Encounters with Master Sheng Yen VI

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Preface

To share with the public the thoughts and life experiences of Dharma Drum Mountain founder Master Sheng Yen (also known as Shifu, meaning "Master"), 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 official 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 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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Dan Stevenson

He was never frivolous or casual about his interactions with his students. He observed the Buddhist precepts meticulously in his relationships with his students. I think that was extremely important. In a way it complicates the clear relationship and trust that are necessary between a student and a teacher who is going to be examining and working on your personality. Shifu would often make little adjustments to his bearing when he sensed that students might take his behavior wrongly.

Introducing the Speaker

Dan Stevenson

Currently a professor at the University of Kansas, Dan Stevenson was one the first students of Master Sheng Yen in the United States, from whom he had learned Chan for over 20 years. He authored the *Hoofprint of the Ox* based on the Master's teachings of Chan practice, an endeavor that took him 17 years to complete, which aims to introduce Chinese Buddhism, especially the Chan tradition, to an international audience.

I remember clearly the day when I first visited the Temple of Great Enlightenment (Dajue si) in the Bronx. It was a Sunday afternoon. The building had once belonged to the telephone company, but had been remodeled as a Buddhist temple. The entrance to the Temple had a big round moon gate. So I opened the door and went in, not knowing what I would find. A small vestibule led into the main Buddha hall. Off to the side, seats were arranged for a lecture. The audience was entirely Chinese. Facing them—and me—at the far end was a thin, very skinny monk with a shaved head, black robes, and big heavy black plastic rimmed glasses, the style of glasses worn in the 1950's or 1960's.

Entering a temple encountering a Chinese Buddhist monk

I first became interested in Buddhism when I was in college, mainly through the courses I took. I always wanted to do more than just study Buddhism academically or read Buddhist books. I had always hoped to have the opportunity to meet Buddhist monks and nuns and learn to practice meditation. This was an interest that developed

during my first years in college. An older friend who *practiced shikantaza* meditation of the Japanese Sōtō Zen school taught me a bit when I was a sophomore. We would sit together once or twice a week, sometimes with the organist Anthony Newman, who was an artist in residence at the time. After graduating from college, I entered graduate school to study Chinese Buddhism and Chinese religious history at Columbia University in New York. New York City is a very vibrant, diverse, large city with many different people from different parts of the world, including Buddhist monks and tulkus from Tibet, Vipassana teachers from Southeast Asia, Zen teachers from Japan, and Chinese Buddhist monks as well, many of whom were refugees from mainland China.

In the summer of 1976, I began to look around for opportunities to meet Buddhist monks. Most people I contacted at that time were Tibetans, due to connections I formed with classmates. I had the opportunity to live and travel with them. But I always wanted to find Chinese Buddhist monks with whom I might study, insofar as I was studying Chinese Buddhism and working with Chinese

sources. That was my greatest interest. I knew there were Chinese Buddhists in NY, but I didn't know how to contact them. Other Buddhist groups, such as the Tibetan and Japanese, were much more active in advertising their presence to the American public and American students. Chinese monastics and their communities were more retiring and insular.

At one point I heard from people that there were several Chinese monks living at the Temple of Great Enlightenment in the Bronx, and that they had a regular open house for Chinese lay people on Sundays. Westerners were welcome to come and listen to lectures as well. I also heard that a new Buddhist monk there was starting to teach Chan meditation. That interested me a great deal.

So I went up there one Sunday afternoon. The Temple of Great Enlightenment was fronted with a big round moon gate made of brick. I opened the door, and I went in, not knowing what I would find. As I entered the main Buddha hall I saw that they were in the middle of a lecture. The seats for the audience were off to the right, and facing

me at the far end was a skinny monk with shaved head, black robes, and big heavy black plastic rimmed glasses, the style of glasses worn in the 1950's or 1960's.

He looked very scholarly. He was in the middle of lecturing on some topic. The audience was made up of Chinese lay followers, with several other monks also in attendance. I had studied Chinese, so I could understand a bit of it, though it was technical and his accent was not familiar to me. A Chinese lay person came up to welcome me and said, "There's another lecture downstairs by Ven. Renjun, and it's being interpreted in English. You're welcome to go down there." And I said, "Well, I understand a little bit of Chinese. Is it ok for me to stay here?" And he said, "Yes, yes." So I sat down there and listened to the rest of the lecture, which I barely understood. After the lecture, I was introduced to the speaker, who turned out to be our shifu, Master Sheng Yen. After hearing that I was studying Chinese Buddhist history and personally interested in learning to meditate, Shifu told me that he was starting a meditation class and I would be welcomed to attend. The only requirement was that I had to pledge to come to every

class—couldn't skip a class—and that I was to meditate two hours every day, once in the morning, and once in the evening. I said, "Ok." So I started coming when the class began. That's how I met Shifu and the other resident monks, masters Minzhi, Renjun, and Richang.

Study and Chan practice supports and complements each other

Those were very happy years, very happy times. It was wonderful. Chinese lay people there were quite warm, quite compassionate, and very welcoming to us foreigners who came to join the activities. Shifu was teaching meditation, and everybody was pretty serious about it. The classes were held on Saturdays and ran for most of the day. Some of us would stay on for evening service. On Sundays they held activities for the larger Chinese lay community, which typically included lectures, a noon service, with chanting of Buddha Amitābha's and Guanyin Bodhisattva's name, a collective meal, and afternoon session of seated meditation and recitation. The noon meal was vegetarian, prepared on site by the older Chinese laywomen. The taste was unforgettable.

When I had free time, I often would go to the Temple of Enlightenment to read with some of the monks, especially with Ven. Renjun. I felt I learned a lot from just being around them. I never thought of it as "field work," but observing and interacting with them day to day, being privy to their conversations, something about the culture of Buddhist self-cultivation began to sink in: the meaning of renunciation and self-discipline, and about how people's bodies and minds change and transform through Buddhist practice. You could sense this directly in their calmness and their bearing. So this kind of engagement changed my views tremendously.

In the beginning meditation class, Sheng Yen shifu taught us how to sit, when to sit, and where to sit, as well as how to adjust our diet, the proper way to harmonize body, breath, and mind, "generate the mind without any abiding," and the proper way to count and follow the breath, meditate on the *dantian*—this kind of practice. As he was teaching these techniques, and as we were practicing them two hours a day at home, the practice begins to have an effect on the day to day disposition of the

body and mind—a very powerful, wonderful effect as one continues, as the practice accumulates.

At the same time that I was beginning to practice with Master Sheng Yen at the Temple of Great Enlightenment in the Bronx, I was also reading Tiantai Zhiyi's (538-597) *Xiuxi zhiguan zuochan fayao (The Essentials for Practicing Calming-and-Insight & Dhyana Meditation)* in Chinese with my advisor at Columbia. I discovered immediately that most of what Master Sheng Yen was teaching, the way it was organized, the ideas of harmonizing the body, breath, and mind, were informed by the *Essentials of Calming and Contemplation*. This had a major impact on me, simply for the fact that I was able to study the original text at the same time that I was putting its principles into practice under the supervision of a master of Chan meditation. It was an eye-opening experience for me, opening my eyes to the richness and complexity of these Buddhist traditions. Not only was it very rewarding for me personally, but the idea of dual practice of doctrinal study (as well as academic research) and contemplation also made tremendous sense. I realized in retrospect that if I hadn't met Shifu and spent

time with him, and if I had not also met other Chinese monks from that generation, such as Ven. Minzhi, Ven. Renjun, Ven. Haolin, Ven. Yanpei, Ven. Richang, and Ven. Xichen, my understanding and knowledge of Buddhism as a researcher and academic would be very different: I would have failed to see and understand many things I read in the texts.

One of the things I came to realize very quickly, and also from the first seven-day Chan retreat we held, was that ritual practices such as reciting the Buddha's name, repentance rites, and scripture recitation, offering of incense, chanting of praise, dhāraṇī incantations were everywhere—including morning, noon, and evening daily services. Lived Buddhism, especially among monastics and actively observant lay people, involved every aspect of the body, the mind, the environment, and the surroundings. It is not just a matter of abstract beliefs that one carries around in one's head and vaguely tries to translate into everyday life; it's an entire culture, and an entire package. This experience impacted my own research deeply, and my person.

As far as my own practice goes, the technique I gravitate toward and feel most comfortable with is probably equivalent to what Shifu calls "silent illumination" practice. This was the technique I learned, partly through his instruction, but also mainly through my own experience of practice under him. Out of that basic experience I come to know something of my own body and mind, and how to calm, and adjust the body, the breath, the mind. At each sitting one goes back to the beginning, as though starting from scratch: sitting down, inhabiting and adjusting the posture, following the breath, and relaxing body, breath, and mind until they settle down, interfuse, and the mind sinks down towards the *dantian*. This is something akin to calming and insight, but also silent illumination. So that's the method that I still use: starting with the breath until the mind calms down, and then something like silent illumination Chan. As Shifu used to say at the time, "The lower the mind settles, the more open it becomes."

