

ENCOUNTERS
with Master
Sheng Yen Ⅳ

Encounters with Master Sheng Yen IV

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Preface

In an effort to share with the public the thoughts and life experiences of Master Sheng Yen (commonly referred to in Chinese as *Shifu*), founder of Dharma Drum Mountain), the Sheng Yen Education Foundation embarked on a series of talks beginning in September of 2009. Fifty-three talks were given at the Sheng Yen Lecture Hall (located in the “Zhong Zheng Jing She,” the residence where Master Sheng Yen lived in his final years). The talks were titled “A Living Example, Countless Teachings—Encounters with Master Sheng Yen,” and we invited all his monastic and lay disciples to share with us their stories about Shifu, how he taught them through his living example and words. Listening to these speakers’ personal accounts of the interactions between teacher and student allowed the audience to commemorate Master Sheng Yen’s journey, and once again hear his gracious teachings.

The talks include stories of Master Sheng Yen’s everyday life, how he would give detailed guidance to his disciples regarding their speech and actions. There are also accounts of his travels to share the Buddhadharma locally and overseas, reaching out to the public, and teaching them skillfully and flexibly based on the existing circumstances. Even in his later

years when he became quite ill, he was an example of how to face life and death with freedom and ease. All of these examples, no matter how small the story or how short the conversation, radiate with Shifu's compassion and wisdom. They inspire us to vow to "Emulate the worthies and sages, practice what the Dharma has taught us, and repay through our heartfelt gratitude."

At the end of the series, we felt that the interactions from these true life stories were brimming with the Dharma spirit. Hence the audiences initiated and organized transcripts of the talks, to be compiled and published by the Sheng Yen Education Foundation, hoping to allow the general public to learn from the wisdom of Master Sheng Yen, so that together we can realize his vision to create a pure land on this earth.

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Following in the Footsteps of Shifu

Venerable Guo Cheng

The life of Shifu was one that exuded extraordinary qualities in the most ordinary way.

His perseverance was like drops of water that eventually pierce a stone.

He focused on only one mission for 50 years, which was studying, practicing, protecting, and propagating the Dharma. He devoted his life, progressing step by step.

Certainly he could have moved on faster, but he chose to slow down his pace, so as to lead all of us to move forward together.



Introducing the Speaker

Venerable Guo Cheng

Ven. Guo Cheng joined the Chan Meditation Center as a sramaneri in 1997. Before this, she had been serving as a volunteer actively for 12 years. The Chan Meditation Center is like her second full time job. She used to start her days early in order to participate in the morning services before attending to her full time job. The Venerable lived in America for many years. In 2004, she returned to Taiwan and began working full time at the Dharma Drum Sangha University. In 2011, she returned again to the Chan Meditation Center.

I came to know Shifu when I decided to learn meditation in 1984. For years I was a volunteer at the Chan Meditation Center in New York. The thought of joining the monastic sangha did not arise until much later in 1997. Now that I have passed 60, I consider it a blessing that I could still serve the community.

Like most other Taiwanese who came to New York, I came here for further studies after graduating from university in Taiwan. When I finished my studies, I started working at a Jewish company, taking charge of the company's financial matters. I was not even 30 then. Having studied all my life, I felt I should enjoy myself the moment I was employed. New York is truly an exciting place, where one can always have fun, either in a thrifty or lavish way. Broadway, Lincoln Center, Central Park etc. are all great landmarks, not to mention the fun-filled night life. I enjoyed myself for two years. One day, I suddenly felt I had had enough, and started asking myself if I wanted to continue my life in this way. So I started to explore religions, hoping to feel grounded in life.

Aloe Vera medication

To start with, I did not anchor on Buddhism. I started by exploring many other religions. I wasn't really interested in Buddhism until I met Professor Lee Henryue, who was also the catalyst in my search for meditation at the Chan Meditation Center. He once said, "After understanding the basics and theories of Buddhism, one needs to cultivate precepts, concentration, and wisdom. Only then can one be said to be practicing Buddhism." About a year later, I came across the information about Master Sheng Yen's meditation courses in the World Journal, a local Chinese newspaper. I thought to myself: "Isn't meditation practice related to 'concentration,' one of the Three Learnings: precepts, concentration, and wisdom?" With this in mind, I found my way to the Chan Meditation Center(CMC).

I can recall vividly that, even with only 5 participants, Shifu was still guiding us in a very devoted manner. He took good care of every one of us. When I was practicing massaging, I happened to scratch and hurt my hands, probably due to the material my clothes were made of.

Though I didn't really mind, Shifu was very observant and caring. He gave me a stalk of Aloe Vera to apply on my hands. That was the first time I had used Aloe Vera as medicine. Though I was born and raised in Taiwan, like the other members in my family, I only went to doctors trained in Western medicine, instead of doctors of Chinese medicine. So that experience really impressed me, and I felt that the Chan Meditation Center was indeed quite different from other temples.

In the early days, Chan Meditation Center was across the street from its present location. It was a pretty old building, but it was indeed inviting in its own way—the place was neat and tidy, with a simple community. After the meditation class, I started to attend the weekend Dharma assemblies. I did not know much about it all during my first two visits. I merely mimicked the others. My third visit occurred when Shifu had just returned from Taiwan. He caught me from far, while I was sitting alone at a corner. He walked towards me and said, “You have come for the third time.” I was amazed: how could he have known this since we never met in my last two visits? He

then asked me to lend a helping hand if I was free. I went down to the basement and discovered a kitchen with a huge cooking pot. As I did not know how to cook, I started to help by doing the simplest kitchen work: cutting and slicing vegetables.

Settling the mind by focusing on a task

Shifu was very skillful in receiving people. He knew the capacity of every person who came to him. I, for example, would quickly immerse myself in attending to matters at hand. Without a task to do, I would turn restless; things would have turned out differently if Shifu hadn't asked me to help out in the kitchen.

Another supporting condition that brought me to this place, ironically, was an argument I had at work. Looking back, I'm very thankful to what I had been through. About 1985, I ran into an argument with my colleague at work. Feeling upset I decided to apply for some leave. This surprised my boss, as I hardly ever asked for any time off from work. I explained to him that I was

physically fit, but that my mind was not well. My boss was most understanding and accepted my reasons. I came to CMC during this two-day break. It happened to be most timely because the Center was just relocating to its present premises. “Good! Good! Good! Come give us a hand.” That was what he said to me after I told him why I had applied for time off.

What kind of work? Dismantling the offering table! Because the door-way was narrow, it was impossible to remove the table without disassembling and reassembling it. Though I was thinner back then, I was “heavy” enough. So Shifu asked me to work along with him. I was very drawn to the way he worked. Though slightly built, Shifu worked on the table in full spirit and concentration. I was very much moved to see how a Buddhist practitioner focused at work.

To me, having a task in hand is a practical way to settle and calm myself. I felt grounded whenever I could focus on and immerse myself into something. And so, I started to frequent CMC, to do voluntary work, listen to

Shifu's Dharma talks, and join the Dharma assemblies. All these started as I stayed on to work at the center.

Soon, I became a regular over the weekends. Some people joked that I had two jobs: one with the Jewish company on weekdays, and another at CMC on weekends. Eventually, Shifu started to entrust me with financial matters. At times when the Center was busy and shorthanded, I volunteered after work. There was a time when my office was only a short five-minute walk away from the Center. I took the opportunity to join the morning services before starting my work. Later, when my company moved to New Jersey, which was a one-hour plus drive away, I adjusted my working hours so that I could leave earlier to attend to the evening service. The company was most understanding; after all I was a long-serving employee, so they were quite flexible about that.

Exceptional permission to be ordained

The thought of becoming a monastic never came to me, even as I had been a volunteer for a long 12 years,

between 1985 and 1997. I felt that the monastic life was too rigid for me. In 1996, when I was 46, I decided to plan for my retirement. I was financially sound, and it was about time to serve the community. During a seven-day retreat in that very same year, the thought of leaving home as a monastic came to me.

Actually, when I was around 30 and started to frequent CMC, I was pretty stable, both body and mind wise. Shifu was curious as to why I did not leave home to become a monastic. I found it strange, and asked instead, “Is it necessary to be a monastic to practice Buddhism?” He raised the same question three times, and every time I gave the same response. After that, Shifu did not ask me anymore. In 1997, during a seven-day retreat, a thought occurred to me: if I wish to serve society after I turn 50, why not consider becoming a monastic, which is also a way to build affinity with sentient beings? After the retreat, strangely enough, Shifu came and asked me, “Are you thinking of leaving home?” I asked if that was still possible for I had already passed 35, the maximum age to become a monastic. “For a long serving devotee, we can make an exception,” Shifu said.

I would probably leave home and become a monastic anyway, even if Shifu hadn't asked. However, it wouldn't be Dharma Drum Mountain since it had this age criteria. Once you have lived in America for a long time, you tend to become used to abiding by rules and regulations. Though thinking of becoming a monastic, I would not request ordination, as I was not qualified. Since Shifu had initiated it, I didn't want to miss the opportunity, although Shifu said just as a word of warning: "We can give it a try, but it may not necessarily work."

Interestingly, my Jewish boss was not surprised. Apparently he had been expecting this. I had worked with him for 17 years, and qualified as a senior employee. Over time, I had been applying for time off to go on pilgrimage with Shifu in China. Out of all four pilgrimages in China, I attended three. Every time I applied for such a leave of absence, my Jewish boss would begin to worry if that would mean my permanent departure to join the monastic after the trip. Nevertheless it was business as usual after my return on every trip. I didn't join the fourth trip, but this time I expressed my wish. Although the timing was

an unexpected surprise for my boss, he told me he was actually prepared for it.

I started my official monastic training on October 1, 1998, with two other novice members. At that time, the only full time residents at the CMC were Shifu, Ven. Guo Yuan, and Guo Gu. Now with three more persons, the Center had certainly grown in population. After a few days, we received a large entourage from the Palm Village: Ven. Thich Nhat Hanh came for a visit with 30 or 40 people, and they were going to stay at the CMC. At that time, the CMC could at most accommodate 32 participants for a seven-day Chan meditation retreat. Now we needed to attend to a group of around 40 people, it was going to be a challenging task to prepare food and accommodation. So Shifu gave up his study room for Ven. Thich Nhat Hanh to sleep in, while the living quarters for other Dharma teachers were used to accommodate other members too. The other two novice members and I had to find a corner and make do with sleeping bags on the floor. A much bigger challenge was preparing breakfast for around 30 or 40 persons. Two other novices and I got up at midnight to start slicing

cheese in the kitchen. I was complaining in my mind, wondering why I had to get up so early in the morning to prepare breakfast as soon as I moved in, although I never felt so occupied when I was still a volunteer. Nonetheless, thinking back, it was quite an interesting period of time for us three novices.

Different approaches to the infinite Dharma

Shifu worked relentlessly to share the Dharma in the West, to the best of his ability. Even with his limited English, for example, he was determined to sow the seeds of Chinese Buddhism in Western society.

I started to take part in retreats in 1987. At that time there were not many participants, and anyone could sign up the retreat, up to four times a year. Over time, there were more and more participants, so one could only take part in two retreats per year. Later, as the numbers swelled, registration became a criteria-based process, including considerations of gender and nationality.

Shifu conducted his retreats differently in the West and East. Western students were very result-oriented, seeking immediate benefits as they practice. In addition, they emphasized the rational and analytical aspects. They had to be totally convinced before accepting the teacher and teachings. This is why Shifu put in great effort to clarify the teachings of Chan, and devised a gradual and sequential system of methods for practice. From 1998 onwards, Shifu gradually developed the methods of practice for silent illumination and huatou. He would use only one method for each retreat. He explained the steps and levels of practice in even more detail and clarity, which was beneficial particularly for Westerners.

In the East, it is different, especially in Taiwan, where devotees have more reverence for monastics. So Shifu would conduct his retreats by emphasizing faith and devotion, in addition to introducing the right views and understanding, gradually engaging them with Chan practice.

In Buddhism, the Dharma needs to be delivered in line with the Buddhist principle according to the capacity

of the audience, in a flexible way in terms of time and space. Shifu's teaching accommodated various needs of the students. One example was the congregation of devotees at the monastery. In Taiwan, we have two congregations, divided between the male and female devotees. Shifu did not insist this practice in America, simply because of differences in local sentiments. Western society advocates equality between sexes, so practicing segregation of male and female participants would only invite criticism. Hence, Shifu used a more liberal approach of free and mixed participation. Another example was about protocol. For example, the protocol to invite the monastic teacher to ascend to the seat before giving a Dharma talk was not practiced in America. Instead, Shifu just took his lecture notes and spoke directly. Shifu's intention was to share the Dharma. He would adopt whatever way suitable for the audience, and was comfortable and at ease at all times.

Another example was his explanation on the five precepts, where the fourth precept of "abstaining from sexual misconduct" was delivered in a different manner

in America. An editor of the Chan Magazine in America asked about this, to which Shifu replied, “In America, the relationship context is different from that in Taiwan. Americans would not be attracted to the Dharma if we were to speak of this percept solely from the Eastern perspective.” Nevertheless, Shifu still emphasized the spirit of upholding the percept, encouraging fidelity and commitment in relationships. To adapt to different customs and cultures, it was necessary to adjust the way to present and deliver the teaching.

Complete entrustment as a skillful means

In the early days, we had very limited resources at CMC whenever we conducted seven-day retreats. Experienced practitioners had to serve as volunteers. At times, we would have seven different time keepers for seven days respectively. We would tap the help of the participants on other tasks such as meal preparation. So the retreat was the beginning of my experience as a chef in the kitchen.

Once, a devotee who volunteered as our chef could not turn up during a meditation class for beginners. Shifu asked if I could help prepare meals. I told him I could only prepare simple meals. “Well, as long as the dishes are well cooked and edible, that would do.” I felt encouraged to hear this, and prepared three dishes for lunch—one main meal, a side dish, and a soup. Most of the time two dishes and one soup were the standard menu for our retreats.

