to Japan to study for a doctorate degree in Buddhist literature. Remember, he had very little formal education. He didn't know any Japanese, yet he went to get a doctorate degree at a Japanese institution. All this work was driven by his vow to do whatever was needed to bring the Dharma to everyone.

Coming to the West

After he finished his doctorate degree, he was a bit ahead of everyone in Taiwan. People there didn't know what to do with a Buddhist monk with a doctorate degree. So he accepted an invitation to be a professor in Canada. After a while he realized that it really couldn't work because he didn't speak any English. But he got another invitation to go to New York to teach. That's how he began his journey of teaching the Dharma in the West.

Because of this, many people know Master Sheng Yen as an important figure in Chan Buddhism in the United States. But besides teaching in America, he also established a very large network of Buddhist centers in Asia, with its headquarters in Taiwan, called Dharma Drum Mountain. Dharma Drum Mountain has a huge campus with a large Chan Hall and Chan practice program, a Buddhist liberal arts university, a Sangha university, and a publishing house, as well as a large congregation of volunteers and followers in Taiwan and all over the world. Master Sheng Yen has published more than a hundred books. He was an important scholar of Buddhist studies. His scholarly work is still often cited when people want to study the development of Chinese Buddhism, especially in the Ming Dynasty. That's just a few of the things he did.

He was not only a Chan master. You can tell that he was someone who worked very hard, not because he was a workaholic, but because he knew he had to use every moment of his precious human life to fulfill the great vow he had made. And because of this work, he left a very important legacy. One of the things he did was give full Dharma transmission to lay teachers in the West, one of whom is my current teacher. Actually, his first lay Dharma heir, John Crook, was also my teacher, and his second lay Dharma heir, Simon Child, is my current teacher from whom I received my transmission.

Often this is misunderstood by people, who think Dharma transmission is some kind of achievement. It is not an achievement in the sense of conveying status. Master Sheng Yen said it is really a master giving a very heavy responsibility to you to pass on the Dharma.

I watched John Crook and Simon Child taking this responsibility very seriously. A lot of the teachings that have been passed down were designed for those who were educated in the Chinese or Asian way. And there are things that really need to be adapted, not just culturally, but also for people living in modernity. We just think differently. They devoted their entire lives to finding ways to make Chan practice accessible to people with a Western education, and I learned from their example.

In fact, Master Sheng Yen didn't really give them a choice. The story was that John Crook attended one of Master Sheng Yen's retreats, and at the end of the retreat, Master Sheng Yen said, "I'm going to give you transmission." John Crook didn't expect that at all, but he took it on and took it very seriously. A similar thing happened to Simon Child. I think John Crook did the same thing to me when



From left to right: Simon Child, Master Sheng Yen, Rebecca Li, and John Crook DDM Archive Photo

one time I turned up at his retreat as a participant. It might have been the second time I attended this retreat, or the third time at most. He said, “Here, Rebecca, you’re going to be in charge of the retreat as guest master taking care of the retreatants.” I said, “Okay, I’ll do my best.” This is part of the training we learned from Master Sheng Yen as well.

Rebecca’s Background

I hope I have given you a sense of who Master Sheng Yen was. Some of you mentioned that you would like to know about my practice. I didn’t grow up Buddhist. People assume that because I look Chinese, I am the one who made my white, Kansas-born husband follow the Buddhist path. But it’s the other way around. When I met my husband in graduate school in Southern California, he had already been practicing Zen for a number of years. At that time the only way to get Dharma books was to go to a library. This may be a little difficult for some of you to understand; this was before the Internet, before Google, before Amazon. You had to go to libraries with actual books in them. So I would travel with my future husband, drive an hour out into the Los Angeles area to a Chinese monastery that had a good library that would let you borrow books. We would check books out, bring them back home, and read them, so that we could return them the following week. That was our weekly routine.

Some of the early books I read were the two books that Master Sheng Yen wrote during his six-year solitary retreat. One was his autobiography of his early life – some of which I shared with you. The other was *Orthodox Chinese Buddhism*, his explanation of all kinds of misunderstandings and misconceptions about Buddhism that were very common

among Chinese people. They include what is karma, what is rebirth, all kind of things. I remember distinctly feeling that this all makes so much sense, the way he explained it. I felt a really close affinity with his teaching.

At that time, one of Master Sheng Yen’s disciples who had attended some retreats with him was leading a meditation group near where I was going to graduate school. My future husband was already attending that group, so he brought me there after sensing that I might be interested. He didn’t drag me there. The first time I attended the group, someone had just returned from an intensive retreat with Master Sheng Yen in New York and shared his experience of the retreat. I remember thinking that I wanted to go to that retreat, and I set my mind to attending.