When I undertook weeklong Chan retreats with Master Sheng Yen, he would often assign me a different method of practice for each retreat. The first retreat was

Huatou practice, and the second retreat was something like silent illumination. Shifu didn't call it "silent illumination Chan" at that time; it was a method of simply quieting the body and mind and just observing—nothing else but just watching everything as far as the mind can reach. On another retreat I was assigned the practice of "just listening" based on the teaching of Bodhisattva Guanyin described in the Chinese *Śūraṅgama Sūtra*. On several other retreats I used the "white bones" meditation.

Accomplishments as a result of various causes and conditions

Some of the instruction that has meant the most to me and affected me most deeply has had more to do with morality and treatment of other people, than it does with meditation. There are a lot of things I've gained from Shifu that didn't come from instruction deliberately addressed to me or deliberately spoken as instruction, but just things I heard and saw.

When I was finishing my doctoral degree, getting

ready to leave New York to take a position at a university in the Midwest, Shifu gave me a going away celebration. Shifu and many of my old friends were there, including my former Chinese language teacher, with whom I felt quite close. On that occasion Shifu told a story about a student who had once complained that his parents objected to what he chose to do in life: study. The unnamed student felt he had to achieve all his goals entirely on his own, with his own effort. When he was studying for his doctoral degree, his advisors didn't give him much attention, write bright intensive comments on his work, and give a lot of personal instruction on how to do all the hard study and work. When it came to writing the doctoral dissertation, nobody helped him; he had to do all the work by himself. So the student felt, "Ah, this is an accomplishment I have done all my own, all by myself." He told this as a story without any names involved, but obviously he was directing the lesson to me.

But think about it: Actually, the person had parents who provided a home, education, and opportunities from the time the person was young. Then he went on to

graduate studies. At graduate school, his advisors were there every day to teach their classes and answer questions. They also put aside time every week, for years on end, to give the student personal directed readings. They had taken the labor to build up a fabulous library collection, and the student had wonderful opportunities to interact and form lasting friendships with fellow students. So the accomplishment could hardly be said to rest entirely with the student himself, but required all kinds of causes and conditions, especially the support from other people. That message is something that has stayed with me a long time.

Another thing Shifu used to say all the time, which I've taken to heart, is not to cling to any experience, and especially not to be proud. It's very easy to have some kind of special experience on Chan retreats, or get praised for something right, after which you get puffed up and perhaps begin to treat people differently, or people begin to treat you differently. Then again, when practicing, it is very easy to become obsessed when you feel you have had some special experience; some good feeling happens and you begin to hanker after it, trying to recreate it, over and over again.

One of the things Shifu emphasized incessantly was to let go of everything and not clinging to anything: "Having nothing in which to abide, allow the mind to arise," as the saying goes. It's all about not being attached to anything, letting go and being fully present all the time. If you really think about it, you can't get away from anything, and you can't hold on to anything. You can only go deeper into it and be with it. That is what I understand as no-seeking, no-attachment, "having nothing in which to abide while allowing the mind to arise." Something good happens, it's gone; something bad happens, it's gone—that's the universal law. If there's any kind of attachment at all, then it's a kind of selfishness, it's a kind of craving; it's certainly not solving the problem of the "three poisons." One of the things I took away from Shifu's emphasis on not clinging is the idea that afflictions really boil down to very basic human problems: greed, craving, anger, hatred, fear, and it is changing those attitudes at the most fundamental level that is the real thrust of Buddhist teaching, of what it means to seek and achieve awakening. That's probably what matters the most to me.

Teaching the Dharma by example

As an American growing up in a cultural background very different from China, encountering and taking an interest in Master Sheng Yen coming from another completely different culture as a Buddhist monk was what appealed to me and what I did find important.

He was never frivolous or casual about his interactions with his students. He observed the Buddhist precepts meticulously in his relationships with his students. I think that was extremely important, because in America the cultures are different and there are students who bring all sorts of unusual expectations and personal needs to the notion of having a spiritual teacher. Master Sheng Yen was always aware of that problem, and he looked to the precepts and proper deportment as a Buddhist monk as the model for interacting with his male and female students. In New York I saw Buddhist teachers hug their students, male and female, and I was very uncomfortable with that level of familiarity. In a way it complicates the clear relationship and trust that are necessary between a

student and a teacher who is going to be examining and working on your personality. Shifu would often make little adjustments to his bearing when he sensed that students might take his behavior wrongly.

He came back from Taiwan one time with a new pair of glasses. I was there when he arrived. The glasses were very stylish, so he looked very distinguished, very stately. Shifu wore these glasses and people commented: "Shifu, you look quite handsome." Next day he changed his glasses and went back to the big heavy black and ugly glasses that he had worn before. I never saw those new glasses again until he got much older. That is just one story, but there are many other examples. Shifu was always extremely attentive to people's actions and attitudes; the fact that the Buddhist monastic precepts guided his behavior made me trust him all the more.

Buddhism in western societies

As to the question of spreading Chinese Buddhism in Western society, first of all, there might be the problem

of many Buddhist traditions and forms of practice. Is the objective to spread Tibetan Buddhist tradition, Japanese Rinzai and Sōtō Zen Buddhist traditions, or Korean Sŏn Buddhist tradition? Is that it, only that school and nothing else? Where's the Buddhism? That's one question. Shifu is a Chinese master. Chinese Buddhism is his tradition, and the tradition is very rich. There is also the question of its relationship to other representations of the Buddha's teaching, and how one articulates that relationship to other forms of Buddhism, especially how one teaches the students to articulate that relationship.

I ran into many other students or teachers, and the first thing they want to impress on you is that their teacher is the only good teacher in the world and everybody else is inferior. That's just stupid, not to mention off-putting. To me, it's just going south when you should be going north; it makes no sense. There's a lot of that vanity around, and it has to do with the top-down way the master presents himself or herself in the West, the model the teacher creates for the students, and the way they teach their students' students. I don't think among Shifu's students you see that

problem so much. In the United States, I've never heard students broadcasting Master Sheng Yen's brilliant, special qualities over some or other Buddhist traditions. In fact, he often encouraged students to go listen to or see other teachers. Quite a few Tibetan teachers came through the Temple of Great Enlightenment. Shifu himself expressed great admiration for a number of them, and maintained ongoing connection with one or two. I think that's important.

Another concern might be how to make Chinese Buddhist tradition as taught by Master Sheng Yen accessible and appealing to Americans, so that Americans may get whatever benefits out of it they want. There are two problems here. Americans come to the traditions to practice for their own reasons. The teachers from China come to spread Buddhism with their own goals and reasons. How well do they meet? That's the difficulty.

At some point, there's no question that as a Westerner, even if you speak the language and have more exposure with Chinese and Buddhist culture, there are things you'll never be able to accept very comfortably. But that's

probably true in Taiwan as well. There is always some kind of adjustment involved. So I think the more flexible and willing a teacher is to openly talk about those points of discomfort, the more productive the exchange will be.

Deep faith in Chan teachings

Many people, myself included, were attracted to Chinese Buddhism because we wanted to engage in some kind of practice that could truly change our lives, improve our day to day well being. Could meditation help us deal with feelings of loss, frustration, alienation, and discomfort, not just to turn us into good and productive workers, but turn us into the kind of person and the kind of life we ideally wanted to live. Many of us faithfully believe that that is the case, and over the years I have developed the greatest faith in the techniques of meditation taught by Master Sheng Yen.

After that, lots of questions arise. I will be frank about this: there are aspects of Master Sheng Yen's approach to spreading the Dharma that I have found frustrating. He

was a very determined individual, with a very, very great sense of vow and mission—not just a vow to teach me personally, but a vow to improve human life at large in Taiwan, to reach people in Europe, to teach Americans Buddhist practice, to transform and build a "pure land among humankind," as he later put it. He was always doing many things at once in many places. Therefore, when he started a group, when he got people involved, he needed those people to help him realize his goal.

At that point, practice becomes not just sitting in meditation or about how to improve your daily life. It becomes spreading his teachings and words; and thus expectations and responsibilities develop. Some students—myself included—would feel that our everyday practice was being neglected, or that public relations and spreading Master Sheng Yen's teaching was becoming the practice itself. So I'm very nostalgic for the very early years at the Temple of Great Enlightenment in the Bronx, and the first Chan Center, in Queens, when it was a very small group, when there was this very close access to Shifu—a very equanimous, informal access.

I would say in summary that as the organization grew, the social dynamic of how the organization operated, the relationship of the teacher to the students, and the core priorities of the organization inevitably changed. Changes of that sort are always sensitive, and how they are handled is important.

Hoof-print of the Ox, a book representing Shifu's teachings

When I was approached about putting together a book on Shifu's teachings, I didn't want to just transcribe a couple of tapes and put it out. To me what mattered most was the overall logic of Master Sheng Yen's teaching: the very clear and structured procedure that Master Sheng Yen had developed to teach meditation—and the principles of Chan Buddhist meditation—to students. That was the aim of *Hoof-print of the Ox*, namely, to compose a series of chapters that integrally conveyed not just the principal content of shifu Sheng Yen's teaching, but the manner in which that content was conveyed to students in classes and retreats. My understanding of that teaching and pedagogy comes from watching and listening to him teach the beginning and intermediate classes, helping

him to teach the beginning and intermediate classes over and over again, participating in Chan retreats, and observing his lectures to the public. I also had opportunity to observe him not only in the United States, but in Taiwan as well.