Once he had assigned a task, Shifu would observe, all without putting pressure on you. When I first worked to prepare meals in the kitchen, he would come for a short visit. He would let me manage everything on my own once he was sure everything was in place, although he would still help take care of details.

After my first experience, I began to volunteer more often in the kitchen. Working as the chef became my work assignment in every retreat. It was fairly easy to prepare a three-dish lunch. At times, we would prepare dishes with leftover food. Once, Prof. Yang Bei came for a retreat to help out in the kitchen. She was very good at

preparing soups. Soon, she became our regular soup chef in all our retreats.

Retreats in Taiwan were organized by the retreat coordinator and retreat monitors. Earlier in America at the CMC, retreats were organized by Ven. Guo Yuan, who was also the disciplinary monk. I looked after external matters, and also served as a time keeper from time to time. It was only when we started Dharma Drum Retreat Center in New York that we recruited volunteers to work in the kitchen.

I participated in 40 retreats. During one of the retreats, Shifu skillfully transformed a challenging situation into a great surprise. The regular translator could not make it, and we could not find any other translators. Fortunately, we discovered a Western student who could speak Mandarin, so Shifu asked him to be the interpreter. It turned out that he kept up extremely well, while Shifu delivered his talk in a most profound way, which greatly inspired every participant on the retreat. Everyone stayed focused and had a great experience with their practice.

Causes and conditions are like this: things may not develop as expected in the beginning, but may turn out to be positive surprises later.

Presence of a great teacher

Shifu's attention to details and passion for learning was evident in his travel logs. As he started sharing the Dharma in the West, he was constantly filling up his notebook with details, about what he observed regarding the locals and their culture. In the preface to his book, *Flowers in the Air, Moon in the Water*, he wrote: "I had never planned what to write before my trips. There was hardly any time for me to write during my travels. However, I would recall every detail, every moment and every event I observed, and things and ideas I have jotted down. All these were kept for reference purposes. When the trip was over, I would squeeze some time out of my busy schedule to pen down the ideas that have come to me and what I have seen."

He added: "My mission is to spread the Dharma. Retaining what have transpired along my footprints is for

the sake of Dharma propagation. Many people may not be able to meet me in person. What I have documented are my interactions with those whom I have met in my journeys through the Dharma. Reading these travel logs would be a more enriching experience than meeting me in person...I am most happy to share my experiences unreservedly with readers whom I have affinity with.”

I used to keep personal notes of my early pilgrimages. Later, knowing that Shifu would write about his travels, I simply didn't do it anymore. Reading his travel log brings more insight than our own experience. Shifu's lifelong mission was to share what he had learnt. Time and time, over and over again, this was simply what he had in mind.

Shifu's organizing skills were amazing. Every time before he returned to Taiwan, he would settle and prepare every aspect of his work, so systematically that anyone who followed up would not have much difficulty to carry out the tasks. In the later part of his life, Shifu suffered from a kidney condition. He kept the medical reports with him personally, stating that it was most practical for him

to keep them with him in his personal luggage at all times. This, I believe, is something many of us have come to experience, after his passing away.

Shifu was an enlightening teacher of our life, guiding us in a most devoted manner. It is a pity that some of us, lacking good karmic roots, failed to appreciate his presence as an accomplished teacher even in close contact. Once, a practitioner asked him: “How do we discover a great teacher?” Shifu said that, for beginners, the affinity to meet one’s right teacher depends on their causes and conditions. If they lack the discernment to decide, then learning devotedly and diligently with their present teachers would be the assurance of meeting a great teacher. Shifu would never put himself on the pedestal as a great teacher. He simply explained things objectively in terms of the causes and conditions, and it was up to people whether they would accept or not; Shifu never coerced people.

Promoting Buddhism through personal practice

In 1989, when Shifu was 60 years old, he found the site in Taiwan for Dharma Drum Mountain, and was planning for its construction. Every time he returned to New York, he would talk to us about the discovery, after breakfast time over the weekends and holidays. He would spend more than an hour joyfully sharing the story, which we found intriguing too. I think Shifu was delighted because he saw a future, that Dharma Drum Mountain would be a great help in spreading Buddhism and have a profound influence.

After that, an association of Dharma supporters was soon established. The pilgrimage trips we made were meant to form a common vision for this purpose. I remembered the first and second trips, where Shifu shared his concern that our group was growing too fast, and that we should slow down, to reflect and settle a little. During that period of time, Shifu put more emphasis on rendering care to devotees and supporters around, so that all of us

could catch up. Back in New York, he shared many of his ideas too. But, aware of the fact that his disciples were still not able to catch up, he withheld his plans. Shifu wouldn't coerce his followers, but simply slowed down and waited for us to catch up.

Sometime around 1995 to 1996, Shifu placed emphasis on educating and enriching the devotees, for he thought that a Dharma center was certainly important, but if the followers couldn't really grow and benefit from the Dharma, their efforts to practice and support the Dharma would not last. From Shifu's teaching by example, I've learned that a leader should know when to forge ahead, and when to slow down. Wisdom lies in keeping the balance between the two. More significant was his way to guide and safeguard his disciples.

Shifu wrote this in the preface of *Master Sheng Yen's Chronicle up to the Age of 70*: "Leading by example is a better way to inspire and motivate others. It is harder and slower to inspire others with idealistic calls. Taking my life as an example, I immerse myself fully in the Tripitaka,

practice the Three Learnings, and devote myself to reading, studying, and writing. I studied abroad on my own accord, taught at the university, established the institute for Buddhist studies, personally oversaw the planning of the university, and engage in teaching Chan practice and popularizing the Dharma in the contemporary society. Though taxing and never easy, these efforts finally has a positive influence on Buddhists of our era, improving the quality of Buddhist education, creating a climate to propagate the Dharma, reestablishing the reputation of Buddhism, and changing the way society perceives Buddhism.”

Strengthening personal cultivation in preparation for Dharma propagation

The life of Shifu was one that exuded extraordinary qualities in the most ordinary way. We have all witnessed his perseverance. I would use water to describe him. His perseverance was like drops of water that eventually pierce a stone. He focused on only one mission for 50 years, which was studying, practicing, protecting, and propagating the Dharma. He devoted his life, progressing

step by step. Certainly he could have moved on faster, but he chose to slow down his pace, so as to lead all of us to move forward together.

Water also has the ability to go around obstacles that come in its way.

Water can also change its form. It can evaporate and rise, turning into clouds and mists; and it can solidify, turning into ice.

For the past 30 years, Shifu had been sowing the seeds to propagate Chinese Buddhism in the West. He showed no sign of giving up, no matter how challenging and tough the situation was. Now, we're putting efforts to nourish our sangha and strengthen our inner cultivation, so that we're capable of sharing the Dharma further. Shifu created a great field of merit for us, a community of monastics and laypeople, to cultivate hand in hand. In the US, now we have Ven. Guo Xing to take care of both the Chan Meditation Center and Dharma Drum Retreat Center.

In addition, at DDRC we have Ven. Chang Wen as the abbot. As a Western monastic, he completed his education at Dharma Drum Sangha University, and subsequently, under Shifu's instruction, he returned to Western society to share the Dharma. He is ever ready to serve wholeheartedly. The abbot at the CMC is Ven. Chang Hwa. Also an outstanding monastic, she holds a doctoral degree in Biochemistry, and exhibits a great sense of mission for Buddhism. She is also the translator of Shifu's book, *Complete Enlightenment*, a proof of her mastery in both English and Chinese. Our Dharma teachers assigned to the US are all most outstanding and excellent, which shows that our monastic sangha puts much emphasis on the US.

Selfless giving, the path of a religious teacher

Shifu can be said to have reached another peak in his life when he was 60. I'm 60 too. To me, Shifu is the best example for me to model myself on. I'm always thankful that, at the age of 60, I'm still useful. I'll perform wholeheartedly whatever I'm still capable of doing.

Wherever I can be of service, I'll never decline, and I'll be happy to take up any task.

Even though we're devoted and diligent, it's not likely that we can achieve success instantly. Nevertheless, as long as we're clear about our direction and lay a solid foundation slowly we can certainly go a long way. For a religious teacher, what comes first should be a noble mind, which is an aspiration to serve and contribute unconditionally. All our actions and plans should go in line with this direction. As long as we're spiritually equipped, the path will naturally unfold itself. As long as we move forward firmly, the path will be smooth. This is why the sangha needs everyone's support; this is also the reason why Shifu expected a pure, diligent and peaceful sangha in harmony. Amitofu.

*(Talk delivered on January 27, 2010
at the Sheng Yen Education Foundation)*

A Manifestation of Guanyin Bodhisattva's Compassion and Wisdom

Yü Chün-fang

Before I met Shifu, books were the only source of Buddhism for me.

It may seem that I understood, but I actually had little idea about the essence of Buddhism and how it could be applied in daily life.

After becoming acquainted with Shifu, I started to feel that he was an exact embodiment of Chinese Buddhism, manifesting the compassion and wisdom of Guanyin Bodhisattva.



Introducing the Speaker

Yü Chün-fang

Dr. Yü is currently professor emerita in the department of religion at Columbia University. She is also the first Sheng Yen Professor in Chinese Buddhist Studies at the University. In 1976, she was one of the four students in Master Sheng Yen's first Meditation Class, conducted at the Great Enlightenment Temple in New York. This encounter was the beginning of her affinity with Master Sheng Yen, which had a profound impact on her academic career and personal development.

I was one of the four students in Master Sheng Yen's first meditation class held in New York, in 1976. Shifu conducted this class at the Great Enlightenment Temple. Frankly, I was not diligent at meditation. I benefited from Shifu mostly in my academic research, and my understanding and application of the Dharma. Prior to meeting Shifu, I had been studying Chinese Buddhism for a decade at Columbia University without any mentor. I would say that it was only after meeting Shifu that I really entered the field of Chinese Buddhist Studies.

Exploring Buddhism from Neo-Confucianism of the Song and Ming Dynasties

My interest in Buddhism started when I was a university student. I graduated in 1959 from Tunghai University in Taiwan, as the first graduate of the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature. My plan was to pursue a PhD in English literature in the USA, and return to teach in Taiwan. During my four years of study at Tunghai University, I encountered Buddhism when I took courses in the Department of Chinese Literature. There

were two famous professors at that time—Mou Zongsan and Xu Fuguan, both representing the “New Confucian” philosophers of the time, who stressed the need to reinterpret Neo-Confucianism of the Song and Ming dynasties by using modern approaches. Since Buddhism had a profound influence on Neo-Confucianism of the Song and Ming dynasties, Buddhist philosophy was often brought into discussion in their lectures. My knowledge of Buddhism began to take root from then on.

When I was in America, I discovered that, compared to Taiwan, most universities in the United States had a department of religious studies which was under the Faculty of Humanities, just like history, philosophy and anthropology. On the other hand, universities in Taiwan had no department of religious studies, let alone courses on religion. When I was a graduate student at Columbia University, I decided to switch to the Department of Religion and focus my research on Buddhism. It might be hard to imagine that there were only two professors in Buddhist studies at Columbia University during the ten years from 1963 to 1972, one being Japanese and the

other American. Both of them were experts in Japanese Buddhism, while there was no specialist in Chinese Buddhism.

Professor William Theodore de Bary, a leading expert in Neo-Confucianism, was my dissertation advisor. He proposed that I focused my research on Buddhism in the Ming dynasty, an area with many possible topics to delve into but had not explored by researchers. He also advised me to do research on one of the four great masters of the late Ming dynasty—Yunqi Zhuhong. I had never heard of Yunqi Zhuhong before this. After hearing his advice, I immediately went to the Far Eastern Library in search of information, and found the *Anthology of the Teachings of Yunqi* (Chn. *Yunqi fahui*) by Master Lianchi, or Yunqi Zhuhong, a collection of more than thirty volumes. So I decided to base my dissertation on that.

I completed my dissertation in 1972. During the dissertation defence, I was challenged by an extremely demanding professor. Perhaps it is not known to you that Yunqi Zhuhong advocated the “unity of Chan and

Pure Land.” Rather than being his own invention, the idea of “unity of Chan and Pure Land” had been a most significant and prominent tradition in Chinese Buddhism. One of the most famous masters of this practice is Chan Master Yongming Yanshou of the Five Dynasties. Yet, the professor who questioned me during the defense could have been influenced by Japanese Buddhism, and so held strongly against the view of unifying Chan and Pure Land practices as one. To him, doing so is like mixing gold with dust, or honey with water, thereby causing damage to the teaching of Chan.

The major difference between Japanese and Chinese Buddhism is in the way the former categorizes and segregates schools and sects of Buddhism. In Japan, there is a distinct demarcation between Buddhist schools and sects. Not only between Zen and Pure Land, even the school of Zen itself sees a clear division between the Soto and Rinzai sects. Jodo Shinshu (True Pure Land School), too, has different branches and lineages. With such a concept, this professor believed Chan Master Yunqi Zhuhong’s idea of unity of Chan and Pure Land

was probably due to his personal misunderstanding, and regarded it as an exception in Chinese Buddhism, and so insisted that I revise my dissertation.

In the history of Columbia University it was probably the first time that a student was required to revise and rewrite a major part of a dissertation. Normally at this stage it might just be some minor modifications, mostly corrections of grammatical mistakes and choice of words. So, I spent another year reworking on the dissertation, adding to the content by tracing the “unity of Chan and Pure Land” all the way back to Master Yongming Yanshou of the Five Dynasties, which was transmitted through Song, Yuan and then to Master Zhuhong of the late Ming dynasty, proving that the philosophy of “unity of Chan and Pure Land” was not an isolated case, but a tradition long existed in Chinese Buddhism. When I resubmitted my dissertation, it was quickly approved. This was a blessing in disguise, as I was able to publish my dissertation very quickly after the second submission, without having to do much revision. Overall, it was a fulfilling experience.

First encounter with Shifu at Great Enlightenment Temple in New York

After publishing my dissertation, my first teaching position was in the Department of Religion at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, where I offered a course—An Introduction to Buddhism, in which I covered the origin of Buddhism in India, and moved on to Chinese and Japanese Buddhism. We had more than thirty American undergraduates, who were very interested in Buddhism. I led them in studying of Buddhist history, scriptures, and Buddhist thoughts. I also wish the students to gain a better understanding of Buddhism by visiting temples and monasteries or discussing the Dharma with Buddhist monastics. So, I included visits to temples and monasteries as part of the course.