Early on, when I was going to that library in the Los Angeles area to borrow Dharma books, some of them were Chinese books, and there was one set of verses that really touched me and stood out for me. Some of you may have encountered that set of verses. Often they appear in the beginning of a book or a sutra. It goes like this (this is my translation):

*The Buddhadharma is difficult to encounter,
now I have encountered.
Human birth is difficult to acquire,
now I have acquired.
If I do not make use of
this human birth to deliver myself,
when will this body be delivered?*

Delivered, meaning liberated from samsara. Every time I encountered this set of verses, I was on the verge of tears. I felt deeply touched by it. I felt the urgency of making a vow to make Dharma practice a top priority in my life.

That summer of 1995, when I started reading his books, I heard that Master Sheng Yen was coming to Los Angeles (which he rarely did) and would be giving the three refuges ceremony. I was planning to go to hear his talk and to take the three refuges with him, even though I had not met him before. I felt I was ready. A few days before that talk I got very sick. As I was lying there, feeling so weak, the thought came that I might not be able to go. Then came a very strong response to that thought: *Even if I have to crawl to Los Angeles, I will go.* I still remember the feeling of that sense of determination. Somehow my vow power propelled me in those moments. I did go. Meeting him and taking refuge at that time shaped the trajectory of my life.

First Retreat

I very much wished to attend an intensive retreat with Master Sheng Yen. But it was extremely difficult to get into one of his retreats at that time because they were always full with his regular participants. They had a relatively small space that accommodated only thirty people. I applied and was rejected. I applied again and was rejected the second time. When I applied a third time, I called them and they finally accepted me. I persevered. If there's something you want to do, persevere. Don't give up easily.

I still remember that first retreat. It was in 1996. It was difficult, because they got up at 4:00 AM which is 1:00 AM in California – which is usually when I went to bed. So I practiced with a lot of drowsiness. I couldn't really remember much about the meditation itself, except that I didn't give up. I just practiced with drowsiness and followed some of the instructions given by Master Sheng Yen on how to deal with drowsiness.

I remember feeling, when I went to interview with him the very first time, “I finally found you.” I wasn't looking for anyone, but I felt that very strong sense that I finally found my teacher. I couldn't stop crying. He asked, “Why are you crying?” I remember that distinctly. By the way, he was speaking in Mandarin. I couldn't really understand Mandarin, so I was relying on his translator. At the end of the retreat, he asked everyone to share their retreat experience. The Chinese people shared in Chinese and I shared in English because my Mandarin was not good enough. I can't remember what I said, but after I spoke he looked right into my eyes and said, “You're going to help a lot of people.” I didn't know what I was going to do to help people, because I couldn't even understand his Chinese, but that's the moment I remember from that retreat. I felt a very strong connection with him.

That was around the end of my graduate school years, and I needed to start thinking about the next phase of my life. Going out into the job market, should I go for the highest status job? Because that would mean success; that would mean I've proven myself worthy of my professors. Of course, my professors would want me to be like them. But I started thinking about what was important for me. The craving for approval, for recognition – it might lead to going for a job that might not be the best fit for the life I wanted to live.

I was very lucky that I had already encountered the practice and made the vow to make the Dharma my top priority in life. It was important to find a job that would allow me to have balance in my life. I wanted to work hard, but there should also be space for my home life and my Dharma work. That means I was not going to choose a place that expects me to spend all my time at work – even though that might be the kind of position expected

of me by my professors or other people in my life. So it was important for me to have that clarity and to set the priority of being able to practice with Master Sheng Yen. That's how I ended up in New Jersey, where I could be close to Master Sheng Yen's New York center.

Training Begins

When I started my academic career as an assistant professor, I also started practicing and training with Master Sheng Yen more regularly. A couple of things became clear to me at that time. First, I was able to see that the teaching position I got was a fairly good fit for me, and so I saw it as a real blessing to be able to have that job. I don't know about you; have you had a job that you liked at first and then you started to dislike it? The process of getting through tenure was difficult, but remembering that it's a blessing to have this position that accommodates the kind of life I would like to live, allowed me to get through it without letting it bother me too much.

There were some colleagues who were not super friendly. In academia, there are a lot of egos. I've seen colleagues who became very defensive and jeopardized their tenure application by doing so. Some of them couldn't make it through the process. But I saw that what I was doing has a greater purpose, and that it's not just about getting tenure at the end. Teaching to the best of my ability is part of my path to help me live a life in the Dharma. I needed to find my way in the world to have a sustainable way to live, and it was a blessing that I had that good opportunity.

It was also fortunate for me to have people like John Crook and Simon Child, my two teachers, as my

role models. John Crook was a professor and Simon Child was a physician in the United Kingdom. They provided this example for me – to be able to juggle both their professional life and their Dharma life.

The second thing that was very clear to me during those years was that I could only do my best, whether I succeeded or not. I could only do my best with integrity, trying to jump through all the hoops involved in getting tenure. Meanwhile, teacher training with Master Sheng Yen was very demanding. He required us to thoroughly research a topic and then create a presentation, and we had to do it every week. At the same time, for my job, I had to prepare for the classes I was teaching, write my research papers, and be on committees. So I was very busy at work, along with the demanding Dharma teacher training program.