He had a very clear strategy for teaching the logic and techniques of meditation to students. So the aims and objectives of the book were to pull together materials that would articulate and spell out that approach in a very careful and comprehensive manner. Beyond drawing on tapes from classes or lectures—which couldn't just be transcribed as they were—one had to take tapes from multiple classes and events, compare their contents, and integrate their contents. Upon occasion, I also translated material from other books of Master Sheng Yen in order to fill out certain gaps, such as his *Essentials of the Buddhist Precepts and Vinaya (Jielü gangyao) and Experience of Chan (Chan de tiyan)*. The overall content and organization of *Hoofprint of the Ox*, which Shifu himself vetted, was based on my observation and experience of his teaching over a period of about 10 years, the objective being to present an overview of that teaching that was as clear and faithful as possible.

Teaching by Modeling, Being a Spiritual Guide for Students

Rikki Asher

In the first class, Master Sheng Yen explained three basic requirements that a Chan master must possess.
First is: a deep understanding of Chan Buddhist theory;
second, upholding the precepts;
and third, the mental ability to harmonize body and mind.

Introducing the Speaker

Rikki Asher

Dr. Rikki Asher started to attend Master Sheng Yen's Chan meditation classes at the Temple of Great Enlightenment in the Bronx, New York in 1976. Soon after, she participated in her first seven-day silent retreat. Following Master Sheng Yen's suggestion in the first class, she kept a journal which turned into a record of the Master's Dharma talks, introducing various methods, and several pages of questions and answers, giving us an idea about his early style of Chan teaching and guidance in response to American society at that time. A professor at Queens College of the City University of New York, Rikki contributed photographs and artwork to the Chan Magazine.

It was 1976 when I met Master Sheng Yen. The Vietnam War ended a year before, during which many young men served. A lot of us were asking such questions as: "Why was our government in Vietnam?" "Who benefited?" "How could all this killing be justified?" Many soldiers returned from the war depressed, looking for answers. Young people thought that we were freeing ourselves from a society that was unresponsive to demands for change. As it turned out, our minds were still not free! Groups of people were intrigued by the phrase: "turn on; tune in; drop out." There were lots of ways to try this: alcohol, heroin, cocaine, amphetamines, psychedelic mushrooms and LSD. Each alters one's consciousness to one degree or another. Oftentimes drugs gave access to deep spiritual experiences. Some reported they had a glimpse of God; or, when a 'trip' turned bad, inner demons that practically scared them to death, or induced psychosis. These experiences led many young folks to search for answers through organized spiritual involvement. We embraced Eastern models and symbols; tried very hard to fit in. From the outside, we wore T-shirts with Yin/Yang symbols, mala beads, or hung posters of Buddha on the wall. I wore bells and beads, sometimes

walked barefoot outside; practiced yoga; hung posters of Mandalas in my room, all outer accouterments (Although, I did read a few Buddhist books and didn't eat meat).

In 1962 my father died. I was 5 ½ years old. My mother tried to explain death, she said, "God took Daddy away." I asked, "Where did he go?" "When is he coming back?" She had no answers. These questions didn't go away. They remained unanswered. Surprisingly studying Dharma provided a framework that brought me closer to understanding my questions about death and dying.

The door of the Temple of Great Enlightenment beckons

There is an expression, "When you search for a teacher, the teacher will come." I was not searching, and the teacher came anyway! The causes and conditions were ripe for me to meet Shifu, (Which means teacher). My daily walk to the subway station took me past a low, orange brick building. There was a very large circular door that I later learned was called a Moon Gate. Above the

doorway attached to the wall hung gold Chinese letters. Frankly, it looked like an abandoned Chinese restaurant to me since I never saw anyone come in or leave. Passing it once again I decided to find out about the place. It was summer 1976. There was a doorbell on the right side of the entrance. I rang the bell. An elderly Chinese man wearing a suit opened the door and smiled. He asked, "Can I help you?" I replied, "What is this place? Is it a restaurant?" He answered, "This is the Temple of Great Enlightenment, the Buddhist Association of the United States, would you like to come in?" "Sure!" He gave me a tour of the upstairs. I noticed the spotless floors and several gold-framed posters on two walls depicting the life of Buddha. As we walked around, three seated gold Buddha statues were displayed in a glass case in front of the main hall. The man in the suit informed me that: "There is a new meditation class, being offered on Saturdays, taught by a Chinese monk who recently arrived from Taiwan to teach in the United States." He explained that this monk studied in Japan and earned a doctorate in Buddhist Studies. "Would you like to join the class?" I said, "Why not, what have I got to lose?" He added my name to a list. On Saturday I returned to the

Temple, which I no longer thought of as an abandoned Chinese restaurant, and began my first class. Those classes changed my life.

Master Sheng Yen was an organized teacher. He often taught three or four topics at a time, and wrote them in Chinese on a blackboard. One of the students in the class was Ming Yi Wang. He translated Shifu's words flawlessly. Shifu covered a lot of material and Ming Yi consistently captured the essence of each topic, even his jokes. To English only speakers he was "the voice of Shifu." Besides Dharma talks, Shifu taught several meditation practices, body massage techniques and gentle yoga. There was homework that included 30 minutes sitting, yoga, then more sitting for 30 minutes. We were expected to practice this routine twice a day. He asked us to keep a notebook of experiences, questions or problems that arose.

From the second class, I kept a notebook to record questions, thoughts, psychological, physical experiences — and my doodles. This notebook originally belonged to my late father, so it was precious to me. Thirty-two years later,

the contents of this notebook even comes in handy today.

Shifu usually answered student questions respectfully and thoughtfully. Sometimes he wouldn't answer a question, or he'd pose your question to you. Other times he offered clear guidance and direction concerning Chan theory and meditation. Shifu very rarely, got angry with students. I recall a time when that did happen. He acknowledged his shortcomings and told us that he must work on not getting angry with students. He was human and admitted his shortcomings; this gave me a more realistic view of Master Sheng Yen. He was also a knowledgeable, considerate and compassionate teacher.

At the end of one particular class he announced that we were ready to participate in a 7-day silent meditation retreat. Even though most of us had no idea what we were getting into, everyone signed up. From the first day, Shifu revealed a very different side of his personality than what we were used to. This was a very stern, strict, harsh teacher. In the Chan Hall while we were sitting, he often shouted at us unexpectantly, "DON'T MOVE!" He repeatedly

reminded us to return to the method, yelling: "WHERE IS YOUR MIND?" In the middle of a sitting period, he startled me screaming: "YOU AREN'T WORKING HARD ENOUGH!" "HOW CAN YOU ALL BE SO LAZY?" This took place while the incense board was used often, WHACK! WHACK! Even without asking for it.

Showering was not permitted on the retreat, since, according to Shifu, a shower would take time away from practice and paying too much attention on the body was discouraged for the same reason. That's another example of his expectations of us. The idea of not going along with this was unlikely.

When entering the interview room, he displayed compassion, and acknowledged how hard I was practicing. He asked me very specific questions. Based on the answers I gave, he encouraged me to work hard. By this he meant to immerse myself in the method. Back in the Chan Hall, he became loud and stern again. For some reason, this approach strengthened my practice for a long time. Years later retreats that Shifu led at Dharma Drum Retreat

Center (DDRC) revealed a totally different style. He often smiled and appeared to be much more relaxed. The tone of his voice was gentle. Retreats were described as vacations. This was quite a welcomed contrast to those early retreats.

Dharma teacher as spiritual director for students

In the first class, Master Sheng Yen explained three basic requirements that a Chan Master must possess. First is: a deep understanding of Chan Buddhist theory; second, upholding the precepts; and third, the mental ability to harmonize body and mind. He went on to explain that a Master must have sufficient comprehension of the Dharma, the right method and effectiveness. He assured us that he had all three. He emphasized that every word he spoke was for our benefit; whatever problems we had, physical or mental, he urged us to let him know what they were and he would address them. I developed friendships with members of the class. Shifu called these connections "Dharma friends." A number of these relationships have lasted 40 years.

Shifu then asked, "How does a rain drop form perfect circles when it drops into a puddle of water?" Shifu drew circles and the raindrop, on the blackboard. No one had an answer. He said that "A drop of rain that lands in a puddle forms a perfect circle; is this *wu* (*emptiness*)? Everything and nothing is a perfect circle, lifetimes are circles; seasons are circles, our eyes, our nose, ears, mouth, all circles." My mind was going in circles. I knew what he meant about the seasons and body parts, but not a clue about *Wu* and *Emptiness*.

Notes dated March 5, 1977, describe Shifu teaching us to forget about emptiness and existence. "Do not search for the truth, only cease to cherish opinions." "Searching itself is already an illusion. In our world, there's not anything completely objective, there's no need to search for truth; only *wu* (emptiness) is left. If only *wu* is left, can you describe it? You can't describe *wu*, because it's not a relative thing. Is truth the same thing as *wu*? You don't need to look for truth; stop your opinions." I looked at my Dharma friend, Buffe, and we both shrugged our shoulders. On a certain level it didn't matter that there was little or no understanding of

wu, what mattered was that Shifu's *being* resonated for me even without words. So, I kept coming back.