At that time, most of the Buddhist monasteries near New Jersey were located in New York. I recall that I brought along ten students to visit the Great Enlightenment Temple, sometime in October of 1976. A slightly-built monk with glasses received us warmly. He asked where we

came from, and introduced the Temple to us in great detail, from the Buddha statues, to the collection of sutras and the purpose of the cushions. He also responded meticulously and patiently to all of our questions. Later, I came to know that this was Master Sheng Yen, who had just received his doctorate in Buddhist literature from Taisho University in Japan, and that his dissertation was also related to the four great Buddhist masters in the late Ming dynasty. His research was on Master Ouyi Zhixu's life and thought. Shifu completed his dissertation in 1975, while mine in 1973. At the time I felt it was a pity that I could not benefit from his dissertation, because there was a difference of two years.

Introducing Chan teachings to Western society

I visited the Great Enlightenment Temple a few more times and learned that Shifu was planning for a meditation course. In 1976, Shifu organized the first meditation course at the Temple. Without any publicity, we had a small class of four, including myself, two Westerners, and

Wang Mingyi, who later became Shifu's long-term English translator.

The meditation course ran for three months. It was held on Saturdays with day-long sessions, including Dharma talks, explanation on the postures for sitting meditation, and guidance on the methods for Chan practice.

Shifu first taught the method of counting breaths, and also the methods of watching the breath and diaphragm. I could only manage the methods of counting and watching breaths. Since my mind was very scattered, I couldn't really manage the method of watching the diaphragm. Shifu understood my situation, and explained that it was difficult for intellectuals to let go of wandering thoughts. It was common for those who are always thinking to have discursive thoughts while sitting in meditation. From the perspective of Chan, acknowledging and not paying attention to our discursive thoughts would be enough for practice. However, certain thoughts that arose in the sitting actually helped my research. For example during sitting,

better ways to lead and teach my students, and ideas on research topics, etc. would emerge. Although I was no good at meditation practice, it did indeed facilitate my academic and teaching skills.

After Shifu left the Great Enlightenment Temple, with the support from Mr. Shen Jiazhen and others, he first rented a little flat located in Queens (New York City), and subsequently purchased an old apartment house, right across from the current Chan Meditation Center. I attended a seven-day Chan retreat there twice. We used the Buddha hall as meditation hall during the retreat. Of the participants, which numbered from 20-plus, to later around 30, half were Chinese and half were American.

At that time, we were required to sit six sticks of incense each day during the retreat, in addition to listening to Shifu's Dharma talks, doing Yoga exercise, and walking meditation. Reading, taking notes, or making phone calls were not allowed. We had to follow the rule of silence all the time. The only time we could speak was during the afternoon interviews. Everyone had the opportunity to

be interviewed. Shifu was fully aware of everyone's state of body and mind, and was able to give guidance simply through observation before we even opened our mouth.

For example, during one retreat, a participant suddenly burst into tears and cried loudly. We were all shocked, not knowing what really happened, while Shifu immediately used the “shouting and beating” way, in a stern tone, and removed the participant from the hall. On the other hand, for those who felt upset for not being able to use the method properly, he would teach them to relax and not to be too hard on themselves. For those who were too demanding with their practice, refusing to end their sitting or even sleep, he would ask them to let go and take a good break. Such expedient and skillful means, as Buddhism teaches, were indeed evident in his teachings.

Later, when I began to suffer from arthritis and gained weight, it became more and more challenging for me to practice sitting meditation. So I followed Shifu's advice to sit on a chair instead of on a cushion—the point is to keep a straight back. However, that soon became my last retreat

because I felt uneasy watching others practicing on their cushion while I sat on a chair. Now, thinking back, I really regret that.

Let go of the past, work on the present moment

I was going through an extremely challenging time of my life when I participated in my last seven-day retreat. I was being reviewed for tenure at Rutgers University. Normally, after teaching for five years, faculty would be able to obtain tenure once they had passed the review. At that time, I was the only female Chinese professor in the Department. It turned out that I was denied tenure, while my American male colleague who was being reviewed at the same time, received the tenure.

We had a union at the University, and we had the right to examine the evaluation. I discovered many statements written about me were not true. For example, it stated that some of my classes were cancelled because very few students took my courses on Buddhist studies which were

also perceived as too specialized. This was not true at all; there were always many students who enrolled in my classes. The University union also found the whole thing unreasonable, and so decided to file an appeal for me on its own initiative.

I was very depressed during that period of time. When I met Shifu, he encouraged me to join a retreat. And I did. Sitting on a chair, I realized everything could be put down. Just like what Shifu taught: “Let go of everything. What is past is past, and the future has not yet come; both the past and future do not exist. All that we have is the present moment, the very here and now.” Gradually, I was able to leave things behind. Interestingly, the University decided to review my tenure case some time later. I was not only promoted, the University even backdated their record for a year promoted me as an associate professor.

I am very grateful to Shifu for teaching me to let go and not to be burdened by my past. Indeed, I cannot recall many past personal history now. What I will never forget, however, are my academic research and writings. I

have few memories for other incidents: places I had been, people I had met, and even unhappy moments. If I had any glory, it is also long past. Anything that I can be proud of should serve as a reminder to me: what more can I do? How should I strive for greater helpths and achievements? These are profound teachings I have learned from Shifu.

Creating a new outlook by making the most of the causes and conditions

I was offered a position in another university when the union was working on my appeal. I received a call from the union the very day I received the appointment letter. “We won. The president has reviewed the case. Welcome back.” So I had to make a decision to either return or accept the offer from the new school. In the end I decided to return to Rutgers University. Some people were worried about my decision thinking that I would not have a good prospect for many of those who were against me would continue to challenge me.

I applied Shifu’s teachings when I returned to work—

not to be caught up with the past, but maintain the same attitude at work. This surprised my colleagues. Gradually, they showed signs of appreciation. After my first term as head of the Department, they continued to elect me as the head for a second term.

Since I had only been teaching and working on research, my initial perception was that I could not handle administrative work. I soon realized that there was not much difference between research and administration, and I could deal with my work in the same manner: What should be done? How can it be done more effectively? The same analytical method can be used for both kind of work.

Rutgers University is a fairly sizable State university, with about 50,000 faculty member and students. While it is famous for its engineering faculties, its philosophy and English departments are also among the best in the US. However, the University did not value the Department of Religion, which had only eight full-time professors for undergraduate programs, with the rest filled in by adjuncts. For the past seventeen years it had never hired

any new faculty members. When I became the head of the Department, I felt I should do something to change this. So I called for a meeting, pointing out that we had all served for a long time, and so should think about what we could leave behind as our legacy when we retired. If we were serious about this, we should then recruit more faculty members and increase the number of students who major in Religion. Only then would the University pay attention to the Department of Religion.

The first thing I did was to collaborate with other departments to organize lecture series, because it would be hard for us to organize events on our own. The first one was organized in 2001, coinciding with the general election in America. We took the opportunity to host a “Religion and Politics” lecture series with a well-known political research institute. A prestigious professor was invited as our keynote speaker at the conclusion of this series. The lecture series were not only attended by many professors and students, but also by the University’s top administrators.

We organized another lecture series in the second

year. Working with the Institute of Women Studies, we hosted the series entitled “Women and Religion.” The keynote speaker was a nun who had authored a book about her story about working with a prisoner on the death row. She met the prisoner when he started to serve his sentence and accompanied him to his execution until the very last moment of his life. A movie was later made based on this true story. The lecture was immensely successful, and was more popular than that of the previous year.

The topic for the lecture series in the third year was “Religion and Globalization,” which was in line with the current interest in globalization. I introduced the idea of inviting His Holiness the Dalai Lama as our keynote speaker. My colleagues all felt that I was overly optimistic, saying that inviting His Holiness the Dalai Lama was as impossible as inviting the Pope. I was determined to give it a try—after all, how would we know if we did not try? We finally received a positive answer from His Holiness the Dalai Lama after many attempts to make contact. Unfortunately, we had to cancel the event as he was not feeling well. However, he fulfilled our wish and came to

speak in 2004, when I had left Rutgers for the Columbia University.

I taught at Rutgers for thirty-two years. On hindsight, it had been very fulfilling even though there were challenges and disappointments. I feel very thankful for that experience.

Teaching and research as a way to share the Dharma.

I consider my marriage as one of the greater disappointments of my life. My ex-husband was American. We were fellow students at Columbia University. It was only after our marriage that we realized that our aspirations were rather different. I was forty when we divorced, with a six-year old son. When I expressed my desire to be a monastic at Chan Meditation Center, Shifu, however, did not agree. I had always wanted to be a monastic since my first encounter with Buddhism when I was eighteen. Being the eldest child, however, I was treated more like a son by my parents, who wanted me to excel in

my studies, and never encouraged me to enter the kitchen. When I first came to the States, I could not cook at all other than boiling eggs and making porridge. I had no clue why I got married when I had no intention to do so in the first place. When I expressed my interest to leave home, Shifu expressed his disapproval: “You’re merely trying to escape your responsibilities. Your son is only six, and your mum is with you too. They need you to look after and take care of them.” I explained that I wanted to propagate the Dharma. Shifu told me, “There are many ways to propagate the Dharma. You don’t need to be a monastic. You can do so through teaching and academic work.”

This was an important piece of advice for me, giving me a great sense of mission. I have always kept this in mind that I should not study for the sake of study, and that teaching is more than a job. Teaching, doing research, and engaging in writing are all means to share the Dharma. Even now I still keep reminding myself that I should not lax, and should keep striving.

Shifu spoke at Rutgers University many times during

his time in America. The topics were mostly on Chan practice in daily life. Even though he had an extremely busy schedule, I never heard him complain. We were always very happy to have Shifu lecture at the University. His lectures had a very personal touch; there could be a few hundred of us, but you would feel that he was speaking directly to you. I believe many of us had this experience, which was very touching and engaging.

Shifu often told stories as examples in his lectures. He could be pretty humorous as well. There was another quality of him—he had no problem communicating with anyone. Once, I brought my six-year-old son to meet Shifu at the Chan Meditation Center for the first time. Shifu was able to speak with him instantly, and my son was also very happy to meet him. Another time, before he spoke at the University, he asked to be driven to my house so he could meet my mother, who was living with me at that time, because I used to talk to him about her. They were very happy talking to each other.

My mother belonged to the generation of modern

intellectuals of the May-Fourth Movement era, when there were few women studying in the universities. After graduating from the Beijing Normal University for Women, she dedicated her life to teaching. She did not subscribe to any system of belief, and had never been in contact with Buddhism. However, she had a very positive impression about Shifu after their talk, and started to take interest in Buddhism. Soon afterwards, she started the practice of reciting the White Robed Guanyin Dharani with joy.

Faith in Guanyin Bodhisattva

Though I wrote a number of articles after publishing my dissertation in 1981, I had always been thinking of writing another book, on a new and an unexplored topic as a contribution to the academia. The idea occurred to me during a seven-day retreat that I should focus on the theme of the bodhisattva. The belief and faith in bodhisattvas has always been an important aspect of Chinese society, with Guanyin Bodhisattva as its most popular icon. So I decided to write a book on Guanyin Bodhisattva.

While doing my research on Guanyin Bodhisattva, I read Shifu's biography, *A Journey of Learning and Insight*, in which Shifu talked about how he was inspired by Guanyin Bodhisattva. When he first became a monk he could neither understand nor remember any of the sutras. This changed after he practiced 500 prostrations to Guanyin Bodhisattva every day for half a year, when all of a sudden he could understand the sutras with a better memory. Throughout his life, Shifu had great faith in Guanyin Bodhisattva, and in fact Dharma Drum Mountain was founded in dedication to Guanyin.

One of the chapters in my book is about spiritual efficacy. The earliest historical record of spiritual efficacy with Guanyin Bodhisattva was found in the Six Dynasties period, about the fourth century AD. The record showed that one could develop wisdom by prostrating to the Bodhisattva, which was similar to Shifu's experience as a novice. I believe this is all possible because of one's devotion and sincerity, which makes it such a moving story.

I have to thank Shifu, for he had been most helpful when I was doing my research on Guanyin Bodhisattva, including translating and publishing the Chinese version at a later time. The original English book was very well received. Many expressed their interest in reading the book, including many Chinese readers during my visit in China. However, translation from English to Chinese required resources and time, which I could not commit to. In addition, it wasn't easy to find a publisher. Sometime in 2005, I discussed this with Shifu at CMC. Shifu arranged to have the Dharma Drum Publication take care of its translation and publication. I'm extremely grateful to Shifu, without whom the Chinese version would not have been possible (Prof. Yu's Kuan-yin: the Chinese Transformation of Avalokitesvara was published by DDM Publication in 2009).

The causes and conditions ripen for the Professorship in Chinese Buddhism

Soon after 2004, there was another turn of causes and conditions which led me to teach at Columbia University.

Originally, when Columbia University invited me, I was not keen to continue teaching at all. At that time, I was serving as the head of the Department of Religion at Rutgers University for the second term, and was planning to retire. If not for their interest in developing the graduate program of Chinese Buddhism, I would not have agreed to teach at Columbia University; most likely than not my last teaching post would be at Rutgers. However, because I had only been teaching undergraduates, and working alone on my research, having a chance to direct young scholars and graduate students to work on Chinese Buddhism research would be a rewarding endeavor. So in 2004, I retired from Rutgers University and went to teach at Columbia University.

Upon my arrival at Columbia University I discovered there were two endowed professionships in Buddhism,: Japanese Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism. The professorship in Chinese Buddhism, however, was set up specifically for me. This meant that the University would probably change course and might well discontinue the Professorship in Chinese Buddhist Studies in the future

after my retirement. For example, if there were to be a new focus on Islam, there would be a need to hire a new professor of Islam, and so the position of Chinese Buddhism could be replaced. Aware of this problem, I felt that I should try to ensure the success of the Professorship in Chinese Buddhism, so that the University would retain the professorship even after my retirement.