What I mean by doing my best with integrity was that I couldn't pretend to be a greater scholar than I really am. If I did so, my department might make the wrong decision in giving me tenure. It would not be good for them. My performance at work before tenure needed to reflect what I would be able to sustain throughout my career and post-tenure, which I knew would involve spending substantial amounts of time on my Dharma practice and training. So I told myself that if my best effort could not earn me tenure, that meant it's not the right career for me and I would have to do something else with my life. Why was it possible for me to think that? It has to do with the vow power and this mindset cultivated through my training with Master Sheng Yen. I learned from his example to do one's best and not get attached to the outcome, while remembering that everything we do is to cultivate the bodhisattva path.

EVERYTHING WE DO
IS TO CULTIVATE
THE BODHISATTVA PATH.

Translation as a Practice

Some of you have asked me, did you do a lot of retreats with Master Sheng Yen? I did attend retreats with him regularly. And because I became his translator, I attended even more retreats and Dharma classes. Those were very important formative years for me. In his Dharma classes, he emphasized the importance of cultivating right view. He always said that without right view, enlightenment is not possible. So Dharma teaching is always about establishing right view. As far as teacher training, the appropriate attitude in sharing the Dharma is that teaching Dharma is a form of practice, just practicing in different way.

I began to be trained to become Master Sheng Yen's translator when I started my career as an assistant professor. You might remember that I said I did not understand Mandarin. I had one college credit in Mandarin, and I couldn't really understand Master Sheng Yen's accent. So when I trained as his translator, I had to really strengthen my Mandarin. I also needed to learn very quickly all the Dharma terms in Chinese and in English. I was looking at the appendixes of all kinds of Buddhist books all the time, staring at them, and listening to Master Sheng Yen's Dharma talks with a group of translators.

I did not plan to become his translator. Others in the translator training stopped and so I had to keep doing it. I ended up being the only one from the group who kept translating for Master Sheng Yen.

Master Sheng Yen really had a mission to bring Chan to the West. He wanted people here to be able to share the benefits of Chan practice, but he knew

he needed someone who could translate it all into English. So when he asked me, I said, "Yes, my Mandarin's not very good, I'll do my best." And that's what I did. Some people ask how I managed it. I think it's another example of what is possible when we are propelled by our vow.

Empty Vessel

Master Sheng Yen had a couple of interpreters before me. He told me, "What I want you to do is to not be my interpreter; I want you to channel me." He didn't want me to say, "Master Sheng Yen said this," in the third person. Rather, when I spoke, I was just him

in English. He was giving me an assignment to be fully present and completely connected with him when he was talking, basically asking me to be kind of an empty vessel for his teaching to pass

through. In a way, I found that very easy because I just needed to remember everything he said and say it exactly the way he had organized and structured it. I didn't need to insert myself to determine what is important, picking and choosing. No need for that. Just say what the master said. I realized that it was a practice of letting go of my self-centered attachment.

He of course also trained me to pay close attention to what he said and, more importantly, truly take it to heart. It's not just something that the master was saying to entertain us. It was said to help us practice.

Besides translating for his retreats, I traveled with him as his translator for international meetings of religious leaders. This allowed me to spend some time observing up close how he handled various

WHAT I WANT YOU TO DO
IS TO NOT BE MY INTERPRETER;
I WANT YOU TO CHANNEL ME.



Rebecca traveled with Shifu as his translator for meetings of religious leaders. DDM Archive Photo

situations. I draw on that when I encounter many situations. So I would say if I handle any situation well, it's to his credit.

Some people thought that being translator was a distraction for me. In fact, it gave me more motivation to practice diligently. Because I realized that if I have to translate for Master Sheng Yen, then I had better be able to fully pay attention to what he's saying. And that means I had better *really* practice when I was in sitting meditation so that my mind was not scattered. I definitely cannot goof off. It offered me the opportunity to practice in that way in intensive retreats. So that's how I have benefited a great deal in being his translator.

That helped me truly understand how the bodhisattva path works. Sometimes people understand the bodhisattva path as just doing work for the benefit of others. It's actually about making the vow to bring benefits to everyone. And when we

work in that way, the first person who benefits is ourselves. In the case of me being a translator, I heard all of Master Sheng Yen's teachings and I retained a lot of them because his words had to go through my mind before coming out in English. I don't know if other people benefited, but I benefited from Master Sheng Yen's teachings first when I served as his translator. This is how the bodhisattva path works: It's not about benefiting

others at the expense of ourselves; we are one of the sentient beings that we are bringing benefit to.

Increased Responsibility

In 2002, as soon as I got tenure, I was drafted to be the chair of my department. If you have known anyone who is a department chair, usually they receive condolences. It's not a promotion. I found myself on a steep learning curve, leading the department through a campus-wide curriculum restructuring amid a budget crisis.