A few months later, Shifu described experiences of his teacher to the class. "What is Buddha?" his Master shouted. As soon as Shifu opened his mouth to answer, he was hit with an incense board. The Master asked, "Do you know what this stick is?" When Shifu began to answer, he was hit once more. The Master asked, "Do you know what the question is?" Again, he was hit. He described this attempt to answer as a dualistic state of mind, and spoke about the dualisms of purity and defilement, increasing and decreasing, like life and death. We were encouraged not to remain in a dualistic state of mind; for example, he explained that beauty could not really be judged. He added that it depends on the feeling of the moment. He asked, "Does avoiding duality mean that we clarify our own definition of beauty and ugliness, of pure and impure? In daily life, don't distinguish between good and bad; 'good' and 'bad' are opinions. We can improve our karma, yet it's impossible to escape it. When sitting, throw away all distinctions. Gradually in your daily life, this non-duality will arise."

When he finished, I thought that this is a great way to live and very difficult for this Chan student to achieve.

Chan application to daily life to appeal to beginners

Many people come to Chan with a wide range of ideas about meditation, Buddhism, Buddha, and monastics. Some questions recorded in my notebook include: Is Buddha a god? Do I have to change my religion to become a Buddhist? Can we really get rid of suffering? When these kinds of questions are posed in my Meditation Classes these days, I reflect on ways that Shifu taught us in the very beginning. He emphasized that we present ourselves as Dharma friends rather than teachers, and to be prepared. He'd say, "If you don't know the answer to a question it's okay to admit that, and make an effort to find answers."

Questions about suffering are common in Beginner and Intermediate Meditation classes. The word *suffering* poses a challenge since most of us have a fixed idea of

suffering and what the word means. Basically, *suffering* is regarded as physical, mental, or emotional pain. As a meditation teacher, it is very useful for me to refer to Shifu's Buddhist explanation of *suffering*, based on his book, *There is no suffering*. An important aspect of my teaching is to relate these concepts of *suffering* to students' own experiences. There is an expression that is applicable regarding *suffering* from a Buddhist vantage point. Essentially: *Pain is inevitable, suffering is optional.*

The beginnings of the Chan Magazine to benefit practitioners worldwide

In 1976, Shifu wanted his students to create a quarterly magazine about Chan. Buffe Laffey and I accepted the task. To begin, he wrote the word *Chan* in Chinese calligraphy on a piece of paper. This became the logo and appeared on every magazine cover. The rest was up to us. Buffe edited each issue using a typewriter. She contributed her photographs, and I provided artwork, using pen and ink, brush and ink, and pencil drawings. The main articles were translated transcripts of Shifu's Dharma talks. He

insisted that students write reports about meditation and retreat experiences. Most of us were college undergraduate or graduate students at the time. Some people studied Chinese; others physics or practiced the martial arts. I was an art student. We were a motley crew.

Working with Buffe gave us a chance to have some fun while applying our practice to the work. Below is the cover design of the first issue in the summer of 1977. It included Shifu's calligraphy and my Chinese brush painting. This illustration was inspired by the *Zen Shikantaza* method (in Chan, "Silent Illumination"), symbolized here as a cat watching a mouse. The idea was that one's mind should be as focused as a cat watching a mouse hole, waiting for the mouse to come out, without knowing when it will. Shifu was very fond of this method and design.

Master Sheng Yen was a scholar who understood the power of the printed word. He knew that teaching at the Temple of Great Enlightenment could only reach so many people, whereas Chan Magazine would reach a much wider audience.

A calligraphy painting by Rikki Asher for the cover of the first issue of the Chan Magazine featuring a cat watching a mouse, symbolizing the “just sitting” method of meditation as taught by Master Sheng Yen.

Shifu expected each issue ready to send the printer in time to meet the mailing deadline. Somehow, we consistently managed to do that. He believed we could get it done, and we did. Before we met Shifu, if someone had told Buffe and me that we were going to create a quarterly magazine we would have said, "No way!" However, since Shifu gave us this job, and expressed total confidence in his two students, we rose to the occasion. It was an important part of my life for a long time and I enjoyed doing it with my dear Dharma friend Buffe very much.

A spiritual path packed with gratitude

In 2007 I had an opportunity to participate in a Buddhist pilgrimage in India and Nepal. I asked Shifu what one should do to prepare for such a trip. He told me to "Go with an open heart." Once I got there, it made perfect sense. I was very grateful for those words and carried them with me. At Bodhgaya (the place where the Buddha became Enlightened under the Bodhi tree), I created a series of watercolor paintings, called "The Art of

the Bodhi Tree". Each watercolor has gold leaf fragments and a Bodhi leaf. To "Go with an open heart" does not only apply in India. In fact I refer to the phrase in many situations and places.

Each moment is originally new

In 1994, I taught art education at the University of New Paltz, in upstate New York, living there two days, and returning home to Rego Park, Queens, for the rest of the week. When in Queens, I prepared lectures. While in New Paltz, I thought about Queens. When in Queens, I thought about New Paltz. My time seemed fragmented. I became confused and nervous. I thought Shifu must experience something like this too, except he does it successfully. When he's in Taiwan, he does what he needs to do in Taiwan; when in New York, he does what he has to do there. I wrote him a letter about this dilemma, and he answered me:

Each moment is originally new and divided, each moment has always been isolated, just as it is, problems and vexations will come when you try to connect these moments

together. Because of this you find yourself unable to adapt to new circumstances. So don't try to string time together, or think of time like a waterfall, continuously going from past to present, to future. Rather, just face each moment that is in front of you. When a person truly understands impermanence, he or she will be a joyous person. His or her outlook on the future will be positive. Looking back, he or she will have no regrets.

Feeling like a beginner is a great thing. The problem is you feel like you're one of my oldest students; please don't be concerned with these thoughts. After all, what power do they have over you? Who gives them this power?

You and Royce have my blessings.

This letter was like a short personal Dharma talk. It released a lot of stress I was experiencing.

From the past to the present

After such a long time, many of the talks have left my mind. What remains is the core of the teaching and the practice. Recently, after working abroad, I experienced

a deep dark depression. It was impossible to work at the college or do practically anything. Never before in my life have I had such a sense of sadness, futility, lack of motivation and energy. It was difficult to get out of bed and face the day. At that time, sitting meditation did not work. It saddened me, and gave me a profound insight and compassion for others. From time to time I was able to watch my breath. This practice grounded me somewhat. As time passed, with the help of my husband, friends, analyst and doctors, I was able to manage to live once again, and pick up the practice. It continues to be a slow and painful process. Through this I have developed a profound awareness that someone else may not be able to meditate or that it may not even be the best thing for them. I returned to teach Meditation classes, and met some students who came to class with psychological problems including hopelessness and depression. Grateful for having gone though similar struggles I am able to approach their needs with compassion and understanding. Based on my own experience with depression, of telling myself that "I am breathing in this moment, and breathing out in this moment." I introduced this method to them. They

were able to utilize following the breath and counting the breath methods. They also appreciated lying down, and experiencing a body scan. Only after these techniques were tried out, were they willing and able to try short periods of meditation. It became clear to me that the practice is multi-layered; there is not one way to practice, and that it doesn't always work. I finally realized that in Chan meditation one size does not fit all.

Today, many of Shifu's early students (myself included) continue to be involved in Chan by attending lectures, lead retreats, teach Beginner's and Intermediate Meditation Classes, and give Dharma lectures.

We are fortunate to have studied with Shifu for so long in his early mediation classes. Were we too attached to him? Probably, but it seems as though some attachments are less harmful than others.

Notes from October 1976:
Student Question: What is karma?
Shifu's Answer: It is the invisible force made up by our

physical and psychological actions.

Student Question: Does one have control over our own karma?

Shifu's Answer: The mind controls our karma.

Master Sheng Yen often told us that we have deep karmic roots with him. I believe it.

These deep karmic roots, such as those spoken of by Shifu that he shared with each of us are concepts he taught along with karmic ties and karmic knots. I refer to these ideas in present experiences—including the inevitable highs and lows— that reflect choices, actions, thoughts and intentions from an earlier time that I hope to work through even if I am never able to quite figure them out. What karma can teach us is patience, humility and compassion for others and ourselves.

Shifu's Deep Concern for the Transmission of Dharma

Ming Yee Wang

In the very early years I already had a feeling: at the same time Shifu untiringly tried to bring the benefits of Dharma to a large number of people, he was deeply concerned with the continuation of a vital Buddhist tradition. In public talks he repeatedly mentioned that Chinese Buddhism was in a very feeble state and we needed to do our utmost to preserve and revitalize this great tradition. I was deeply touched by this aspect of compassion—a selfless commitment to preserving the Dharma tradition, like that of a loyal minister to his endangered country.

Introducing the Speaker

Ming Yee Wang

Ming Yee Wang was born in Hong Kong in 1951 and came to the U.S. in 1969 for college. In 1976 he moved to New York City and through his mother's introduction participated in the first Chan meditation class taught by Master Sheng Yen at the Great Enlightenment Temple in the Bronx, N.Y. From this point on he served as the Master's English interpreter for twenty years. Since Ming Yee had received an English-based education in Hong Kong, and had a good command of both Chinese and English, his interpretations for the Master had been much appreciated by the Master's Western as well as Chinese students.

It was in early 1976 when I moved to New York City to stay with my mother. Before that I was attending graduate school at Princeton and for unknown reasons I often had headaches which made it quite difficult for me to focus on my studies. Finally I decided to leave New Jersey for New York.