When I returned to Taiwan in October 2006 to attend the first International Conference on Sheng Yen's Thoughts and Contemporary Society, I raised this concern with Shifu, and had a discussion with the Sheng Yen Education Foundation. I suggested to endow a chair in Chinese Buddhism. Shifu agreed to the idea and felt it was something worth doing. I never expected that it would work out so quickly. In May 2007, Sheng Yen Education Foundation collaborated with Columbia University and established the Sheng Yen Professorship in Chinese Buddhist Studies. Up to today (2010), we had eight excellent PhD students. We received four to five applicants per year, but have only been able to accept one to two because of limited scholarships. The program supports

students with a five-year scholarship. I believe we can have more students if we have more grants.

Manifestation of Guanyin Bodhisattva's wisdom and compassion in Shifu

Before I knew Shifu, my understanding of Buddhism was only through reading, but I actually only had a vague idea about the spirit of Buddhist and how to apply it in daily life. It was through Shifu's presence that I discovered Guanyin Bodhisattva's wisdom and compassion. To me, he was the embodiment of Chinese Buddhism.

One can always find the answers to any problems through Shifu's wisdom. The same goes for his compassion. I left home for Taichung to study when I was eighteen, and came to America after graduating from Tunghai University. This is to say that after eighteen, I actually spent more time with Shifu than with my parents. He was most compassionate and kind to me.

One example was when I suffered from breast cancer

in 1999. I was receiving chemotherapy and radiation therapy until May 2000. One day, he came to New Jersey to visit and cheer me up, encouraging me to be more positive and not to worry since I was already receiving treatment. It was an unexpected visit, very moving and touching, and it empowered me a great deal.

We often speak of the perfect compassion and wisdom of Guanyin Bodhisattva. Compassion and wisdom are likened to the two wings of a bird, or the two wheels of a cart. With a life-long faith in Guanyin Bodhisattva, Shifu was also his manifestation. From the Buddhist perspective, one who prays to Guanyin Bodhisattva should also aspire to become like Guanyin Bodhisattva. I think I saw a perfect example of this in Shifu.

I have been engaged in teaching and academic research throughout my life, especially on the study of Chinese Buddhism. The day I met Shifu I finally found an excellent teacher. It was Shifu who led me into the world of Chinese Buddhism. I was also inspired by Shifu during some challenging times of my life. Shifu was my tutor in

Buddhist practice, and also an enlightening teacher and in some way like my parent. I am forever grateful for his teaching and guidance.

*(Talk delivered on June 20, 2010
at the Sheng Yen Education Foundation)*

The Freedom of Letting Go

Wu Shu Fang

When I could neither move forward nor retreat, these words from Shifu came to me: Let go and you will be free. With these words in mind, all my worries were put to rest.

Not only could I smile at those who were staring at me, I could also complete my work calmly.

I reminded myself of Shifu's words again and again that day, and felt the bright and beaming sun, and how wonderful the world is.



Introducing the Speaker

Wu Shu Fang

Mr. Gong Tian Jie and Mrs. Wu Shu Fang are a highly respected volunteer couple in North America. They have had a close relationship with Master Sheng Yen since 1988. After taking the refuge, they have practiced and lived in accordance with the Master's teachings. Even when they were diagnosed with cancer, they never gave up their vow to serve the Dharma. They volunteered to serve full time at the Chan Meditation Center in late autumn of 1996. Since then, they have been committed to activities of DDM Association of Dharma Supporters in North America.

I am extremely grateful to my husband, without whom I couldn't have practiced the Dharma, received guidance from Shifu, and come to Dharma Drum Mountain. He is my benevolent spiritual friend for life.

I am a Filipino-Chinese. I attended a primary school affiliated to the Samantabhadra Institute. I met my husband in Taiwan when we were both studying at university. We were fortunate to have our marriage blessed by Venerable Hsing Yun, at a wedding ceremony in 1963, which took place at the Chung Hwa Institute of Buddhist Studies in Beitou, Taipei, in the presence of our Venerable Dong Chu. I remembered him as a huge person, with a stately presence. He was amiable and smiled at us all the time. I did not meet Shifu at that time. Twenty years later when I got to know Shifu, I realized that it must have been during the time of Shifu's solitary retreat in Mei Nong. Karmic affinity is truly incredible.

The school-like Chan Meditation Center

My husband and I immigrated to America soon after

our wedding. We were very fortunate because it was a time when the economy was strong and vibrant. There were so many opportunities between 1960 and 1980. In this span of 20 years, it wasn't impossible to earn a good living as long as one was willing to work hard. However, things are quite different now. New generations of immigrants now face intense competition and are often under great pressure. I understand their challenges, and hope to provide assistance and care for them with the Dharma.

When we lived in America, my husband was active in the civil rights movement in his free time. He established many new contacts when he joined OCA (Organization of Chinese Americans), fighting for the rights of local Chinese. In 1988, we met Mr. Zhu Guodong in a gathering. Zhu was only in his thirties, and worked in the corporate world as a public relations manager. A string of Buddhist prayer beads he wore on his hand caught my eyes. "You're so young, are you a Buddhist?" I asked. He acknowledged it and told us that he was a student of Master Sheng Yen, and had participated in two seven-day Chan retreats conducted by Shifu. We chatted with great interest and

asked that he arranged a meeting for us with Shifu.

After a month or two, Zhu brought us to meet Shifu at the Chan Meditation Center(CMC) after Shifu returned to New York from Taiwan. My husband was extremely impressed with Shifu in the meeting. This was indeed rare, for he was one who held strongly to his personal views, and he could only be convinced only when he came to see and realize for himself. Prior to meeting Shifu, he was never ready to take refuge, even when there were others who recommended teachers to him. He viewed taking refuge as a serious matter, akin to searching and meeting one's lifetime teacher. He certainly didn't have a simple definition for a "teacher." I was very surprised that he decided to take refuge after meeting Shifu for the first time.

The Chan Meditation Center felt very much like a school to me. The building might be small, but I was surprised when I learned about Shifu's teachings in some booklets. That was the first time I found Buddhist books about Dharma in daily life. More so, I was very happy when Shifu met us for the first time and said to me, "You are a veteran Buddhist."

Taking refuge, living life in another dimension

I grew up in a Buddhist family. It was due to my father's influence that everyone in our family practices Buddhism. During the Second World War, he joined a guerrilla group and often had to risk his life, and it was the monks at Buddhist temples that helped save his life many times. During this period, he came to know an elderly monk Venerable Xing Yuan and became close to him, who was most compassionate towards my father, provided shelter and taught him the Dharma. In one of the crucial moments when my father was nearly arrested, it was the Venerable that saved his life by turning him, temporarily, into a monk. After the war, this experience inspired my father to get all of us to practice Buddhism, doing morning and evening services at home. My father even started to engage in spreading the Dharma on the air from the 1950s, and so one can say he was a pioneer in using the media to propagate Buddhism.

I was exposed to Buddhism from a young age under

my father's influence. Though I came to know many virtuous friends and teachers, Buddhism remained a vague subject to me. There were very few books available about Buddhism at that time. Even if there were any, they were mostly sutras, or written in classical Chinese, or filled with Buddhist terms. I couldn't understand them very well due to my limited command of Chinese. All this changed the moment I read Shifu's books on Buddhism, when I was finally able to understand what Dharma is about.

When I was about to turn 50, I had a very vivid dream. I dreamt of my past primary school teacher Venerable Miao Qin handing me a Buddhist robe. When I shared this dream with my mother, she felt that it was my teacher's message to remind me to stay in touch with Dharma centers, for there had been a while that I wasn't in contact with Buddhism. So I kept this in mind since then.

So, the moment I met Shifu was the moment I found answers to the very two doubts I had within. First of all, I finally found a Dharma center I felt comfortable with. Secondly, I found Shifu's books accessible and realized

that Buddhism could be applied in our daily life. So I was very happy.

On December 11, 1988, we took refuge in the three jewels with Shifu as the preceptor at CMC. It was a turning point of our life. Taking refuge was indeed an extraordinary event for my long-time atheist husband. Becoming Buddhists and practicing under the guidance of Shifu has been a great blessing for us. We started to view and handle matters differently. It was as if we were beginning a new life, entering another time and space.

A focused mind accomplishes everything

My husband was a step ahead of me to have taken part in a seven-day Chan retreat with Shifu. Determined not to lose out, I decided to follow suit.

At that time, the Chan Meditation Center could only accommodate 32 people for a seven-day retreat. Male and female participants had to sit separately, facing the walls westward and eastward respectively. I can still remember

exactly where I sat at my first retreat. I came third after Ven. Guo Shun and the now Ven. Guo Cheng, and there was a Western practitioner behind me. I had only this experience to share: painful legs. To my right, Ven. Guo Cheng was sitting like a big Buddha, immovable like a mountain. To my left was a veteran practitioner from a martial art family. So, one was a Buddha and the other a bodhisattva, while I was right in the middle like a pathetic caterpillar, who could hardly sit still in peace. From the first day on I was already considering what excuse I should give to Shifu, so that I could give up without losing any face.

Shifu had a marvelous skill to understand our problems at a glance. During the Dharma talk session on the second morning, he spoke through metaphors and stories, one of the morals being: “A focused mind can accomplish everything.” We might have heard similar words before, but I was immensely inspired by that at that time, as if I was hearing it for the first time. From then onwards, I could finally make it through the sitting, though I was still in pain. This sentence kept me going

for the next four retreats, laying the foundation for my Chan practice.

Shifu pointed out my problem at that retreat. He said that I had been too “xie dai.” I was puzzled and confused, for “xie dai” is the Chinese for shoe laces, and what have shoe laces got to do with meditation? Later, Ven. Guo Cheng pointed out to me that it was not “xie dai” as in shoes lace, but “xie dai” meaning slack in practice. Being a Filipino Chinese, I sometimes had difficulty understanding Mandarin correctly. With Shifu’s mild accent, and my poor understanding of Mandarin, funny stories like this happened. Nevertheless, I felt pleased and encouraged when he said I had great perseverance. This was my first retreat experience.

Leaving all our expectations behind as long as we put in our very best

In 1992, my husband’s company decided to move from New York to Florida. We had to follow in order to keep his job. Shifu asked, “Do you really need to move?” My

husband explained that he would lose the job if we stayed. With Shifu's blessings, we moved to Florida. Though away from New York, we never failed to return to the Chan Meditation Center for the annual seven-day Chan retreat.

I became more courageous when we had lived in Florida for five years. This was perhaps the biggest change I could see in myself. In the past, I had been merely like an assistant and follower to my husband in organizing activities. As he had to attend to other matters when we were in Florida, I was the one to set up the Dharma Drum Mountain liaison center in Florida. Everything was a new experience for me at that time. Once, Shifu was on a visit trip to Florida to render care to the devotees. That was my first time to organize a large-scale public lecture. But due to my lack of experience and thorough consideration, the turnout was poor in one of his talks. I felt so bad about it and was in tears. Shifu consoled me by saying that as long as we tried our very best we shouldn't worry about the possible results. I would never forget his advice. Ever since I have always kept reminding myself to keep devoting myself to serving others, by working to the best of my

ability, while leaving all expectations behind, not to be troubled by the possible outcomes.

A family of two, both suffering from cancer

1995 was a special time for me and my husband: we were both diagnosed with cancer. His was stage one and he soon returned to work after treatment. Mine was stage three, and required chemotherapy and radiation therapy. There was a time when my neck was completely covered in sores, and I lost all my hair. This drastic change was extremely difficult for me, all the more because I had always wanted to look good.

Life had to go on, though. Once, I was still wearing a turtleneck and a hat shopping at a supermarket, though it was a typical warm day in Florida. I noticed many startled gazes around me, and realized how frightening I must have appeared. At that time I could really relate to a metaphorical expression: “I wish to dig a hole to hide in.” That was really an awkward moment.

As I was feeling embarrassed, Shifu's words came to me, softly: "Let go, and you'll be free." Incredibly, all my worries were gone with these words. Not only could I smile at those staring at me, I could also complete my work calmly. I kept reciting "Let go, and you'll be free" for the rest of that day, feeling the warmth of the beaming sun, and how wonderful the world was.

Actually I was very disturbed after being diagnosed with cancer. I strongly felt that I hadn't really done nothing worthwhile in my life, and I had been rude to people and unreasonable in dealing with matters. So I became very anxious and pessimistic about my next rebirth, wondering which lower realm of existence I would be descending into if I died then. What could I do, then? So I thought to myself that I'd like to live a few more years, to do something meaningful.

Now my condition has stabilized, and my hair has grown back. Many people are curious about what force supported me through all this. Here I can share my experience. Shifu's guidance was certainly very important.

Once, when my condition was most serious, he called and said to me: “Leave your physical body to the doctors, and leave your life to the Buddhas and bodhisattvas.” That was indeed a tremendous encouragement to me.

The other factor could be related to my meditation practice. The doctor told me, when I was first diagnosed with cancer, that I had only a 25 percent chance of survival. Sometimes, our ignorance about something makes us less fearful of it. So I just went on with my life like normal, and practiced sitting meditation as usual. I shared with the doctor that I was able to maintain a positive attitude, sitting in meditation with right mindfulness, which helped strengthen my immune system. I sat for two to three hours a day, which served to heal my body. With this experience, I often encourage people to cope with sickness in a positive and cheerful mindset, which is very important. Now I still practice sitting meditation every day. Chan practice is the best medication for me.

Cultivating merit and wisdom amidst sickness

During the time when I was ill, I still accompanied Shifu on a pilgrimage trip to China in 1996, where we visited some holy Buddhist sites. When I returned to New York, the doctor discovered that my condition had improved dramatically. He asked if I was on any special treatments, and encouraged me to continue doing whatever I was doing.

The pilgrimage was very important for me. Many were concerned that I couldn't cope because of my poor health. I even had the thought of giving up, because seats were limited, and every participant would be assigned a task. So I told Shifu, "I haven't been assigned any task, so I should give this opportunity to somebody else." But Shifu simply said to me: "You can join."