When I attended an intensive retreat in 2004, I thought I was there to be a retreatant and the translator. On the first day of the retreat Master Sheng Yen asked me to come to a meeting. Basically, he wanted me to help him form the board of directors to run the retreat center for him. So I spent most of the retreat in meetings.

He needed help and asked me, along with another practitioner, to set up the board, hire, train, evaluate staff, and set up all the administration systems to operate the retreat center. For over ten years since then, I have helped orient and support monastics sent from Taiwan to run and operate the center. I share this with you because I want to highlight that the training is not just about meditation in the meditation hall. Master Sheng Yen trained most of his students by giving them a lot of responsibilities. It is through working with our habits, our vexations in working with other people, and overcoming obstacles in various situations that we engage with our training in Chan practice. That's also how we learn whether we are integrating right view fully in our lived experience.

Over ten years I also worked on Master Sheng Yen's second autobiography, *Footprints in the Snow*. Some of you might have read it. I spent a lot of time interviewing him, which enabled me to get to know his life lived as a human being. He was an

extraordinary person. What I saw was that we can all learn from the example of someone like him, of making great vows and spending his life fulfilling his vow to the best of his ability, constantly learning new things. He did everything imaginable to include and invite as many people as possible, making use of their different abilities, and in the process, making his and many people's lives very meaningful.

Master Dongchu

Something that stood out for me from Master Sheng Yen's experience was his training with his teacher, Master Dongchu, when he became a monastic again after being in the military. One time Master Dongchu gave him a ceramic tile and told him, "I need you to find another tile that looks exactly like this one." To search for the tile he had to take a bus, but Master Dongchu didn't give him any money for the bus, so he had to beg people for his bus fare. He went around to a lot of places, but nowhere had a tile like that.



Photo by Anya Smith

He was so frustrated, he felt like he failed. He went back and the master just laughed at him, saying, “Of course there’s no such tile. There’s no way for you to find the exact same tile.” The master basically sent him on an impossible mission. Imagine how that would make you feel; he got mad, very frustrated.

Another example: Master Sheng Yen would be writing essays and Master Dongchu would say, “Why are you writing?” Master Sheng Yen would answer, “Well, I’m supposed to write an essay to spread the Dharma.” Master Dongchu would say, “No, no, no, go recite a sutra!” So he would recite a sutra. Then Master Dongchu would come by and say, “What are you doing?” and tell him to go do some other thing. Whatever Master Dongchu would tell him to do, Master Sheng Yen would actually do it, and then he’d get criticized for doing it. How would you like that?

There were many examples of this in his training with Master Dongchu. You might think that master was very cruel. But Master Sheng Yen saw this as great compassion. How many of us can experience that and not get mad at our master and leave – or maybe write on the internet to complain about this teacher? That always stood out for me.

Worthy of Scolding

One time I traveled with him to the United Nations where he was going to be on a panel. A Harvard professor who was also on the panel volunteered to be his translator. So we got a chair for that translator. When the panel moderator moved the chair, Master Sheng Yen scolded me, saying, “What is wrong with you? You should go get the chair!” I was a bit

surprised; I didn’t know I was supposed to get the chair. Afterwards, I was so happy that he found me worthy of scolding. I saw him scold a lot of his monastic disciples but I thought maybe he decided a lay person would not be worthy of his scolding. So I took that as meaning I was worth his time to teach me that way.

One time when I was translating for him, he told a story about traveling to a conference with his translator (and everyone knew that was me). He was saying, “I was trying to tell Rebecca that her mouth really began to stink and she needs to drink more water.” I just translated the whole thing to everyone. I reminded myself that his master liked to humiliate him, and he liked to occasionally humiliate his students in front of everybody. When he was telling the story, this went through my mind: *Thank you for teaching me to let go of self-attachment.*

I told you this story because I want us to learn to appreciate the importance of criticism as great compassion. I often tell my students, “If I’m making you feel comfortable all the time, I’m clearly not doing my job.” If I can push a button occasionally, maybe I’m doing something. But we hate to have our button pushed. We hate to be asked to let go of our dearest beliefs. In the outside world no one would tell us that we were wrong. They would say, “Yeah, you’re right,” and then allow us to keep moving down the wrong path. Only when we encounter someone with great compassion would they be willing to point it out for us. We need to remember to have the wisdom to recognize that for what it is. That’s one of the many valuable lessons I learned from Master Sheng Yen’s practice and his life.

THANK YOU FOR
TEACHING ME TO LET GO
OF SELF-ATTACHMENT.

Vow Power

Another thing I learned from him, as I've mentioned already, is vow power. Because of his great vow, he was willing to take on the heaviest of responsibilities. In his autobiography, he talked about how he was leading his sangha in the United States and thought everything was going well and that this was what he wanted to be doing. Then his master passed away in Taiwan and left the entire organization for him to take over. He didn't plan to do that; it was not his preference. He did it anyway. He started splitting his time between Taiwan and New York. He just needed to fly back and forth, work harder, and find a way to fulfill all his responsibilities.