Learning meditation and doing interpretations

Around that time my mother was regularly going to the Great Enlightenment Temple in the Bronx. Shortly after arriving in New York, I happened to mention to her that I would like to learn meditation, and she told me that the Buddhist Association of the United States (B.A.U.S.) would soon be offering a meditation class to be taught by a certain Master Sheng Yen, at the Great Enlightenment Temple. The class started sometime in April or May of 1976 and I think that was the first time I met Sheng Yen shifu. There were only four students in that first class: three Caucasians and myself. In this kind of situation, Shifu very naturally let me try doing interpretations for him, and

thus began my relationship with him as both a student and an interpreter. At that time, in addition to the meditation class, there were regular Sunday Dharma talks given at the temple. The folks at B.A.U.S. wanted to make these talks accessible to Westerners who might be interested in Buddhism, and so I eventually interpreted for the Dharma talks and the meditation classes.

In college I had not taken many courses in English Language or Literature; I mostly took a science curriculum. But I did have some interest in philosophy. In trying to translate Buddhism, especially Shifu's teachings, I had to find my own way of expressing various Buddhist ideas. In the beginning I had little notion of any existing, accepted way of translating Buddhist terms into English; I could only rely on my own conceptual understanding. There were not that many Buddhist books in English during the 1970's, unlike what we have witnessed in the last twenty years or so—many books on Buddhism in English have become available for the general public, from Theravada and Tibetan traditions. At that time all I could find in the temple library to consult were a couple of books published

by Master Hsuan Hua from the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas. Later I had the feeling that some of the Buddhist terminology used in those books might not convey meanings fully and clearly.

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

Based on my own experience, there is a big difference

between doing oral interpretations and written translations. Given the opportunities to polish and revise the manuscripts, the accuracy of the written translations is considered a most important quality. But the primary objective of oral interpretations is to convey what Shifu has just said a minute before in a form that can be understood by Western audiences. Of course, the more complete and the more accurate the interpretations are, the better. But I did not aim for 90% accuracy or more. And there was something special when I interpreted for Shifu. For example, if I interpreted the same kind of content for another person, say a professor, I might not be equally effective. So, I suppose, when Shifu was present, something was different —let's say it was Shifu's energy.

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

the more precise words.

At times during a Dharma talk, Shifu might feel that the audience did not clearly understand what he had just said, and so he would repeat himself or present the ideas in a different manner. Sometimes after a passage, he would ask, "What did I just say?" as a way to get people to reflect on what he said, and to make sure that they understood. One time I wasn't too sharp, when I heard Shifu asked, "What did I just say?" For some reason I thought Shifu had truly forgotten, and so I proceeded to tell him what he had just said. The audience had quite a good laugh.

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

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

Adopting the way of teaching to the audience

When Shifu first started teaching Chan meditation in America, there weren't so many activities that he had to be involved in, and there were very few students, sometimes only a few, sometimes up to a few dozen. This was very different from his later years, especially after the establishment of the Dharma Drum Mountain organizations, when he needed to introduce the Dharma to a large number of people. And we can also observe how his ways of guiding students changed significantly from the early years through the later stages of his life. One factor was that with more experience in guiding students, Shifu adjusted his teaching methods. Another important factor was that, facing the increasing number of students who sought to learn Dharma

practice from him, and with his time and energy limited, Shifu could no longer expend the same kind of effort on every single student as in the early years. Once Shifu said to us, "In the early years I treated you people like a strict, demanding father, now I am more like a kind grandfather." Accordingly, individual students from different eras might experience different kinds of benefits from Shifu.

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

For example, the first time Shifu gave a Dharma talk at the Great Enlightenment Temple, he spoke on *The Mahayana Storehouse of All Illuminating Wisdom, the Sutra of the Wordless Dharma Door*. At that time Shifu followed a

very traditional way of lecturing on a sutra, explaining the separate aspects of sutra title, structure and distribution. Later, giving Dharma lectures at various universities and to various Buddhist groups, and especially where there was a substantial number of Western people in the audience, Shifu spoke in a different manner. He gradually developed a way of speaking which the audience with various backgrounds could not only find accessible, but could benefit directly from in their daily living. One way or another, Shifu's delivery of his Dharma talks evolved over the years.

Another time—this was also in the early period—a fellow disciple, Paul Kennedy, and I went with Shifu to visit a Dharma center in Chinatown. In the elevator a young man in his twenties asked Shifu directly in English, "What is the meaning of life?" Think about this, in that half a minute or so in an elevator, how does one answer such a question? Shifu told him, "Life has no meaning." That was a special situation; I imagine on other occasions Shifu might not respond to the question in this manner.

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

The life of the Chinese Buddhist tradition was hanging by a thread

In the very early years I already had a feeling: at the same time Shifu untiringly tried to bring the benefits of Dharma to a large number of people, he was deeply concerned with the continuation of a vital Buddhist tradition. Around 1980 I once accompanied Shifu on a lecture tour through a few states. In the public talks he repeatedly mentioned that Chinese Buddhism was in a very feeble state and we needed to do our utmost to preserve and revitalize this great tradition. I was

deeply touched by this aspect of compassion—a selfless commitment to preserving the Dharma tradition, like that of a loyal minister to his endangered country.

I remember the first year after we bought the Chan Center building in Elmhurst. The house was in really bad shape. We couldn't start renovation right away—we had to first remove the broken structures before we could even consider how to make use of the space. Many students came to help with the cleanup during the weekends, from early morning till late at night. The work was endless. I remember once asking Shifu, "Do we need to finish all the work today?" and Shifu said "Yes," or something like that. Shifu was earnest and determined that the tasks be finished as soon as possible. He demonstrated this spirit of giving oneself completely for the sake of Dharma with no thought of one's own physical well-being. The students managed to take turns going to the center over the weekends and helping out; but for Shifu it was like this day after day.

And not just in the beginning years. Shifu continued to be untiringly dedicated to the spreading of Dharma for

the next three decades. The students tried to follow him with varying degrees of vigor, but Shifu himself never stopped. His time was never wasted.

If an ordinary person is as busy as Shifu and has to deal with the same kind of demanding travel schedule over a long period of time, he can easily collapse. Shifu had also told us the rather peculiar ways in which he was "trained" by grand-master Dong-Chu. But clearly he understood that the same method cannot be applied to all people.

I imagine it took Shifu quite a few years to develop his own training methods suitable for different students and disciples.

Wales—a wonderful place

During the years when I interpreted for Shifu, I accompanied him on three trips to Wales to conduct Chan retreats. The Wales retreat center gave me an impression of a different kind of space-time. In the universities and temples that we had visited in the U.S. or in Canada, we

had always stayed in modern environments and modern buildings, and the living conditions also represented those of modern societies. But the Wales retreat center, in contrast, seemed very removed from modern world. One thing I noticed right away was that it was bitterly cold. Even in spring time, after I put on layers of winter clothing, I still felt cold. It was not easy to live in that kind of environment. In 1989, when we went there for the first time, there was no electricity and people relied on oil lamps at night. An image that came to my mind then was that in China, over the centuries, countless serious practitioners had lived in similar or even harsher conditions, and still dedicated their whole life to Dharma cultivation.

While Westerners do go to Chan retreats in our Elmhurst Chan Center, Chinese typically constitute more than half of the participants. But in Wales it was almost all Westerners. Did Shifu have a different method of teaching because of this? I don't recall. It was true that many of the participants in Wales were professors or scholars, hence they might have had a somewhat higher level of education, or possibly more previous meditation

experience, but the most important difference came from the environment, the natural settings and the climate, which deeply impressed me.

Gratitude to Shifu, as student and as interpreter

I served as Shifu's interpreter for about twenty years and during that time I still had no clear idea of its significance in my life. But now, looking back after all these interim years, I tend to think that there must have been some good karmic seeds planted in previous lives, such that it felt as if a subtle force somehow pushed me towards New York to meet Shifu. During most of my twenty years in New York, Shifu would go back to Taiwan for three months and then come to New York for another three months. He was like one of those birds that migrate according to the seasons, and my life had a pattern that synchronized with his. When Shifu was in Taiwan, I would sometimes feel lacking in focus; but when he returned to America, I always called upon my reserve energy and followed him to many places. This continued

until 1996 when, for various reasons, I left New York and moved to California. From then on I did not have many opportunities to see Shifu or interpret for him anymore.

Now I am in my sixties, an appropriate age to take a retrospective look at one's life.I sometimes ask myself, "What have I done with all those years?" I may wish that I had handled some particular situations with more maturity. Or, if I had shifted somewhat my attention at certain junctures, I could have accomplished more. But one thing I know—the interpretations I did for Shifu during those twenty years were for a worthy cause, and this thought gives me peace of mind. Maybe I did not accomplish much by worldly standards, or I may have seemingly done well in some areas, but this is not what truly matters. On the whole, I do not feel that I have squandered life's precious opportunities, because I have put energy into something quite worthwhile.

In a certain sense I have a higher opinion of myself as Shifu's interpreter than as his student. Interpretation happens in a specific space-time when I try to serve as

a communication channel so that the audience can, in general, grasp what Shifu has just said. With this objective, I consider myself a relatively competent interpreter. But as a student, I recognize my own inadequacy in so many aspects. However, I served as an interpreter for only those twenty years or so, whereas Shifu's influence on me clearly extended beyond that period and probably is not limited to this lifetime.