Shifu was right. The pilgrimage meant a lot to me, as it gave me strength, confidence, and deeper faith in the Dharma. I remembered the challenge at Jiuhua Mountain. We had

to walk 99 steps downhill to pay tribute to the Buddhist mummies, and it never occurred to me at all how I was to return to the top after I reached the bottom, which was definitely going to be a test of my stamina. However, I walked every step by following Shifu's instruction: Take a breath, experience your breathing, for every single step. I used this method to walk both up and down hills. So, I made it.

Faith and confidence are very important. We must have confidence with ourselves, have faith in the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, and, even more so, have faith in Shifu. I follow every instruction and word of Shifu faithfully. Shifu once said: "Do not be afraid of death. Do not look for ways to die. Do not wait for death to come." Most important of these is not to be afraid of death. To me, recovering from a serious disease was like returning from death. It has made me more compassionate; in the past, I wasn't compassionate enough, and found it difficult to generate a compassionate mind. For now, though I still have problems with my practice, I've realized that I'm the one who has benefited the most in extending care and sharing Shifu's words with others. This is indeed good medicine.

I am a fighter by nature. Falling sick is an unavoidable fact, yet I could live in harmony with cancer cells, and not be beaten by cancer. I've always kept a positive attitude and belief, and remained joyful at heart. I feel it's necessary to work persistently at every task, with a happy and positive mindset. I practice sitting meditation every day, and constantly recite the name of Guanyin Bodhisattva. Initially this was the method I used to focus my attention, instead of indulging in discursive thoughts. Later, when I was able to concentrate on the method, a sense of joy filled with positive energy would naturally arise within. Certainly, it's still important to watch your diet. Now I still do these practices on a regular basis.

Volunteering full-time to develop DDM Association of Dharma Supporters, USA

After our recovery my husband truly realized the meaning of impermanence, and so he decided to retire early. In November 1996, we moved back to New York from Florida. We offered ourselves to Shifu as full-time volunteers, hoping that we were able to do more. This

coincided with the initial development of Dharma Drum Mountain Association of Dharma Supporters in America. My husband served as the director-general, while I took up a less demanding position, as Ven. Guo Yuan's assistant in promoting Chan practice activities.

The main purpose of the association was to encourage practitioners in other states to set up their respective liaison centers. Before the association was formed, we organized some activities and invited many of them to New York to participate, in which we shortlisted those who we found were willing and engaged them to help promote DDM's vision and ideals in their States. The establishment of liaison centers or practice centers in different places depended on the resources available. To maintain the practice centers, we organized annual activities, such as annual gatherings or at least two to three volunteer training sessions per year.

A large number of Chinese have come to the US to work and study. Living abroad is never the same as staying at home. Therefore, the liaison and practice

centers also fulfill their cultural and emotional needs. In this aspect, everyone maintained a very close and warm rapport.

DDM Retreat Center in Shawangunk

Starting from 1998, retreats that used to take place at CMC were gradually organized at the Dharma Drum Retreat Center in Shawangunk (DDRC). There simply was not enough space to accommodate participants at CMC, as it could only fit 32 people the most. Shifu was hoping to have a more suitable place to hold retreats, ideally not too far from or too near New York City. DDRC fulfilled this expectation.

Located in upstate New York, Shawangunk is around two hour's drive from New York City. As it was a rural community, the people were more conservative. They were not very comfortable with our presence when we first arrived, more so when we were an organization with a constant flow of silent visitors. Shifu had been thinking about ways to benefit the locals, following the

practice of private institutions, even though we are a non-profit organization. It was important to be friendly to the community so that we could find a better place to practice.

Shifu often reminded us that in a sense we were intruding into the locals' lives, so instead of being cold and distant we should be even friendlier to the local community. Also, we invited our neighbors to our Chinese New Year activities. Shifu indeed put a lot of thoughts in this regard. Establishing DDRC was never an easy task. I hope you can take the opportunity to visit, and show your support to the resident monastics and devotees.

Busy and tired, yet a wonderful experience

DDRC was originally a YWCA campsite. Unattended for years, the place was extremely moldy and infested with rats. Devotees from New York and New Jersey spent almost a year cleaning up the small cottages, before we conducted the first retreat. Most of the volunteers were female and it really got on their nerve the moment they opened the door

and saw a lot of rats on the run. When we finally managed to fix all the old buildings, and built a new dormitory, we soon discovered that the bathroom in the dormitory was leaking. Shifu was very compassionate, and asked us to bear such less-than-ideal materials and workmanship, as this was a rural area far away from New York City. Many of the Western disciples were very touched by this, for some had been wondering if the workmen ever carried out their job properly, while Shifu simply tried to comfort us.

In 1999, we had an unforgettable experience during a 49-day retreat at DDRC. We had no water supply after a power cut, all due to a thunderstorm, which was causing many inconveniences. So Shifu gathered all of us to collect water from a nearby lake. All the monastics, including Shifu and all the retreat participants worked together until midnight. Though the weather had been cold throughout the retreat and we were tired, everyone felt it was extraordinary, to be able to experience and realize a lot. Shifu always reminded us: “Apply the method.” Collecting water required us to use the method too. Also, in the process of collecting water we learned how to cooperate

with others to get things done together. We really learned a lot. We might have been busy and tired in those years, but it was so wonderful. I'm grateful that, during those days, I had the opportunity to work with Shifu and other monastics to accomplish those tasks.

Sharing meal with Shifu at a long dining table

There were not as many devotees in New York as in Taiwan, so here people had more opportunities to become close to Shifu, listening to his talks and raising questions to him directly. At CMC, we had our meals at a long dining table, with Shifu sitting at the front, surrounded by his regular students on both sides. Everyone would just start chatting at the table. Sometimes Shifu would share some humorous stories with us. We felt like a family, and at times old friends. I think the devotees in New York were indeed very blessed, to be so close to Shifu, in spirit and in form.

They say: "New Yorkers are hard to please." My understanding is that indeed some intellectuals tend to

believe they're more knowledgeable, and hold strongly to their own opinions. So sometimes Shifu would coax them as if they were little children. People also say that New Yorkers tend to be bad-tempered. But Shifu always had his way to calm them down with just a few words, and even managed to convince those who were very difficult to deal with. Shifu often reminded us to apply the methods in our practice, and in handling matters as well. That advice has been truly useful, and sometimes we would jokingly say to each other: "Apply the method."

After Shifu's death in 2009, I felt that our devotees in New York have been all the more united and energized. Take me for example. I wasn't particularly diligent in the past, but now I'm keener to share his teachings, especially the Fivefold Spiritual Renaissance and the Six Ethics of the Mind. I feel strongly that anyone who has received his teachings has the responsibility to promote them.

We have a study group at CMC, and have studied the Six Ethics of the Mind for two years. The more we studied, the more we felt of its importance. If we see the Fivefold

Spiritual Renaissance as a campaign to promote ideas and concepts, then the Six Ethics of the Mind would be one to further realize them. Recently I had a chat with some of my Dharma brothers and sisters, including some devotees from Shanghai, and we all agreed that we should all the more endeavor to promote Shifu's ideals, and put them into practice. I think this is really good.

My late husband's final repentance and devotion as a manifestation

My husband was a person with a strong personality. There were few people whom he would pay attention to, and Shifu was the one whose instruction he was most convinced of. To him, Shifu's death was as if he had lost the most important support in his life. One could imagine how upset and depressed he was. He died on the second of June this year (2009). He had suffered a lot since his cancer relapsed in 2004, undergoing no less than 50 chemotherapy treatments. I hope that none of you have to experience what he went through, for the treatments were indeed very painful, beyond description.

Even so, he was always thinking of CMC, and DDM. Whenever his condition improved, he would still go and volunteer at CMC.

When Shifu passed away in February this year my husband attended to the prayer service on the very first and final day. He was concerned about the venue's settings, and even called a resident monastic: "Why is the mourning hall so humble, with no offerings of flowers and water?" The venerable was really kind to take the trouble to come over and explained that it was Shifu's will to keep things simple.

Two weeks before he passed away, he was in tears whenever we spoke of Shifu. I had only seen him in tears twice in our 46 years of marriage. The first time was when we were both admitted to the hospital in 1995. He was there for medital examination and I was there for a surgery. He was sad and in tears, though not emotionally disturbed. After Shifu passed away, however, he burst into tears and cried out loud. I realized that people would usually reflect what they've done in the past, especially when they're very ill. For him, he felt extremely sorry that he could no

longer repent to Shifu, for he had often upset Shifu in the past. This, perhaps, was what upset him the most, and so whenever he thought of Shifu he would be lost in tears. I believe there was enormous pain and struggle in him, when he was terminally ill and no longer had the chance to repent to Shifu.

Not to involve the ego is to have true freedom

It's truly a blessing to have met Shifu in this life. He offered us Dharma and wisdom for life, taught us not to practice the Dharma for the sake of enlightenment, but, more importantly, to be a "street sweeper for spirituality," and that we should "detach from our ego," and "let go for a peace of mind," under all circumstances. These were the most important teachings for my life, and I've since applied them in my personal relationships. Freedom is to be free of the ego. We should show gratitude for whatever situations we encounter, for without them we would never be able to gauge how far our practice and realization of the Dharma is, and how much we have actually learnt from Shifu.

I'm really grateful to Shifu. The past 20 years we've virtually followed his every footstep and lived our life with his teachings. His kindness is beyond the sky, more profound than the earth, and deeper than the ocean. I will continue what my late husband had yet to accomplish; I will fulfill his wishes to serve DDM. To me, this is not only the way to repay Shifu's kindness, but also to repay his kindness on behalf of my late husband. As long as DDM requires anything of me, I'll spare no effort and take it as my duty and obligation.

*(Talk delivered on November 25, 2009
at Sheng Yen Education Foundation)*

A Diary of Immeasurable Compassion

Yao Shi Zhuang

Shifu used to keep a diary with him.

With a quick reference to his own notes, he could fluently dictate eloquent and profound texts, as I transcribed words.

Time and time again, he would speak, nostalgically, of the Patriarchs.

He led us to follow their footsteps, and to experience the spiritual world of the Great Masters of the past.



Introducing the Speaker

Yao Shi Zhuang

Yao Shi Zhuang migrated to America in 1992. A year later, she became a volunteer at the Chan Meditation Center. She served as a transcriber to Master Sheng Yen, and had been a great personal assistant to him in sharing the Dharma in writings. In 2007 when the Master was not well enough to travel, with the consent of her family she returned to Taiwan from New York to continue working for the Master.

She aspires to serve as a life-long volunteer for Dharma Drum Mountain, and vows to practice the Dharma with the Master in every lifetime to come.

It all started in Taiwan when I began my Dharma practice with Shifu. However, it was in the United States that I had the opportunity to assist him in organizing and preparing his manuscripts. After migrating to America in 1992, I began to volunteer at the Chan Meditation Center(CMC). Now, thinking back, the affinities were truly amazing. Not long after I started to visit CMC, Shifu said to me: “Soon you’ll be working here every day.” Quite naively I asked what time I should report for work. He laughed and explained: “It’s voluntary work, not full time employment. Anyway, why don’t you come and join us for breakfast every day?” Shifu said that jokingly, showing a lighter and humorous side of him.

Shifu was always very busy when in Taiwan. It was in America where he completed most of his writings. You must be curious to know how he managed to complete so many books. Allow me to share with you what I know.

Travel logs inspiring words of wisdom

We can categorize Shifu’s writings into three kinds:

one includes those he penned and composed entirely on his own, such as *Tiantai Keys to the Mind: A Vernacular Translation of and Commentary on Ouyi's Jiaoguan gangzong*, and *The Essence of the Avatamsaka Sutra: Examination and explanation of the Essay on the Origin of Humanity*. For these writings, I only worked on his manuscripts. The second category includes his discourses and speeches. Shifu would further categorize and arrange them himself, before they were published by Dharma Drum Publication. Examples of these are *Protecting the Spiritual Environment* and *The World of Chan*. The final category is his travel logs, where he would give an oral account for me to record and transcribe. He would review and refine the transcriptions before they were released; these include books such as *Ascending the Summit*, *A Wonderful Year of "Great Good for All"*, and *A Pilgrimage to the Wellsprings of Chan*.

Whenever Shifu returned from Taiwan to the US, he would bring along many manuscripts. He would first select those he decided to use and commenced editing them, before engaging me for transcription, after which

he would continue to review and refine them for the second or third time. Though this took place in a short period of three months, he was able to finish one to two books in this manner. Certain books, however, required two phases of editing and review. For these, Shifu would work out the first phase during his first return visit, and complete it three months later when he returned again. As to travel logs, I remembered how I did it for the first time: after an oral account, Shifu would request that I read my transcriptions aloud to him. After he approved them, I continued. I had no idea why it was done this way. Looking back at this now, I feel as if I passed the first test set by Shifu.

Many people thought that my transcriptions were based on recordings of Shifu's dictated speeches or talks. This was not the case. Actually it was live transcription while Shifu delivered them, sentence by sentence. I could keep up with his pace as he didn't speak very fast. Normally when he finished a section, I would have finished transcribing.

Shifu always carried a small diary with him. He had the amazing ability to write really small characters and so he could even fit in two lines of writings within a spacing of 0.5cm. I remembered the transcription process with him: he could easily provide a concise oral account filled with words of wisdom right after referring to his diary and some external references. His powers of observation were keen and subtle. One example is in his *Memoirs of My Universal Travel*, where he led us on pilgrimage trips to holy Buddhist sites in China, showed his appreciation of past masters and patriarchs, and guided us to discover their past and enter their inner world. I was on three such trips, in 1993, 1996, and 2002. As I worked on the transcriptions, I realized that I never once observed the many aspects and special features of the environments that he mentioned.

Beating the Dharma drum by dedicating his life to all sentient beings

Shifu would explain to me the general principles for working on a specific book. Trusting that I could understand

these principles, he gave me a lot of freedom to work out the details, without having to repeatedly remind me or review the process. Of course, each book has its own unique general principle. Shifu had incredible patience and perseverance. Normally he would dictate from 9 am till noon, and continued after lunch and a short break. The only break was when he used the toilet or when he had appointments.