His Dharma heirs, John Crook and Simon Child, largely did the same thing. They turned up for a retreat and Master Sheng Yen said, "Here, you carry the lineage onward." And they took it on and devoted their lives to do just that, propelled by their great vows. That's something we can all cultivate, starting from small things – taking on a little bit more responsibility in supporting our sangha, pushing ourselves into unfamiliar territory to learn new things.

That's actually another thing I learned from Master Sheng Yen: He was always willing to seize the opportunity to learn new things. For example, he was invited to a meeting of religious leaders at the United Nations. He had never done anything like that, but he went and tried to learn what happens in this kind of gathering and how he could contribute. In these meetings, he noticed that many religious leaders would hug each other as a form of greeting. Being a Chinese monk, he was unfamiliar with this form of greeting. Yet, I watched him learning to greet another religious leader in a meeting by hugging him. He was a little awkward doing that, but he was willing to learn in order to make a connection with

other religious leaders. He was not trying to be the popular one, but to have positive affinity with others so that he could share the benefits of the Dharma with everyone he encountered, because he knew these people, in turn, would be able to influence others. So in order to fulfill his great vow, he was willing to go into unfamiliar territory, learn new things. And that's something I took to heart and have tried to learn to do myself.

I will stop talking now. Are there any questions?

RESIDENT: You mentioned, Rebecca, that Master Sheng Yen emphasized right view and said it wasn't possible for anyone to awaken without right view. I wonder if that's something you continue to emphasize in your teaching?

Thank you for the question. The answer is yes. I emphasize cultivating right view, which along the way helps us identify the erroneous views we hold. We think we understand what is impermanence, what is emptiness, and so on. But because we understand these things through preexisting biases from our conditioning, there are often traces of erroneous views in our understanding. Sometimes not just small traces, but giant boulders. Then, when we ask our questions, that's where we can reveal that we are coming from a certain perspective that has some of that erroneous view.

That's why it is worthwhile to fully engage in discussion; not to worry about asking what people call a "stupid question;" not to worry about revealing that you have an erroneous view. Actually, if you reveal it in your question, then you have an opportunity to see that you have that erroneous view. That's how I usually work with my students. They ask a question and I point out how actually there's this strand of view that is erroneous. It doesn't mean they're bad; they are very sincere practitioners, but we all

need help in identifying our erroneous view. That's how the process of cultivating right view is crucial to awakening. Otherwise, you think you're going toward awakening, but you might be perpetuating delusion without knowing it.

CHOZEN BAYS ROSHI: I was really struck when we began reading Master Sheng Yen's books years and years ago, and I began teaching from it where he talked about what in Zen practice would be sudden versus gradual awakening. He talked about gradually refining the mind, starting with the tangled, confused mind, and then simplified mind, then one-pointed mind, and then no mind as a gradual path of practice.* I'm wondering if he taught that when you were translating for him, or how he did teach about sudden versus gradual awakening?

That's the notion of gradual cultivation and sudden enlightenment. Master Sheng Yen realized people need some kind of stages, to break it down, instead of thinking of enlightenment happening suddenly from zero. He was trying to give some guideposts along the way. He would often say that sudden enlightenment refers to the realization, what's called "seeing the nature," or *kensho*. It happens suddenly, and what one realizes is no different from that which was realized by the Buddha. It's just that usually for most people, *kensho*, or seeing the nature, is a relatively brief experience and then we return to our usual, deluded way of being. So there's the gradual cultivation of preparing and stabilizing the mind,

from scattered mind to collected mind, to unified mind, to unification of body and mind, to unification of body-mind with environment, unification of thought after thought, to the much more subtle stabilization of clarity that allows us to see what's already here.

Our mind is so distracted. We're looking for something and forgetting right view, forgetting that it's already here. When causes and conditions ripen, you realize, aha! But then there is still work to do because all the entrenched habitual tendencies and vexations did not disappear with *kensho*. The only difference is, now we know how to practice with them. We understand that they are not fixed entities, but a path that we continue to cultivate.

He would often clarify that it's very important not to equate *kensho* or seeing the nature with liberation. People still have lots of vexations afterwards. Some teachers might still have a lot of their own issues. So it's very important for students to keep an eye out for it, because our training with our teacher is co-created. We also have responsibility as a student; one needs to discern also. Really practice is about learning to take full responsibility for your life. Your teacher is not responsible for your enlightenment. Your teacher gives you guidance, points out your blind spots for you. It's *your* practice, your path. Take full responsibility for it.

I think time is up for the evening. Thank you very much for your questions! 🌿

IT'S VERY IMPORTANT
NOT TO EQUATE KENSHO
OR SEEING THE NATURE
WITH LIBERATION.

* See Chan Master Sheng Yen, "Seven Phases of Meditative Development" in this issue (Winter 2024).