Shifu left this world at a time that corresponded to around mid-night in California. I was already asleep, and I heard the telephone ring, yet I did not get up to answer it, but continued sleeping. During the night, I had a short dream. I dreamed that I was in a spacious hall together with many people, when Shifu came in from outside for a short while and then was gone. Shifu might be talking to somebody, but not to me, and it was in this manner that I caught a glimpse of him. It was not until the next morning, when I listened to the voice message, that I learned that Shifu had passed away.

Not too long afterward I was visited by a friend, who,

seeing Shifu's photo on a bookshelf, picked it up and saw the words on the back that Shifu had written for me years earlier and whose existence I had all but forgotten:

"To generate no evil thoughts is wisdom.

To engage in no evil actions with body and speech is compassion.

To live with both wisdom and compassion is the Bodhisattva path.

To be complete in both wisdom and merit is the unsurpassable fruition of Buddhahood.

The Bodhisattva path has to be cultivated in the midst of sentient beings.

To live a good human life is already not too far from attaining Buddhahood."

I was once again reminded of Shifu's compassionate and down-to-earth teachings.

Selfless unconditional teachings

In the early years Shifu did not have many students in America and most people had ample opportunities to be

close to him. Even those who were not Buddhists or who were not his students could feel his genuine kindness.

After Shifu passed away, an old friend, Nagendra Rao, got in touch with me. In the 1980's he not only participated in many Chan retreats at the Chan Center; he also attended most of the classes Shifu gave during that period. Already an experienced practitioner of Hinduism using the practice methods of his own tradition during the retreats, he told me that Shifu had given him invaluable guidance that helped him advance in his practice.

What Nagendra emphasized was that Shifu did not have any narrow, sectarian mentality. He would not hold back from giving appropriate teachings just because someone wasn't formally a Buddhist. So long as you participated in the retreat, Shifu would always give you guidance, and it didn't matter which tradition you belong to; you could benefit from his teachings. Nagendra viewed Shifu as a great master who had transcended sectarian limitations, and he felt deeply indebted, but Shifu never requested him to make any commitment. This was why,

after Shifu passed away, he felt an inner urge and called me to share his feelings. This is an aspect of Shifu that might be less well-known: how, when given the right causes and conditions, he would offer guidance to practitioners of other traditions.

Master and disciple

I still remember that at a time when Shifu had no more than a few dozen students in America, he once said to us, "Now you people are close to me and can ask me questions any time. Who knows, there may come a day when I have many, many students, and at that time if you want to ask a question, you might not have the opportunity." At that time I felt that there would be such a day, and indeed there was.

Now that Shifu has passed away, I am very happy to see that many people continue to follow in his footsteps. Especially when I hear some of Shifu's monastic or householder students/disciples mention that they vow to follow Shifu and study with him lifetime after lifetime, I

am full of respect. For Dharma Drum Mountain, this is obviously very encouraging.

But what about those people who studied with Shifu in the early days and then went away for various reasons? I remember Shifu once said something like this: a person may have the causes and conditions with the Dharma such that he may very seriously and diligently study and practice the Dharma for some time, and then at some point that motivation or dedication would somehow disappear. This does not mean that the affinity with Dharma will be completely lost; it is just that the person will regress from Dharma practice for some time, and there is no telling how long this period will be.

Each person treads a different life path, and if anyone has ever seriously studied with Shifu for some time, he should inevitably come to some measure of understanding of his own life unless he chooses to ignore it all. But if he does pay attention, he will have to look into his own mind and his current life conditions, and reflect on what he has learned and examine what path he is on.

Hence I tend to think that there may be no clear demarcation line as to whether Shifu's influence continues in a student or not. For one who stays with the Dharma Drum Mountain organizations, Shifu's continued influence may be quite obvious. But a person who has gone far away can still be deeply influenced by Shifu in his life choices. And the person who stays with DDM may well have also been influenced by other Dharma masters in this or previous lifetimes. The web of causes and conditions is indeed vast and far-reaching.

Remembering Shifu and Accepting My Life

I have a strong faith in the Dharma, but I might not have been firm enough in my conviction to stay close to Shifu and practice under his guidance. Shifu understood me and did not make many requests of me. He probably just allowed me to negotiate my own path and see where causes and conditions would lead.

Looking back, I see a tapestry of countless threads of situations and influences that have shaped the course of

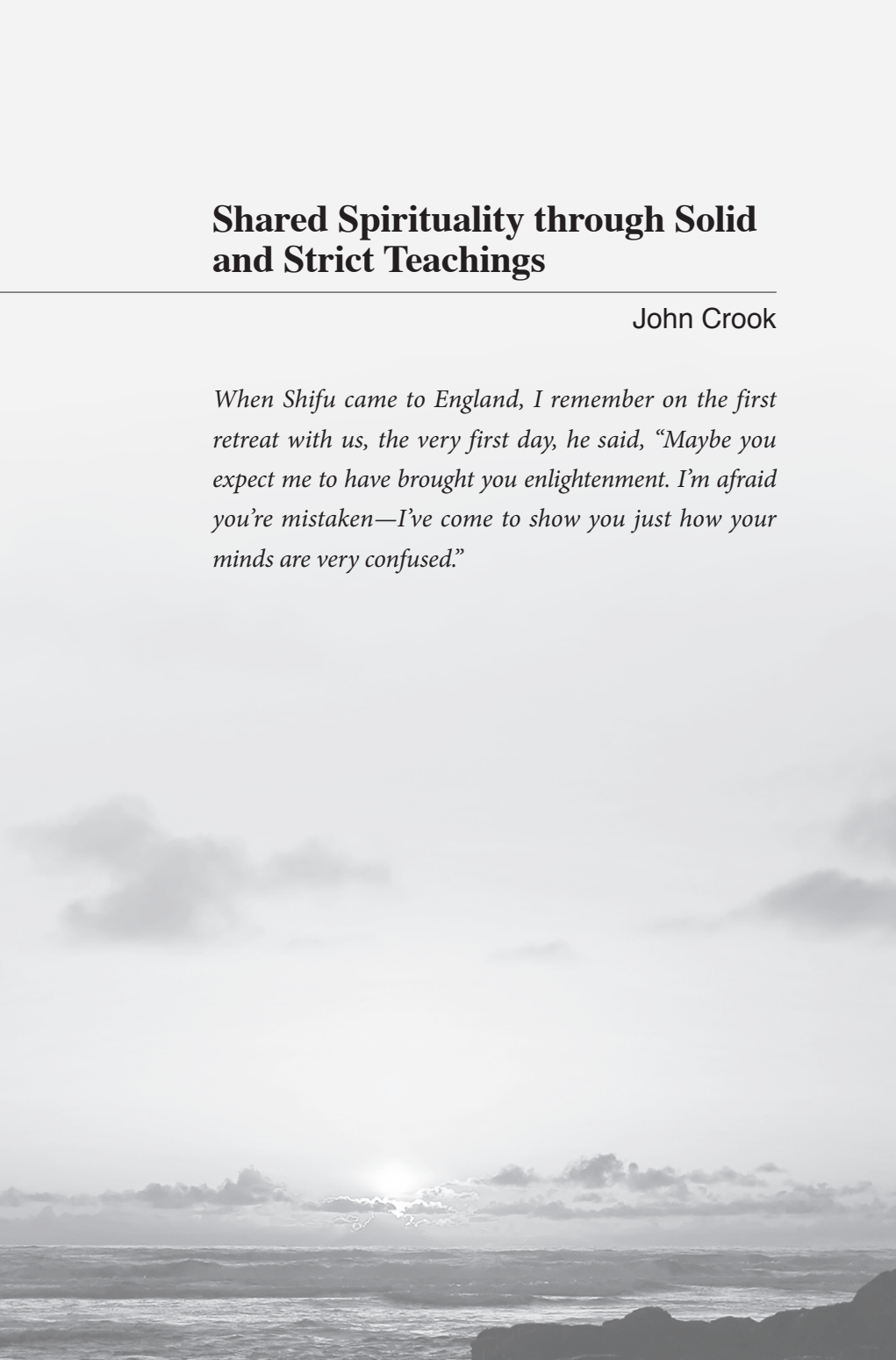
my life, and I have gradually come to a gentle acceptance of the scope of this life. It is a journey, and I might have carried over some benevolent tendencies from previous lives. Sometimes I made more effort, sometimes less, but overall I have adhered to a general direction—an affinity for the Dharma.

I have probably not been focused enough, but was scattered in my interests. Yet at this age, I do not make overly harsh demands on myself. I try to recognize my own shortcomings in various situations, and I aim to make good use of my remaining years, taking one steady step at a time. Most of all, I am grateful.

Shared Spirituality through Solid and Strict Teachings

John Crook

When Shifu came to England, I remember on the first retreat with us, the very first day, he said, "Maybe you expect me to have brought you enlightenment. I'm afraid you're mistaken—I've come to show you just how your minds are very confused."