When we had very little time, we would do the transcriptions continuously, one after another, until 10 or 11 pm, and then sometimes his attendant would come to remind him to retire to bed. Shifu always put his full efforts in any task he committed to. Sometimes when I met him on the next day at CMC, he would tell me that he had worked until 2am the night before. Whenever I received revised manuscripts from him, I knew that he had worked through the night again. I always felt that Shifu was exhausting himself all the time, dedicating his life to beating the Dharma drum to benefit sentient beings.

In the early days, I also helped with organizing his photos. Shifu wanted me to register dates, venue and a

short summary of the events behind every photo. Those photos were a great help for writing his books. As there were too many of them, it was necessary to record all those details behind each and every photo, without which it would be impossible to sort them out. When I first started, I made a mess by pressing the pen too hard on the back of the photos, and I would stack them too soon before the ink had dried. Shifu on the other hand was careful and mindful: he wrote lightly, and taught me to stack two photos face to face, and only stack all of them together after the ink had dried. I felt quite ashamed that I had to bother him to give me instructions for such easy job.

Even in the US, Shifu was occupied too, busy with attending to visitors, having meetings, giving Dharma talks, leading meditation retreats at Dharma Drum Retreat Center or other overseas practice centers, and even managing matters coming in from Taiwan by fax. Once, we had a blizzard in New York and he joined everyone to shovel snow. So, often time he had to make use of any available time to finish those manuscripts, page by page, whenever he could. There was, however, no sense

of rush or hurry in him at all, but calm and stillness. His eyes were filled with compassion and wisdom, showing the demeanor and disposition of a great practitioner. For someone who had always been in a hurry like me, Shifu often reminded me: “Don’t rush. Slow down. Do one thing at a time.” Sometimes I would rush into his study room for advice. But the moment I saw him, I began to settle down. There was always a peaceful and calm energy in him. Shifu displayed his extraordinary qualities in his ordinary everyday life.

In the early days, Shifu would work on his writings while he conducted Chan retreats at CMC. When participants were talking enthusiastically among themselves about the Dharma talks and interviews they received at the end of the retreats, they had no idea that sometimes Shifu had completed a book of tens of thousands of words during the retreat.

I worked at CMC whenever there was a retreat. There was absolute silence in the Chan hall, with only me in the library on the third floor. At times Shifu walked from his

study room on the second floor to give me his draft to be transcribed. The old staircase squeaked as he walked, with steps so light and soft; while noises of cars and people travelled through the windows. With all the peace and quiet around me, I felt the inner calm and freedom, as if I was doing the retreat myself, although I was typing non-stop, wasting no time

The Dharma Drum Retreat Center in Shawngunk that cleanses the mind

The CMC finally purchased a piece of land in Shawangunk, in upstate New York. It has a wide span of green plain, a forest, and even a six-acre lake, called Murry Lake.

For many of us who were used to the hustle and bustle of urban traffic and crowds, this was in stark contrast to what we used to have at CMC. I remember the first three-day retreat held on a trail basis at DDRC. The retreat was meant to find out how we could utilize the new facilities for better retreats. With only 32 participants sitting in

the hall without pillars that could accommodate over 100 people, it felt extraordinarily spacious indeed.

DDRC is a remarkably beautiful place. In the perfectly silent Chan hall, the autumn sun pierced through the windows, forming long stretches of shadows of every diligent participant within. Practicing slow walking meditation outside, one experiences the soft fabric-like green moss at the feet, and the refreshing soothing autumn breeze on the face. At dawn, there are wild deer grazing on the misty plain. There is a forest filled with huge ancient trees in their upright stance; it is cool and verdant. Walking along the lake is an experience of stillness, when the water ripples ever so lightly. The starry night-skyline is always accompanied by rhythmic chirping sounds of the crickets.

Of course, what the participants look forward the most during the retreat is Shifu's Dharma talk. In the early days, Shifu would give three Dharma talks every day, in the morning, afternoon and evening. This was reduced when his health deteriorated. I was lucky to volunteer during most of the Chan retreats at DDRC, working on

the transcriptions and organizing Shifu's Dharma talks. At times I also joined in the retreat. Shifu repeatedly taught us: "Live in the present moment. Start with the present moment." The present is vibrant and vigorous; it is never stiff and rigid. Every thought is a new beginning to treasure our time, to treasure the process of our practice, and to treasure every single minute of our life.

Practicing under Shifu's guidance, I became aware of my negative habits, that my karmic obstructions seemed to be surfacing all the time, and that my mind tended to rise and fall easily with the people, things, and objects in the surroundings. Nevertheless, the ability to pinpoint one's own affliction is a sign of progress too. According to Shifu, our karmic obstacles will cease as we have less selfishness, afflictions, and self-centeredness. Our mind is free when we free ourselves from all forms of affliction. Shifu corrected many of my wrong views and concepts, and regulated and tamed my unsettled mind, again and again. On the other hand, he often encouraged me to be confident and stop doubting my own abilities.

Skillful Dharma talks in a free and spontaneous manner

Shifu had an extremely thorough understanding of our habitual tendencies. After a retreat, it was a common experience for everyone to feel as if Shifu was speaking to him or her directly: “Shifu was admonishing me; Shifu was talking about me; Shifu was referring to me.” We often heard speculations like this. In the US, Shifu gave lectures to both Eastern and Western practitioners on a weekly basis. He explained profound ideas as taught in Buddhist scriptures in an accessible manner. To many who came seeking for immediate enlightenment, he would use a humorous touch to correct such views, creating a lot of laughter from among the students. So, his lessons were often filled with joyful laughter. Sincerely admiring Shifu’s wisdom, the disciples all displayed a most devout reverence to him.

Westerners would raise their hands immediately to ask whatever they had on their mind, sometimes raising amusing and naive questions, but sometimes insightful and

inspirational ones, in a most direct, challenging manner. Shifu could always provide a complete and comprehensive answer that cleared their doubts convincingly. He often used examples, stories and funny analogies from the sutras; such warm-hearted moments of close interaction remained ever vividly in our memories.

Once, during a retreat at DDRC, around 3pm, I was summoned by his attendant Ven. Guo Yao to meet Shifu in his study room. He was working on an article, and asked me to check the first few finished manuscripts. The article entitled “A Great Hope for Our Future Generations” was later published in *The Direction of Dharma Drum Mountain II*. It was almost evening. His face was radiant in the glow of the sunset coming in through the windows. He was writing, in great detail, of the many matters he could not accomplish in this life time, urging his disciples to continue pushing them forward together. Feeling Shifu’s compassionate vow within, my vision started to blur as tears came to my eyes. When he handed me the last manuscript, I could no longer contain myself and cried. But he simply smiled and said: “Let me have a look at your transcription, before faxing it

to Taiwan.” I was often moved to tears when transcribing his books. As far back as 1993, in his book, *Passing Clouds and Trickling Streams*, he already instructed us that after his passing away we should scatter his ashes at Dharma Drum Mountain, allowing it to flow with the rainwater into the ocean. I was also in tears when transcribing these words. Now, Shifu has delivered his final teaching by setting a most ideal example: ash burial in a garden.

Paying great attention to proofreading and details

Shifu worked meticulously on his books, each with no less than three or four reviews, for modification, revision, as well as additions or deletion. He would add more content when he found this to be necessary, and remove a whole paragraph that he felt unsuitable. For example, once he went to the United Nations for a conference. A renowned middle-aged monk, who was also invited by the UN, prostrated to Shifu publicly immediately as Shifu stepped in the venue. Shifu removed the whole paragraph about this encounter during the fourth review, even

though it really happened. In that paragraph Shifu was actually praising the monk, saying that he was impressed by the exceptional quality of his English publicity literature presented at the UN. This is why in his will Shifu stated clearly that none of his writings should be published without having been personally proofread.

Most of the time, I transcribed for him in the little meditation hall on the second floor. He dictated while I wrote on an old folding table we had picked up from the streets years before. We would work in the study instead if more reference materials were needed. In the early days, when there weren't as many volunteers at CMC in the morning, I would work in the library on the third floor. In 1996, Gong Tian Jie and his wife Wu Shu Fang became full-time volunteers. Gong was the general coordinator for DDM Association for Dharma Supporters in North America, while his wife was the assistant to Ven. Guo Yuan, helping him to coordinate and organize meditation retreats and other works. For a period of time, apart from the resident monastics there were only three of us lay disciples, in the daytime at CMC. We also attended classes

on the philosophy of Consciousness-Only, or Yogacara, conducted by Shifu for the monastics.

I started to work in the little Chan hall on the second floor as we had more and more volunteers. Shifu always worked in a most meticulous and systematic manner. When I was away for a while, he would carefully put new manuscripts into my work stack by order. Very often, I would discover additional documents out of nowhere. I continued to do transcription for Shifu by hand until 1998, when I learned to work on a computer. At that time, when Shifu didn't have any attendant with him, instead of keeping hundreds of pages of transcriptions in his luggage he would put them in his personal monastic bag and carried them back to Taiwan.

It only took Shifu 17 days to complete the book, *A Pilgrimage to the Wellsprings of Chan*. I had the opportunity to take part in this pilgrimage, to transcribe details with his oral account, and also helped Mr. Zhang Guangdou preparing site logs for his television program "His Profile" a year ago (2009). For me, these three different occasions

were all unique experiences. The first was an organized group tour; the second was more informative, with more oral accounts provided by Shifu; and the third was to transcribe every single Dharma discourse Shifu gave during the trips. He delivered teaching at every monastery and spiritual site, so that we could appreciate the hard work and endeavor of past masters and patriarchs, and to trace the lineages and history of Chan Buddhism.

About 7pm on the second last day when we were half way through this book's transcription, Shifu suddenly said he had a bad stomachache. Shifu had a very strong willpower; he would not have stopped unless it had been extremely painful. So I rushed to fetch his attendant, and sent him to a doctor. It was from this point onwards that his health continued to worsen, until he became seriously ill in 2005.

Like a dear family member who can settle matters, large and small

“Busy with nothing, growing old. Within emptiness, weeping and laughing.” I had known him over a decade,

and over this entire time this is the most appropriate portrayal of the way he lived. Even when he was conducting retreats, he would always find time to write, whenever he was not teaching or conducting interviews. Shifu was always busy, yet it was within such a busy schedule that he completed his books. Becoming older as time went on, he was never bothered by his age. Busy as he has always been, he was a sensitive person, at times humorous, witty, relaxed and sad too. Now let me share some anecdotes about him.

One of our benefactors, Mr. Shen Jia Zhen, used to visit Shifu in the morning. He would prostrate the moment he saw Shifu from afar. Seeing this, Shifu would quickly rush to get him up. Hand in hand, they then chatted cordially as they walked. I was always moved by this heartwarming sight. Once I followed Shifu and other venerables for a visit at Chuang Yen Temple. Mr. Shen took us to the new library. I was very impressed with the rows of movable bookshelves, which I felt were something really new and special. I expressed my admiration for their library to Shifu when we returned.

Shifu gave me a big smile and said, “We have better ones at Dharma Drum Mountain.” Once at DDRC, I became so focused and oblivious to my surrounding when I was entering text on a computer. I was working on the book, *The Essence of the Avatamsaka Sutra: Examination and explanation of the Essay on the Origin of Humanity*. Sensing something moving, I turned around and was startled to see him right behind me; I jumped out from my seat, I had no idea how long he had been there. He laughed out loud at my reaction. All he wanted to do was to hand me his manuscripts, so he remained silent, so as not to disturb me.

The devotees in America really had the good fortune to be able to meet Shifu and ask him for advice often, as CMC was not a very big place. Shifu also joined everyone for lunch and evening meals. Sometimes he would also give a talk after lunch or dinner. Once, four of us—Shu Fang, Wang Rong, his wife Qing Yuan, and me—were at the kitchen, and Shifu came over to speak to us as the three ladies were busy preparing dumplings. Such a common sight in America was not quite possible in Taiwan. Shifu

would also stop by and speak with our late Dharma brother Gong Tian Jie in his little office, adjacent to the little Chan hall. His wife, Dharma sister Shu Fang, used to relate their conversations to me. According to her, Shifu was extremely knowledgeable about local and worldly matters. He seemed to know everything; there was very little that he did not know.

Shifu was also very skillful in resolving problems. When I first started volunteering at CMC, once I became so upset that I burst into tears, all because I couldn't agree on certain views with another lay disciple; this was Ven. Guo Cheng before she became a monastic. Sad to see me cry, she ended up in tears too. Both of us ended up crying together, when Guo Gu happened to come in. Seeing this, he left immediately, and in minutes Shifu appeared, asking: "What's the matter with both of you, one crying out loud and another in quiet tears?" After finding out the reason, he comforted and scolded us, and soon we both left the Center happily; Guo Cheng even drove me home, as if nothing had ever happened before.

When I was in my thirties I suffered from facial nerve palsy on the left face. The condition improved, mostly, but my expression remained a little stiff, so I wasn't able to speak well in public. In one annual meeting, I was asked to give a talk entitled "The life of Shifu." However, I insisted to stay away from it, and declined in person to Shifu the day before the talk. Shifu was really not happy about it and said to me: "Fine. If you're not speaking, I will do it myself." I had no choice but to try my best to take up the challenge. I felt very apologetic to Shifu for all that I had done due to my stubborn negative habit and lack of confidence. Once, Shifu told me to recite the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, or *Flower Ornament Sutra*, whenever I was free. One will only know about the superior and extraordinary state as taught in the Sutra by reading it, and the purpose is to broaden one's breadth of mind.