Interpreting for
MASTER SHENG YEN

—— BY ——
MING YEE WANG



Ming Yee Wang was born in Hong Kong in 1951 and came to the US in 1969 for college. In 1976 he participated in the first Chan meditation class taught by Master Sheng Yen at the Great Enlightenment Temple in the Bronx, NY. From this point on he served as the Master's English interpreter for twenty years. Since Ming Yee had received an English-based education in Hong Kong, and had a good command of both Chinese and English, his interpretations for the Master had been much appreciated by the Master's Western as well as Chinese students. This article is excerpted from *Encounters with Master Sheng Yen VI*, "Shifu's Deep Concern for the Transmission of Dharma," published by the Sheng Yen Education Foundation, August 2015.

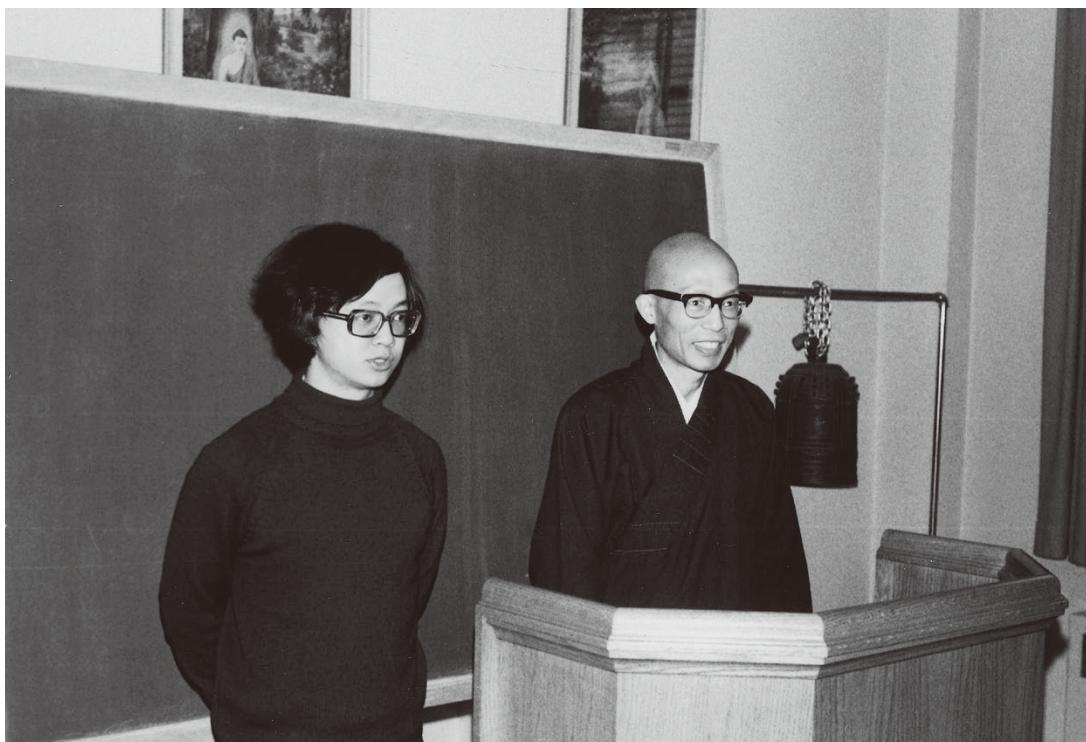


Learning Meditation and Doing Interpretations

IT WAS IN EARLY 1976 WHEN I MOVED TO New York City to stay with my mother. Before that I was attending graduate school at Princeton and for unknown reasons I often had headaches which made it quite difficult for me to focus on my studies. Finally I decided to leave New Jersey for New York. Around that time my mother was regularly going to the Great Enlightenment Temple in the Bronx. Shortly after arriving in New York, I happened to mention to her that I would like to learn meditation, and she told me that the Buddhist Association of the United States (BAUS) would soon be offering a meditation class to be taught by a certain Master

Sheng Yen, at the Great Enlightenment Temple. The class started sometime in April or May of 1976 and I think that was the first time I met Sheng Yen Shifu. There were only four students in that first class: three Caucasians and myself. In this kind of situation, Shifu very naturally let me try doing interpretations for him, and thus began my relationship with him as both a student and an interpreter. At that time, in addition to the meditation class, there were regular Sunday Dharma talks given at the temple. The folks at BAUS wanted to make these talks accessible to Westerners who might be interested in Buddhism, and so I eventually interpreted for the Dharma talks and the meditation classes.

In college I had not taken many courses in English Language or Literature; I mostly took a science



Ming Yee Wang and Master Sheng Yen DDM Archive Photo

curriculum. But I did have some interest in philosophy. In trying to translate Buddhism, especially Shifu's teachings, I had to find my own way of expressing various Buddhist ideas. In the beginning I had little notion of any existing, accepted way of translating Buddhist terms into English; I could only rely on my own conceptual understanding. There were not that many Buddhist books in English during the 1970s, unlike what we have witnessed in the last twenty years or so – many books on Buddhism in English have become available for the general public, from Theravada and Tibetan traditions. At that time all I could find in the temple library to consult were a couple of books published by Master Hsuan Hua from the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas. Later I had the feeling that some of the Buddhist terminology used in those books might not convey meanings fully and clearly.