Introducing the Speaker

John Crook

Born in the UK in 1930, John Crook attended his first seven-day Chan retreat led by Master Sheng Yen in 1986, and had since followed the Master in the study of Chinese Buddhism. In 1993, Master Sheng Yen confirmed him as a Dharma heir, giving him the Dharma name “Chuandeng Dijing,” meaning “passing on the lamp of wisdom, pure in truth.” On John Crook’s invitation, Master Sheng Yen visited and led Chan retreats in the UK four times, a significant contribution to popularizing Chinese Buddhism in the west. He died in July, 2011.

I was born into a Christian family, but I began training as a scientist, as a biologist, and I soon found that some of the ideas in modern Biology, for example Darwin's Theory of Evolution, could not be related very easily to Christian thought. So I gradually lost my Christian faith, which was rather sad for me. But I began on a quest.

A travel to India, a time to meet the Dharma

One of the first people I met, after I'd been in University, was what the Indians call a *jnana-yogi*. Strictly speaking, he didn't teach meditation; his talks were like a kind of spiral which lead from world affairs into one's own heart, and left the mind very still and quiet. It was a very intellectual approach, but I needed more than just the intellect, even though he was important for me and remains an important philosopher in my mind.

Lots of things happened, and I went to India studying Biology. At that time, I began to meet Tibetans, and eventually I received teachings from several of them. I

returned as an anthropologist to the Himalayan regions, and studied village and monastery life in areas where Tibetan Buddhism was practised. The Yogins of the mountains were very kind to me. I was travelling with a friend who spoke fluent Tibetan, both modern and classical. He was a very good scholar in Tibetan subjects, and so we wrote a book together called *The Yogins of Ladakh*. In that book we described several of the meditation methods that we learnt from them, some of which, particularly Mahamudra, is very similar to Silent Illumination.

But the Tibetan approach requires one to be very much in love with Tibetan culture. It is true that I was in love with Tibetan culture, but the methods of their Buddhism are often very complicated, requiring visualisation, tantric practices, and a very great deal of preliminary ascetic practices. Eventually I was reminded that earlier on I'd been in the army in Hong Kong, and had met a Chan master at that time. So I began to feel "I want to go back to something which is a little simpler"—simple emotionally, more simple. So I became interested again in Chan.

A chance to study Chan with a Chinese

I went to Hong Kong in 1953 as an officer in the British Army. That was a tense period because it was part of the Korean War that was not finished at that time. In Hong Kong, I remembered that I'd been reading about Buddhism, so I began to find Chinese friends, and was eventually introduced to a gentleman called Mr. Xi Yangyuan. He had a shop full of embroidery, but he also had fluent English; he actually was a student of Shakespeare and knew English very well, and he had practiced seriously with the great Master Xu Yun, in China. I was led to him and told "here is somebody who knows Chan, and he will teach you." I was the only European in a small group of about 15 people, and he was extremely kind to me because he put most of his talks into English for me. He taught mainly from the *Platform Sutra*, about Hui Neng, and so that was really my starting point.

In Hong Kong I also visited some of the remote monasteries on Lantau Island. In those days, they were very simple, and there were very sincere practitioners. We

used to stay in the monasteries, and I began to develop a love for the atmosphere of the monasteries. One thing I remember especially about that time in Hong Kong was that approaching Po Lin monastery on Lantao Island there is an archway, and on the archway was written, surprisingly in English, as well as in Chinese, a *huatou*: "There is no time; what is memory?" I remember I was so struck by this extraordinary question that my mind went very still for some time. I've always remembered that huatou; it's a very important one for me. "There is no time, so what is memory?" Wow! Big question!

My tour of duty in the army was only one year, after that I went back to England. In those days there was very little Zen in England, certainly very little Chinese Zen in England. So I began to make some enquiries and it was then that I met the Tibetans. But after some time, when I realised I needed to come back and look at Chan a second time, I went back to Hong Kong again looking for my old teacher. By this time he had become a monk. I remember he was a very excellent teacher. But he was getting old, and was very deaf, and I realised I needed a new teacher. So I

went to a Chinese bookshop, and there was only one book in there in English, and this was *Getting the Buddha Mind* by Shifu. I read this book, and I thought "this is excellent," and then I also discovered that he ran retreats in New York. For me that was very helpful, because it's easier to go from England to New York than from England to somewhere in Asia. So I started going on his retreats, and I found them extremely valuable.

Why did I find them valuable? Three reasons: First of all, Shifu's teachings were extremely clear. They were logical, precise, elegant and very well translated by Mingyi, who spoke an excellent British English which I was very happy to hear. Also, I found I was able to ask Shifu questions, sometimes very directly, from the audience. These questions were quite sharp, and Shifu appreciated them. So we began to have a relationship out of this question and answer link. That was when I began to get to know Shifu.

The practice he was describing at that time was mainly Silent Illumination, and I found that suited me very well.

For my psychology, Silent Illumination is very good. I began to understand the Dharma from two viewpoints: on the one hand intellectual; and on the other hand from the point of view of experience. So I really owe to Shifu whatever understanding of Chan that I have.

Becoming a transmitter of the Dharma

Transmission is a very serious matter. If someone receives transmission it means they become a holder of the lineage of the Dharma, and have to teach it to others. I was not expecting to receive transmission at all. However, some years earlier, Shifu had acknowledged some of my experiences as "seeing the nature;" "seeing the nature" is a prime criterion for someone who can transmit the Dharma. If you have not "seen the nature" you are not a genuine transmitter of the Dharma. You can be a teacher, but you cannot transmit the Dharma, and certainly you cannot transmit the Dharma to later heirs, Dharma heirs.

So I had been acknowledged to have received *inka* [i.e. the seal of approval] by Shifu. But I was just doing my

practice, I was just going on retreats and doing my practice, and I was not thinking about transmission at all. And then I went on a retreat, and one time Guo Gu Shi came along and said, "Can I measure you for a robe?" So I said, "What do you want to measure me for a robe for? Why?" Guo Gu said, "Shifu is going to make you a Dharma Heir." So I said, "What? This is ridiculous! I am an English person, I can't even speak Chinese, and my training in the Dharma is very weak. What on earth is Shifu doing transmitting the Dharma to me? He must be crazy!"

However, Shifu was very serious about this. I realised that, quite apart from "seeing the nature," Shifu and I did share a lot of understanding as a result of all the question-and-answers over the years and the interviews I had had with him. I had many personal interviews with Shifu during those years, and these were extraordinarily valuable. Also, Shifu had come to England, or strictly Wales, and had observed my leadership of retreats. I was the Guest-master when he came to England, so he saw that I had a group of people who were listening to my teachings, and he also saw that I could lead them somewhat—keep

them from sleeping, and keep them from making a row, and generally keep them behaving properly. So Shifu had decided to pass the transmission to me.

He actually did that in a very simple ceremony, but I had quite mixed feelings at that time. Of course, at first I felt very honoured by this acknowledgement, but then I felt myself to be quite unworthy. Again the same things came up: I didn't know Chinese, and I was an Englishman. This seemed strange, so I didn't feel very worthy of what Shifu was giving me. I also realised this was going to cause me a lot of trouble, because I would have to start teaching other people. Furthermore, I didn't want anyone to know that Shifu was giving me transmission because then everyone would say "Oh, John's got transmission," and some of them would say "John's got transmission but why haven't I got transmission?" So there was always a little bit of danger about this area.

However, as I calmed down and became more reflective about this, I spoke to Shifu very precisely about what is required of a Dharma heir. Firstly, of course, is "seeing the

nature," but secondly you have to know the Dharma well enough to teach it, thirdly you have to have a group of people who will listen to you, and lastly you have to have a place in which to teach. Actually, I fulfilled all those criteria, and that was Shifu's reasoning for passing it to me.

I decided that, unworthy though I might be, I should try and fulfil Shifu's request, because I felt great confidence in Shifu—maybe Shifu could see things in me that I couldn't see in myself, and if so I'll give it a go and see if I can do it. Since that time, I've been trying to convey Shifu's teachings in England, and later also in elsewhere in Europe. Later on, Simon Child also received transmission from Shifu, so I had a friend, another Dharma Heir, with whom I can consult, and he and I work together very well.

Chan in no-seeking, finding the original face

The truth is that when Shifu's teachings started coming to England, many people were already interested in Zen, but there were a great many mistakes being

made, and perhaps the most important mistake was that everybody thought that Zen was a kind of gallop towards getting enlightenment.

The Western mind is very individualistic, and so "achievement" is what everybody wants: you want to achieve your driving test, you want to achieve at University, and you want to achieve in business—you want to make a lot of money, you want to have a lot of letters after your name, and some people tended to think they wanted the letter "E" for Enlightenment at the end of their list of names. Achievement became something important, and when many Westerners learnt about Zen, they set about trying to "achieve" enlightenment, which was a very egotistical way of proceeding.

They had been influenced in that way by the teachings of the great Japanese Master Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki. We owe a lot to Daisetz Suzuki—he was the first person to bring Zen to the West, but he was of the Rinzai sect, and therefore emphasised the enlightenment experience very strongly. That was what made Westerners very enthusiastic

about Zen, but it was rather a false excitement about trying to find this mysterious "thing" called enlightenment.

When Shifu came to England, I remember on the first retreat with us, the very first day, he said, "Maybe you expect me to have brought you enlightenment. I'm afraid you're mistaken—I've come to show you just how your minds are very confused." So everybody was "um?" [a little taken-aback] But that was precisely the kind of teaching which was needed.