Precious manuscripts with the wisdom of the Dharma

The last time Shifu went to America was in October of 2006. When he met me, he told me that he was not going to write books anymore. I was quite sad hearing that, and

left after I had prostrated to Shifu. But a week later, he suddenly instructed me to work on his Sunday talks in America, where he explained Chapter Six of the *Surangama Sutra*. This was supposed to be a complete book by itself. However, Shifu did not finish chapter six in America. The missing parts were delivered here—right here at this Zhong Zheng Dharma Center, the very place where Shifu was taken care of when he was ill. When I started to work on this, it was clear to me that Shifu could not possibly return to America to complete the discourses anymore. I then expressed my wish to stay in Taiwan in order to finish it. With my family's consent, I returned to Taiwan and stayed in the Nung Chang Monastery. This book was finally completed after Shifu reviewed and finalized it in May, 2007, and recently published as *The Wondrous Wisdom of Guanyin Bodhisattva: the essentials of the Dharma method of perfect penetration by means of the ear faculty*. Although Shifu presented the explanations in a series of talk from 1995 to 2005, he actually spent seven years on this topic, as he was explaining The Thirty-Seven Aids to Enlightenment in between for about two to three years. After this book, Shifu also instructed me to work on three other books.

However, his health worsened and could no longer review the transcriptions. As such, we could not possibly publish these three books. This is why I have been travelling between Taiwan and America up to this day.

A few years ago, Shifu asked if I wanted to keep all the old drafts and manuscripts. These include all the transcriptions, Shifu's original manuscripts, and outlines of his speeches and talks. I also made copies of his original writings, and kept them with me after returning the originals to him. The entire collection, which stacks up waist-high, is now kept in my home in New York. I used to pay little attention to them, treating them as nothing more than a bunch of old documents. Now, as they are extremely precious, with personal notes scribbled by Shifu, I'll arrange to send them all to DDM Publication when I return to America.

Cultivating blessings by being a life-long volunteer

I received a call from Qing Yuan at 5pm on February 3,

2009, informing me of Shifu's passing away. We cried over the phone, thinking of the loss of Shifu's presence, and his liberation from this world. The day before he passed away on February 2, in the early morning, I had a very strange dream, in which Shifu was giving me work instructions as usual, while holding a 15cm long screw in his hand, with a 30cm black screw cap lying on the table. He held the screw and said to me: "Guo Zhuang(Wu Shu Fang's Dharma name), remember to tighten this screw, and tighten it fully." He said that twice, before I woke up from the dream. It was an intriguing dream. I felt much shame and regret, for even though I had been close to him and, as a result, considerably changed for the better, I still had many deep-rooted habits. So, Shifu was actually urging me to continue to be diligent on the Path, without ever becoming lax and lazy.

I appreciate the opportunity Shifu gave me to help work on his books. During the 18 years that I was close to him, I really learnt a lot, including how to use the language and grammar properly, and how to edit a book. Most importantly, all these books are the legacy of wisdom left behind by an exceptional master of our time. Ms Hu

Ligui, the reporter who had accompanied Shifu for long, mentioned in Shifu's biography, *A Wonderful Old Age*, that many people found her really blessed and so she should make the best use of this blessing. Many DDM's monastics and devotees thought I was very blessed too. So I hope I will be making the most of this blessing as well, by remembering to tighten it up, tighten it up at all times.

Causes and conditions are indeed inconceivable, for I'd never expected myself to be writing so much in America, compared to what I had written before I left Taiwan for America. I can recall once while my son and I were walking together with Shifu, he said to my son: "Your mom is like one of my hands." This was most encouraging to me. And so I vow that as long as DDM needs me, I will continue to write, until I can no longer write anymore. Also, I wish I can follow Shifu again in future lives, to generate the Bodhi mind, and cultivate the bodhisattva path.

*(Talk delivered on March 17, 2010
at the Sheng Yen Education Foundation)*

Paving the way for Chinese Buddhism

Jimmy Yu

Shifu led us with a long-term, holistic vision. In engaging the Sangha with the society, he did not advocate selfish practice for personal attainment, nor was he confined to serve any particular sector of the society.

He paved the way to fulfill the needs of our future, for our Sangha, for Chinese Buddhism, and for humanity as a whole. Such was his profound altruistic aspiration—the manifestation of a great Bodhi-mind.

Yet I did not fathom and appreciate the depth of his vision when he was alive.

Now, it is a journey of discovery for me to learn, comprehend, and realize every aspect of his teaching.

Introducing the Speaker

Jimmy Yu (Guo Gu)

Guo Gu began to visit the Chan Meditation Center when he was just 12. He served as the monastic attendant and English secretary to Master Sheng Yen beginning in 1990, and for a decade accompanied the master around the world. Guo Gu is now the Associate Professor of Religion at the Florida State University. He is responsible for training English Dharma teachers at the Chan Meditation Center, and currently the resident Dharma teacher for DDMBA Tallahassee chapter in Florida.

In thinking of what I have learned from Shifu to share with all of you, I could only recall my mistakes and stupidity. It was through mistakes that I progressed and gradually discovered myself. When I began to practice, I was self-centered in many ways. I could not fully understand and appreciate all that Shifu had done for the Dharma, and his kindness in grooming his disciples. I am ashamed about this.

I left the monastic life on my personal accord. I used to serve Shifu and the Sangha. Now, I am sharing his vision as a professor and as a lay Dharma teacher. In the course of this transition, I had come to face many obstacles, yet it was also a necessary path to discover the Dharma. This process made the Dharma come to life, flowing within me like blood.

Skillful means: firm and soft, hard and gentle

Shifu was an extremely skillful teacher. He had no problem in communicating and interacting with anyone.

I was 12 when I first met him at the Chan Meditation Center. When I asked “Do you know Kung Fu?” he simply said “Yes!” and explained that he learnt it from our grandmaster, and that he knew the practice of lightness, which allowed him to walk up a wall, across the ceiling, and down the other side of the wall. I knew he was joking, but thought he was interesting and humorous, and so asked him how to master this skill. “Come next week for a beginner’s meditation class,” he replied. That was how I got tricked into practicing sitting meditation. Till now, I still have not mastered this skill! Indeed, I am a poor student.

I often misunderstood Shifu when I was younger. Because of my American up-bringing, my demeanor and thought patterns were very different from the Chinese. For example, I felt very strongly that Shifu should devote more time to his monastic disciples. However, he was always too busy, and could hardly spend time with them. Although I was always with him as his attendant, I felt it was very unfair for many others who had little chance to even speak to him.

When it comes to education, there is a fundamental difference between the East and the West. In the West, students and teachers are partners; education is a process where teachers inspire students, while students are encouraged to analyze, think for themselves, and even challenge the teacher in the course of learning to complete their education. Living in the sangha and being Shifu's attendant changed this teacher-student dynamic.

On the one hand, I was fortunate as I could always request teachings directly from Shifu. On the other hand, this interaction is not without a side-effect—I became more and more dependent on him. Now I know that we must personally experience and understand the Dharma on our own. An analogy of this is like blowing up a balloon; you do it in one effort so it can inflate fully. Eventually it will pop. Conversely, if we continue to receive assistance and answers for our questions about Chan practice, it would be like blowing the balloon, then relaxing, and then inflating the balloon again. We would never be able to blow up the balloon in full. Of course, it's important to receive teaching, but to realize the subtleties of the teaching, we

need not only right views but also diligence in integrating the teaching in our own lives. Practicing in this manner, it is only a matter of time that we realize the deeper layer of the Dharma.

Of course, Shifu did not always provide me with answers, which I had to discover on my own. In pointing out my flaws in practice, the most common method he used was public humility. Sometimes a Chan master stirs up waves where there seems to be none, creating problems for you to see how attachment you are. Most often we are unable to observe our own self-attachments, especially when everything seems to be fine. Self-referential attachments surface in times when we face adversities and challenged.

Once, I bought a camera for the Chan Center to help prepare some shots for PR purposes. This wasn't my first attempt at photography. I set up the camera on a tripod facing the main shrine and Shifu during his talk. The room was packed with a large audience. Shifu's opening remarks were "Look at this kid, trying to take photographs

like a professional!” Rather than acknowledging me as Guo Gu, he used to refer to me as “kid,” especially in front of people. His remarks broke the ice—everyone was laughing. But it broke my heart as well. Shifu delivered his teachings in a humorous manner, explaining the deeper aspects of Dharma in simple terms. He was always easy with the audience, but not so with his monastic disciples. His humorous approach transformed the atmosphere into one that was relaxing for all. Yet on this occasion, my pride was shattered and my self-attachment appeared front and center.

I could not take it. I left the hall, no longer interested in his talk and just left the camera and returned to my room and started pounding my pillow! I could not understand why Shifu always wanted to insult me publicly. What have I done wrong? It was not my idea to purchase the camera. I had to operate the camera because we could not find any other volunteer to do it. It was his idea to buy a camera and asked me to take pictures! After the talk, a caring senior monastic brother came to ask if I was all right. He explained that it was only Shifu’s skillful means

to train me, for my own good. Unfortunately, I failed to recognize that, and completely missed the point of seeing my own self-attachment and pride. I could not appreciate his intentions.

My self-attachment actually persisted for two to three days, even though I had to face him every day. Shifu understood that I was not happy. One day during breakfast, he asked in a soft voice, “Guo Gu, did you have enough for breakfast?” I did not answer. “Come to my room later, I have something for you,” he said. His tone was most gentle. That was the way Shifu trained his disciples. He could be tough on you at one moment, and then gentle with you the next—poking you with a needle and then giving you a lollipop. This is the way he groomed us: firm and soft, hard and gentle. I could not see that then.

Delivering sentient beings starts from looking after a single person

I have done too many foolish things. Countless, in fact. When we were in Taiwan, I found that I had more

time for my own so-called “practice,” as there were other monastics attending to Shifu’s needs. I enjoyed sitting meditation, and spent a considerable amount of time doing it. I thought cultivation was all about sitting meditation, and that serving as an attendant had no direct connection to my practice or cultivation. Once when we were back to Taiwan at Nung Chan Monastery, I was sulking when Shifu openly humiliated me again. I did not care to find out why. Two days later, I chanced to meet Shifu at the old guest room. He was meeting with a monastic visitor who used to be an attendant to a much revered master. Afterwards, Shifu said to me, “This monk was never affected by his teacher’s criticism and harsh treatment—beaten or scolded. Yet these days there are simply too many attendants who can’t even take a simple scolding.”

These words left a great impression on me. Shifu was holding a book in hand, giving hints as he spoke. He continued, “Haven’t you read the poem by the great master Hanshan (Cold-Mountain): “When we are scolded, abused, belittled, how are we to face up to it and respond?” For a practitioner, Shifu explained, no matter how the

external conditions change, the mind remains unmoved. It was from this point onwards that I began to realize that cultivation was not about sitting meditation. It was about how we handle ourselves in our daily lives, free from self-reference which gives rise to vexations.

There is another example of my foolishness relating to chanting. In college, I was living in New York City's China Town above a temple, Guangming Temple, where Grand Master Shouye was the abbot. I learnt how to chant and recite from him, in a tune that was quite different from the normal "oceanic wave" tone that monks chanted. After taking up the robes, I realized many fellow monastics liked the way I chanted, and soon, my sense of self-importance grew. Once at Nung Chan Monastery during the morning service, where "The Four Great Vows" are part of the daily liturgy, I to recite loudly in the assembly so that everyone would hear me. I was right in the front line—first position of the second row. After the service, as we all stayed behind until Shifu leaves the hall, he passed by and commented with a smile, "Oh, you chanted really well." "Thank you, Shifu." The entire hall was utterly quiet,

and everyone heard his praise. I was so proud. “You chant ‘The Four Great Vows’ day and night, but you can’t even take care of one person, your own teacher, and yet here you are chanting to deliver sentient beings.” Shifu laughed and left.

These words pierced right through me. He was right. I felt terribly ashamed. Tears rolled down uncontrollably. I was not able to look after Shifu, the single most important person like a father to me, who gave me a new life and path. All I cared for was my own meditation, making me forgetful of the things he needed. A deep sense of remorse and shame overwhelmed me, as I stood alone in the Buddha Hall. When I came to, I rushed to see Shifu in his bedroom. He was sitting behind his desk. I cried, repented, and promised that from then onwards I would always look after him and never would forget to attend to his needs.

The five themes of caring for Shifu

I used to be pretty absent-minded. This was not because of my poor memory; rather, I was self-absorbed,

so I failed to be mindful of many things, which led to plain stupidity. Once, Shifu had an important talk to deliver at the Sun Yatsen Memorial Hall. He had prepared his notes, and handed them to me for safekeeping before the talk. Shifu could only smile wryly when I realized I did not have them with me on the stage. Of course, the event was very successful. Shifu was not affected at all as he prepared the contents comprehensively personally, and was an adept at improvising. I, on the other hand, sat miserably listening to his talk.

Going back to the previous incident where I had repented so tearfully in Shifu's room, and vowed that I would never forget to attend to his needs. At that time, Shifu had these words for me: We should start by taking care of a single person, before we can deliver all sentient beings. Once an attendant can take good care of his Shifu, then he can look after a family. For those who had left home, the Sangha is what their family. When he manages to look after his monastic family, he can then care for the society, the world, and then all sentient beings.

After that incident, I began to think and plan very carefully on how best to look after Shifu. It became my practice. I came up with a method, very much like a mantra, that I kept at heart and recite day and night: “Meals, Lodging, Clothing, Bringing, and Resting.” Based on these five themes, I would derive all details of his daily needs—at least his physical needs. For example, if Shifu were to travel, for “Meals,” I’d have to ensure the local food suited him and ask the inviter for his retreat or event to prepare the ingredients for his meals; for “Lodging” and “Resting,” it was necessary to ensure that the rooms had proper ventilation, yet not so cold, as Shifu’s frail body easily caught colds; for “Clothing,” I’d needed to prepare more for him if we were to visit places of colder climate, like Europe; for “Bringing,” I’d need to be aware of the kind of people that Shifu was scheduled to meet and prepare appropriate gifts for them. I used these five themes to look after Shifu.