Maybe I should put it this way: it was not until after the 1980s or 1990s that collections of broadly accepted English Buddhist terminologies began to emerge. Even so, the Chinese tradition still has its preferred choice of terminology, likewise the Tibetan and Theravada traditions. Not just in Buddhism; it is the same situation in any religious or philosophical system: one word may convey different meanings in different contexts, and sometimes different words are used to express the same meaning. Thus in choosing the appropriate word to use, an interpreter has to consider the specific context, as well as the kind of audience. After one or two years, I became somewhat familiar with Shifu's choice of words, such that during the interpretations I rarely had to stop in order to discuss with Shifu which word to use.

Oral versus Written

Based on my own experience, there is a big difference between doing oral interpretations and written translations. Given the opportunities to polish and revise the manuscripts, the accuracy of the written translations is considered a most important quality. But the primary objective of oral interpretations is to convey what Shifu has just said a minute before in a form that can be understood by Western audiences. Of course, the more complete and the more accurate the interpretations are, the better. But I did not aim for ninety percent accuracy or more. And there was something special when I interpreted for Shifu.

For example, if I interpreted the same kind of content for another person, say a professor, I might not be equally effective. So, I suppose, when Shifu was present, something was different – let's say it was Shifu's energy.

Actually Shifu had a good grasp of the English language.

When he first arrived at the Great Enlightenment Temple, he took English classes for a length of time, and his English teacher, Nancy, also became his meditation student. Shifu was quite a good student of English, but he seldom spoke English in public. Hence he might not be able to respond right away, and sometimes neglected to use the more precise words.

At times during a Dharma talk, Shifu might feel that the audience did not clearly understand what he had just said, and so he would repeat himself or present the ideas in a different manner. Sometimes after a passage, he would ask, "What did I just say?" as a way to get people to reflect on what he said, and to make sure that they understood. One time

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I wasn't too sharp, when I heard Shifu ask, "What did I just say?" For some reason I thought Shifu had truly forgotten, and so I proceeded to tell him what he had just said. The audience had quite a good laugh.

Also, between Chinese and English there may be different systems of classification such that there is no simple, one-to-one correspondence. For example, once Shifu mentioned "jiu-jiu" which in Chinese refers specifically to a brother of one's mother, whereas a brother of one's father is called "shu-shu." I translated it as "uncle." Shifu remarked to me, "Uncle' is 'shu-shu' – it cannot be the case that Westerners have no 'jiu-jiu'!"

For some terms the Chinese classifications are more refined, as in this case distinguishing between the brother of one's father and the brother of one's mother. Likewise, there are situations when multiple English terms have to be translated by the same Chinese term. Frankly, I was never sure whether Shifu was joking with me or not on this occasion.

Adapting the Teaching to the Audience

When Shifu first started teaching Chan meditation in America, there weren't so many activities that he had to be involved in, and there were very few students, sometimes only a few, sometimes up to a few dozen. This was very different from his later years, especially after the establishment of the Dharma Drum Mountain organizations, when he needed to introduce the Dharma to a large number of people. And we can also

observe how his ways of guiding students changed significantly from the early years through the later stages of his life. One factor was that with more experience in guiding students, Shifu adjusted his teaching methods. Another important factor was that, facing the increasing number of students who sought to learn Dharma practice from him, and with his time and energy limited, Shifu could no longer expend the same kind of effort on every single student as in the early years. Once Shifu said to us, "In the early years I treated you people like a strict, demanding father, now I am more like a kind grandfather." Accordingly,

individual students from different eras might experience different kinds of benefits from Shifu.

In the early years Shifu was often invited to universities in the United States or Canada to give

public talks; often the invitations came from student Buddhist societies at various universities. As Shifu became better known, more and more Chinese and Western people came to his talks, and the organizers often had to relocate the events to larger auditoriums in order to accommodate the larger-than-expected audiences. During those years, I noticed how Shifu gradually adjusted his ways of giving Dharma talks.

For example, the first time Shifu gave a Dharma talk at the Great Enlightenment Temple, he spoke on *The Mahayana Storehouse of All Illuminating Wisdom, the Sutra of the Wordless Dharma Door*. At that time Shifu followed a very traditional way of lecturing on a sutra, explaining the separate aspects of sutra title, structure and distribution. Later, giving Dharma lectures at various universities and to various Buddhist

SHIFU'S WAYS OF GUIDING STUDENTS CHANGED SIGNIFICANTLY FROM THE EARLY YEARS THROUGH THE LATER STAGES OF HIS LIFE.