It's not that there is no enlightenment experience; of course there are enlightenment experiences—"seeing the nature"—but it's not attained by seeking an achievement. Shifu's teachings were very clear on that point, and began to clarify the nature of Zen. Shifu was not the only teacher in the West who was doing that, and the Japanese Soto tradition is not so strong in stressing the enlightenment experiences as Rinzai, so there was already a movement which was beginning to correct this understanding about Zen amongst Westerners.

Also, many people in the West felt that Zen was all about having an experience. They weren't particularly worried about the teachings which lay behind those experiences; they were very poor on the philosophy. In fact some of the Japanese masters had even granted a Mastership to Christian priests. This is very strange. A Christian priest may have a very powerful and wonderful experience, but they don't abandon their teachings and discover what the true Buddhist teachings are. The fundamental teaching in the Dharma is the Buddha's principle of co-dependent arising, or *pratityasamutpada*, which presents a holistic, not a dualistic, view to the world, and it is this holistic approach that is so important to convey at a philosophical level for Westerners.

Buddhism still remains a minority interest in the West, but it's amazing how Buddhism is spreading. In Britain now every city has several different kinds of Buddhist institution. Many of them are Theravada, and are a sort of Westernised version, which is sometimes quite good, but sometimes either too intellectual or too simplistic. Tibetans are also very strong and they have

some very good Dharma centers.

Chinese Chan Buddhism is perhaps not as common as the other, and there is a good reason for that: Chan makes a demand on those who want to practise. You cannot practise Chan without seriously wanting to understand what a practise is, to undertake a discipline, and to confront your own egotistic selfishness. It must be said that Shifu's impact on the West as a whole is quite small, but within the field of serious Buddhist practitioners he's made a very considerable impact. For example, I think many people who come on our retreats find them among the best retreats they can go to—the most serious retreats. Our Western Chan Fellowship, a registered charity that teaches Chan, and, more generally, Zen, has gradually grown and become more effective. We have small little groups in many cities; we also have two groups in Europe outside Britain. Generally, I can say that the Western Chan Fellowship is actually flourishing.

In that sense Shifu has made a big impact on what I would call really serious Buddhism, and that is Buddhism

that really asks the same questions as the Buddha did: What is being? What is the cause of suffering? What is co-dependent arising, and the failure to understand it? What about ignorance? These are serious, really serious Buddhist questions. The teachings of Shifu have made a considerable impact amongst those who wish to take up those challenges.

A holistic moment in accord with the Dharma as a whole

We have to realise that in the West there is no cultural background for Chan. In China, in Japan and in Taiwan and Korea, children are brought up in families which, even if they're mainly Confucian, still have a good understanding of the relationship between Buddhism and Confucianism and Daoism—it's in their culture. There's none of that in the West because the culture is primarily Christian. Christianity has many excellent features, focussing on poverty, on kindness, on doing good deeds for others—all of these being very excellent qualities, but the problem philosophically with Christianity is that it's

dualistic: there's Man and there's God; there's Heaven and there's Hell. The characteristic Western way of thinking is like that, even in philosophy and science.

In the Eastern view, in the Chinese cultural sphere, in all areas of Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism is not a dualistic philosophy; it's a philosophy which, to use our Western word, is holistic—it tries to picture the relationships in the world as part of a whole. These teachings are very clear in the teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha himself, and are very well developed in Chinese Huayan philosophy also.

So the question is how to present these very important ideas in the West, against the cultural tendency which is very much the opposite direction. The answer is that we have to proceed in two ways. The first is to give people an experience of what a holistic moment, a moment of complete being, might be like. When you practice meditation the mind becomes calm and one-pointed, and for many people, they can experience something that Shifu calls the One-Mind experience, which is a feeling

of being at one with the world. This is, on the whole, very different from much of Western viewpoints. It does relate rather well to some Western ideas of what you might call nature-mysticism, a bit like Daoism. Within the Western tradition there's a lot of poetry about the relationship with nature. The famous poet Wordsworth is a good example. Some of Wordsworth's poems really suggest that he knew what a One-Mind experience of nature was. So there is a tradition, a rather naturalistic tradition, which links with Chan, in the West. That's probably one of the main things.

In addition, now we're trying to teach the Dharma of the holistic view, and that's quite different. We're having to train ourselves to teach the Dharma, not only the fundamental ideas of the Buddha, but also particularly *prajnaparamita* and the sutras related to that—the *Lankavatara Sutra*, the *Diamond Sutra*, and the *Heart Sutra*—and then on to some of the Chinese interpretations of Huayan. This line of philosophical thinking presents a very profound picture of a holistic way of viewing the world, and interestingly enough, also relates to certain modern Western philosophies, for example Heidegger, a very famous German

philosopher, who talks a lot about "being," and many of his ideas are similar to those of the Dharma. Stephen Bachelor, a Buddhist philosopher and a friend of mine, has written a book relating these two.

It's very important that Buddhist ideas should spread in the West. It's not particularly easy though, because the tendency of the West is highly individualistic and highly dualistic. I myself have just written a book about this. The book is *World Crisis and Buddhist Humanism*, and my main position in that is that the world-view, the way in which we view the world, needs to change if we are to solve all these ecological problems, and Buddhist holistic thinking can make a very big contribution to that change.

Insightful interactions between the teacher and disciple

I have shared with Shifu many wonderful moments in interviews, when there has been very "eye-to-eye" understanding, not only intellectual but also heart-understanding. One time when he and I were talking

about insight, he called some monks over and said, "Listen to this. John is saying something. I don't know what it is he's saying because it's in English, but I know he is right." Very strange!

Very often in my experience of Shifu there were these two things: he could be very supportive, and we got on very well in interviews and so on; but he could also be very challenging. On one occasion I was cleaning the bathroom (it was my job, at the Meditation Center in Elmhurst), and I thought the job was well done—it was very nice and clean. In came Shifu and he said, "It's dirty! It's filthy! It's no good at all! Very bad—it's awful!" And he walked out. I got very cross: "What's Shifu doing? It's perfectly clean!" I had a good look around—nothing wrong with it at all. So I was really quite cross with Shifu, thinking, "What a grumpy old man!"

Then I thought, "Hey, what's happening here? Why am I getting upset? This is Shifu teaching something to me. What is he teaching? He's teaching me to manage a challenge with equanimity." So whether Shifu was right

about the bathroom or not was not important. I then made a vow, that whatever Shifu said to me, critical or helpful, all I had to do was sustain my practice. This was a great teaching from Shifu, but I would not have learnt it if he hadn't challenged me, which he did several times. Living with a Chan master is not easy—it's very challenging!

There' another story. After one retreat in England, I took Shifu to London. We walked around London and were having a very jovial time. Shifu was very relaxed. He liked London; I took him to the museums. We weren't talking about the Dharma, we weren't training or anything; we were just friends, and I was showing him London—I was his guide. It was a very happy, easy time. We were walking in Westminster Square, and there's a huge amount of traffic there. I noticed that in the middle of the road was a pile of horse shit—globules of horse shit—very neat and tidy. I had a kind of glimmering that this was a Chan problem—how could this pile of shit continue to be so beautifully arranged with all the cars going by? So I said to Shifu, "Shifu, look! A pile of horseshit! But where is the horse?" Shifu looked at me and said, "What need have we

of the horse?"

A good koan story!

Aspiring to advocate Chan teaching in the west

The Western Chan Fellowship began as the Bristol Chan Group. This was because the first people who went on retreat with Shifu in England were nearly all from the city of Bristol, and after the retreat there were five of us who said, "We must form a society for the practice of Shifu's Chan teaching," and they also asked me to be the leader, the teacher, of that group. So it began as a very small group in the city of Bristol. We began publishing a journal called the New Chan Forum, and gradually it began to expand. We got more people, we ran more retreats, until we realised that we needed to go nation-wide. So we created a charity—we took on charitable status, which is a status in law—and we became a national institution, called the Western Chan Fellowship.

The Western Chan Fellowship specialises in intensive

retreats. I have a small farmhouse hidden in the mountains in Wales—a very beautiful, remote, but rather primitive place. There is no electricity, and no central heating. We have wooden fires, and it has lamps for lighting. It's a very difficult place to live, but that's very good for Chan, because you have to learn to work. If you want heat, you have to work; if you want food, you have to cook; if you want light, you have to know how to work the lamps. So it is very good for practice of awareness.

We have different small groups, all the way around Britain, these are small meditation groups, and they are always led by somebody. We also have some similar groups in Warsaw and in Oslo, and I personally have also done retreats in Berlin, and in St. Petersburg, and, together with Zarko Andricevic in Croatia, so we are very active.

Our main practice is intensive retreats, but there's a problem there. The problem is what people do between intensive retreats, because they lose it. They lose it, and all the problems come back, so we're now beginning very seriously to think about how to teach people a way of

sustaining mindfulness in everyday life. We haven't yet managed to find the best form of teaching, but we are now studying that issue, without giving up our intensive retreats which we keep running. That is basically what the Western Chan Fellowship is, in spirit, and it's fundamentally based on Shifu's teachings, and especially on the Silent Illumination teachings.

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