From looking after Shifu’s daily physical needs, I gradually started to extend to his aspirations and visions, and on means to best present him to a Western audience, and ways to establish, develop, and spread Chinese

Buddhism. To achieve these ends, I used the same principle as I did when I was looking after the well-being of Shifu: understanding their needs by putting myself into their position. For example, when Shifu was invited to speak on “Chan and Postmodernism” at the University of Hong Kong, I conducted some research, and then presented and discussed this with Shifu ahead of time. To fulfill the needs of Western practitioners, I would also conduct research and presented them to Shifu, so that his teachings could resonate with Westerners. Later, Shifu assigned a new task to me: to teach and guide the Westerners on Chan practice. To do this, I was also involved in preparing the training syllabus and courses for meditation guides and teachers. In the process of doing this, I had the opportunity to organize and deepen my understanding of Chinese Buddhism.

A holistic need and view on religious sentiments

When I served as Shifu’s attendant, I used to follow him all the time. I had the opportunity to observe how he carried himself in many aspects of his life. Of all

the people I have come to know, Shifu was the most disciplined person. His conducts were congruent with his teachings. Unlike some other people who would behave differently on and off stage, Shifu never failed to uphold his conducts and teachings as one, at anytime, anywhere. His deep commitment to spread the Dharma came from his personal experience of the Dharma; his impeccable observance of precepts stems from that experience.

It was very rare to see him in tears. I once read from his books, about the early years of his pilgrimage to India and Nepal, that he was moved to tears when he reached the holy sites where Buddha delivered the Dharma. Shifu's tears did not stem from vexation; they were expressions of gratitude to the Triple Jewels. The second time I know of that he shed tears was when I relayed to him of my intention to leave the sangha for a while. I was moved to tears as well. I was extremely sad when he said this to me: "What have I done wrong? Have I not taken you like a father raising his son?" But I had to leave; due to my vexations, I was not getting along with others at the Center, and was determined to stay away for a while. I didn't have

a place to go, so I decided to get another academic degree. I was like a grown-up bird wanting to spread its wings, to attempt to fly beyond its bounds.

From a long-term perspective, I feel that it was a right decision, at least for this life time. Nevertheless, I was only 30, young and filled with my own perceptions. I could not appreciate and realize the profound potential of monasticism and its training. In hindsight, Shifu led us with a holistic and long-term vision, so that we could engage deeply in serving others. He did not intend to lead us to practice the Dharma in a disengaged, selfish manner. He did not aim to merely look after us. Shifu worked towards building a path, a vision, to fulfill and serve the needs of our future; one that was not only meant for the Sangha, but also for Chinese Buddhism, and for humanity as a whole. This is a profound vision, an expression of an altruistic Bodhi-mind, one that I am still trying to understand and fully experience.

Recipe for a fragrant, warm, and delicious meal

There were some amusing stories untold in Shifu's books. One of them was when Shifu was invited by the Holy See over a decade ago, to attend a world interfaith meeting. I was one of the two monastics accompanying him. Interestingly, the organizer put us all in a monastery with rooms that locked from the outside. One had to lock the door not from within, but from outside. One morning we were preparing to attend one of the meetings that Shifu was invited. We went into his room and found his bag, but he was nowhere to be seen. We thought he had gone downstairs and left his bag behind for us, so we locked up the room and proceeded downstairs to the bus.

When Shifu did not turn up after 10 minutes or so, we started to wonder where he could be, and if he had lost his way. Suddenly, we began to worry if he could have been locked out in his room! We rushed into his room, and saw him sitting and smiling wryly on the edge of the bed. It was such an embarrassing moment, and at the same time tense.

We knew we were in trouble, as the other monk quickly apologized: “Shifu, Amitufo! We are so sorry about this!” Perhaps because of my American upbringing, this was more of an amusing incident to me. I could not hold back the urge to laugh when I realized Shifu was locked out by two of his idiot disciples.

Another incident took place about a decade ago. Shifu was invited by Venerable Xing Kong (Dhammadipa) to conduct a retreat in the Czech Republic. Everything went well except for the food. Since there were no vegetarian restaurants, we had to prepare meals ourselves. Shifu asked if I could cook. I thought to myself that it should be easy enough to prepare vegetables. Bearing in mind that Shifu had some minor digestive ailment I just had to prepare a very light dish, one that could do without salt. I told Shifu, “Yes, I could handle it.” I bought some fresh vegetables from the market, and proceeded to realize my stupidity. I placed all the cut up carrots, cabbages, and potatoes into a pot of boiling water, put on the lid, and cooked them all without even a pinch of salt.

As I served the meal, Shifu gave me a look, took a few bites, and finally gave me another wry smile, saying, “I thought you said you could cook?!” I had gotten used to his smiles, and understood that the food must have tasted pretty bad. What happened next was a personal cooking lesson by Shifu. He explained and showed me the way to prepare the dish. He said it was necessary to stir-fry some ginger before cooking. For vegetarians, ginger shreds would help to keep the stomach warm. He was able to cut the ginger very quickly, and put them into a preheated pot with oil. Once the pot was filled with flavor, he poured water in it in preparation for the vegetables. He poured in the harder ones first, such as carrots, followed by cabbage stems, and finally the leaves. Then he would add some seasoning, let it all boil for a while, and before long the meal was ready. Shifu’s dishes smelled gorgeous and were tasty. These are very interesting and touching anecdotes. He taught me not only the Dharma but also cooking and daily living, that everything has a principle, a proper way to bring about the best result.

An international presence through interfaith exchange

The invitation extended to Shifu to deliver a keynote speech at the Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders in 2000 marked the watershed for Shifu's involvement in the international arena. This eventually helped in enhancing Shifu's presence and influence in the international community, in quite a significant manner. Before this, we had been looking at ways and means to improve our visibility, and how we could make greater contribution internationally.

In 1997, I started to explore external resources and means to enhance Shifu's presence. At that time, we needed a blurb for one of Shifu's newly published books—*Complete Enlightenment*, which I translated and edited it. I bravely wrote to Venerable Thich Nhat Hahn to write the blurb, and to my surprise he graciously agreed. I found out that he had read many of Shifu's books in Chinese. His blurb is now on the back cover of the book, as you have all come to know.

Opportunities came one after another once I started looking. In the same year, His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama visited Taiwan. He was looking forward to a dialogue on the *vinaya* with a Chinese specialist. The Buddhist Association of Taiwan recommended Shifu to be their representative, and this led to another opportunity. In May 1998, I co-organized a dialogue at the Roseland in New York City for Shifu and His Holiness, entitled “In the Spirit of Manjushri: the Wisdom Teachings of Buddhism.” This event was jointly hosted by the Chan Meditation Center and the Tibet House in New York. In the process of organizing this event, I was constantly in touch with the Tibet House. The international community started to take note of Shifu since that event. In particular, Shifu’s spontaneous on-the-spot responses, his clear and articulate presentations, and his precise and skillful answers to the questions from the Dalai Lama and the audience were felt by everyone.

The dialogue brought about a lasting impact, within and beyond our own circle. International Buddhist communities started to take notice of this insightful

Chan master of Chinese Buddhism. In the winter of the same year, the person in charge of the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, part of the Insight Meditation Society, invited Shifu to hold a weekend Chan retreat for their practitioners. Many of the second-generation teachers of insight meditation therefore got to know Shifu, and several began to come regularly to Shifu's Chan retreats.

Realizing the Dharma from the part to the whole

Being next to Shifu in the past was an incredible experience for me. I had learned and benefited tremendously whenever he delivered the Dharma, whenever he taught meditation and gave instructions, and whenever he showed by example how to handle situations and interact with people. These were all due to his merit.

Since Shifu's passing, his teachings continue to nourish me, and I try my best to deepen my understanding of them by living them as much as possible. I would like to share with all of you some of the principles of his teachings.

Firstly, it's necessary to make our daily life our practice. Shifu had always stressed that practice is not about incorporating sitting meditation as a part of life. Rather, it's about life as practice, which means how we live our lives, how we handle our work, and how we treat others. For example, when I was serving as his attendant, my practice was to look after Shifu. For many of you, your practice is about looking after your family and work. Whenever you enter your work place, office, or return to your home, they are no different than entering the Chan Hall. Making sure that we perform our duties and take good care of those around us, observing the rising of our own attachments in facing challenges—these are all practice.

The principle I adhere to in my daily life is to offer myself. Offering ourselves is the same as what Shifu meant by “letting go.” Offering and letting go are two sides of the same coin. Only when we let go of our ego can we really offer ourselves for the benefit of others, and look after our family members and perform our work properly. Gradually, we will then extend this giving spirit to every situation of our life.

Secondly, related to this, is that we should always think from the perspective of others. Shifu often reminded us that the first thing he thought of when meeting someone was to consider their needs. By opening up the heart, and expanding the breadth of mind, we can then really listen to people and understand what their needs are. If we want to help take care of people and things around us, we should not be doing so from our own standpoints. Only when we're able to listen and observe their needs can we truly offer ourselves to others. This is life as practice.

Thirdly, and also most importantly, is to start from the part, and eventually develop a sense of the whole. To start from the part is to first have a set of responsibilities, starting from taking care of what a person needs, and then extending to the entirety; for example the needs of the entire sangha, and the needs for Chinese Buddhism as a whole. Realizing a vision is only possible when we have a sense of the whole. Shifu advocated Protecting the Spiritual Environment and the Three-fold Education to meet the needs of our contemporary society as a whole. Also by starting from the part, he launched this initiative

from Taiwan, and then gradually promoted the idea to other parts of the world. This greater sense of direction and a sense of the entirety are not only meant for ourselves, but also for the benefit of all humanity as a whole. This requires all of us to put in individual effort, generation after generation, so as to achieve the goal through collaborative efforts.

Developing a sense of the whole is critical. In the past, I felt strongly that we could complete our daily tasks more efficiently. If everybody were to use my way, we could complete our tasks within half an hour. When I complained this to Shifu, he explained that the monastery belongs to everyone, a place where individuals need to act in harmony with the group. It was necessary to engage everyone in work as one—even if it took more time. Shifu valued the process of practice and cultivation, instead of the result. Take the task of sweeping as an example. Although in certain manner this is a task that requires efficiency, the act of sweeping is in itself the sweeping away of the vexations of our mind. Our afflictions can be compared to fallen leaves. We sweep from one corner to

the other, or we move them into a dustbin, and send them away in garbage trucks. It may appear to us that we have cleaned up, but in reality, we are merely moving them from one place to another around the earth, removing one pile of rubbish from one spot to another. There is no end to this sweeping exercise. Is it necessary then to do this? Yes. By moving one thing to another, the thing may become purified—fallen leaves may become fertilizers. Similarly, we need continuous effort, generation by generation, to reach the goal of building a pure land on earth. The essence of realizing a pure land on earth lies in focusing on the process of purifying our own mind, removing endless vexations without moving anything at all, but in this process our minds and the world are purified.

Cultivation takes place when we disregard gain and loss, having and not having. Shifu used to say, “Don’t insert your self in what you do.” We serve, within our own capacities and abilities, to meet the needs of others. At the same time, our mind should remain peaceful and stable, free from self-attachment. In working with others, we grow and mature together.

An exceptional “translator” of the Dharma

In a sense, the establishments of various Buddhists schools, such as Huayan, Tiantai, and Chan, can be seen as a process of “translating” the Dharma from India to China. To me, the achievements of Shifu can be seen as a process of translation. Based on the core spirit of Chinese Buddhism, Shifu initiated many creative and practical social movements. By translating Buddhist technical terms into an accessible language, he was doing what all great Buddhist translators of the past have done.

Shifu maintained a very admirable habit in translating the difficult Buddhist concepts into simple principles through his writings. He started doing this since the age of 18. Shifu was always wholeheartedly devoted to whatever field he was in contact with. He immersed himself in studying, digesting, mastering, and penetrating the Dharma, revitalizing whatever he came in contact with. I consider this to be true “translation.” One example was his research effort in the *vinaya*, which was presented in his book *The Essential Studies of Śīla and Vinaya*.

Another example is the book he authored *The Heart-Keys to Tiantai*, which reflects his analysis of the theories and practice of the Chinese Tiantai School. Drawing from the rich traditions of Chinese Buddhism, he introduced and advocated the Four Kinds of Environmentalism, the Fivefold Spiritual Renaissance Campaign, and the Six Ethics of the Mind. These represent his effort in revitalizing Buddhism in our era, in paving the way for us to apply the Dharma in our daily life. These were an accumulation of Shifu's life-long study, profound understanding, and mastery of the Buddha's teachings.

We can never exhaust the wondrous teachings and wisdom that Shifu left behind in this life time. Nevertheless, it is possible for everyone to participate in this "translation" work for the Dharma. By reading and digesting his writings, we could translate them through our actions. So I encourage everyone to receive his teachings through his books. The Dharma isn't about quantity. A single phrase can serve this purpose. We can start with a single statement and practice it for three months, before moving on to another one. This would be like having a

conversation with Shifu. As Shifu told me, “Delivering sentient beings begins with taking care of a single person.” When we are able to take care of one person, we can then take care of a family, and a society. By doing so we’re realizing the meaning of reciting the Four Great Vows.

I’m still Shifu’s translator, doing the same thing attending him. Even though I have changed my appearance, and am playing a different role now, I’ve never forgotten Shifu’s teaching and vision for sharing the richness of Chinese Buddhism with the world. So I advise you to give yourself a homework: choose a phrase from Shifu’s writings that you find most relevant to yourself, and digest, experience it every day. Let it become part of your life, let the Dharma flow in you like blood that runs through your body. May you all be well.

*(Talk delivered on June 3, 2010
at the Sheng Yen Education Foundation)*

Appendix

Dharma Drum Mountain Pocket Guides to Buddhist Wisdom

E-1 Meeting of Minds

E-2 In the Spirit of Chan

E-3 A General Introduction to the Bodhisattva Precepts

E-4 The Effects of Chan Meditation

E-5 The Meaning of Life

E-6 Why Take Refuge in the Three Jewels?

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E-14 Master Sheng Yen

E-15 The Six Ethics of the Mind

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E-17 Encounters with Master Sheng Yen I

E-18 Encounters with Master Sheng Yen II

E-19 Encounters with Master Sheng Yen III

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What I am unable to accomplish in this lifetime, I vow to push forward through countless future lives; what I am unable to accomplish personally, I appeal to everyone to undertake together.

– Master Sheng Yen (1930-2009)