Ming Yee Wang and Master Sheng Yen DDM Archive Photo

groups, and especially where there was a substantial number of Western people in the audience, Shifu spoke in a different manner. He gradually developed a way of speaking which the audience with various backgrounds could not only find accessible, but could benefit directly from in their daily living. One way or another, Shifu's delivery of his Dharma talks evolved over the years.

The Meaning of Life

Another time – this was also in the early period – a fellow disciple, Paul Kennedy, and I went with Shifu to visit a Dharma center in Chinatown. In the elevator a young man in his twenties asked Shifu directly in English, “What is the meaning of life?” Think about this, in that half a minute or so in an elevator, how does one answer such a question? Shifu told him, “Life has no meaning.” That was a special

situation; I imagine on other occasions Shifu might not respond to the question in this manner.

In my memory Shifu had been saying repeatedly since the early years, “Buddhism is so good; it is a pity so few people know it.” Hence it's important that one should make the most effort to share the Dharma with other people, so that they too can enjoy its benefits. I think it's with this kind of perspective that Shifu continued to modify the way he expounded the Dharma. From the time I first met Shifu through the next twenty years during which I interpreted for him, it had been like this.

In the very early years I already had a feeling: at the same time Shifu untiringly tried to bring the benefits of Dharma to a large number of people, he was deeply concerned with the continuation of a vital Buddhist tradition. Around 1980 I once accompanied Shifu on a lecture tour through a few states. In the public talks he repeatedly mentioned that Chinese

Buddhism was in a very feeble state and we needed to do our utmost to preserve and revitalize this great tradition. I was deeply touched by this aspect of compassion – a selfless commitment to preserving the Dharma tradition, like that of a loyal minister to his endangered country.

Shifu continued to be untiringly dedicated to the spreading of Dharma for the next three decades. The students tried to follow him with varying degrees of vigor, but Shifu himself never stopped. His time was never wasted. If an ordinary person is as busy as Shifu and has to deal with the same kind of demanding travel schedule over a long period of time, he can easily collapse. Shifu had also told us the rather peculiar ways in which he was “trained” by grand-master Dongchu. But clearly he understood that the same method cannot be applied to all people. I imagine it took Shifu quite a few years to develop his own training methods suitable for different students and disciples.

Gratitude as Student and as Interpreter

I served as Shifu’s interpreter for about twenty years and during that time I still had no clear idea of its significance in my life. But now, looking back after all these interim years, I tend to think that there must have been some good karmic seeds planted in previous lives, such that it felt as if a subtle force somehow pushed me towards New York to meet Shifu. During most of my twenty years in New York, Shifu would go back to Taiwan for three months and then come to New York for another three months. He was like one of those birds that migrate according to the seasons,

and my life had a pattern that synchronized with his. When Shifu was in Taiwan, I would sometimes feel lacking in focus; but when he returned to America, I always called upon my reserve energy and followed him to many places. This continued until 1996 when, for various reasons, I left New York and moved to California. From then on I did not have many opportunities to see Shifu or interpret for him anymore.

Now I am in my sixties, an appropriate age to take a retrospective look at one’s life. I sometimes ask myself, “What have I done with all those years?” I may wish that I had handled some particular situations with more maturity. Or, if I had shifted somewhat my attention at certain junctures, I could have accomplished more. But one thing I know – the interpretations I did for Shifu during those twenty years were for a worthy cause, and

SHIFU HIMSELF
NEVER STOPPED;
HIS TIME WAS
NEVER WASTED.

this thought gives me peace of mind. Maybe I did not accomplish much by worldly standards, or I may have seemingly done well in some areas, but this is not what truly matters. On the whole, I do not feel that I have squandered life’s precious opportunities, because I have put energy into something quite worthwhile.

In a certain sense I have a higher opinion of myself as Shifu’s interpreter than as his student. Interpretation happens in a specific space-time when I try to serve as a communication channel so that the audience can, in general, grasp what Shifu has just said. With this objective, I consider myself a relatively competent interpreter. But as a student, I recognize my own inadequacy in so many aspects. However, I served as an interpreter for only those twenty years or so, whereas Shifu’s influence on me clearly extended beyond that period and probably is not limited to this lifetime. 🌿

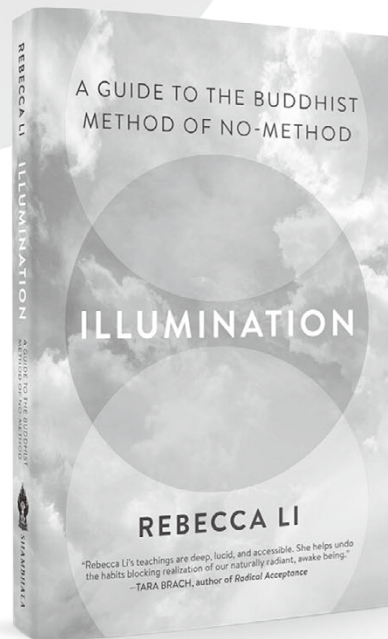
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