

ENCOUNTERS
with Master
Sheng Yen Ⅸ

Encounters with Master Sheng Yen IX

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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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Strengthening Our Lives through Our Vows

Nancy Bonardi

*When I heard him say that,
another piece of encouragement came to mind:
Over the many retreats I attended,
I took time to notice that,
as Shifu was winding down his evening lecture and
people were starting to shift on their cushions,
he often added one more sentence—quiet and subtle:
“Become like little Shifus,” he told us once.
He taught us to strengthen our lives through our vows
and through our faith in him and in the Three Jewels.*

Introducing the Speaker

Nancy Bonardi

Nancy Bonardi was one of the earliest students of Master Sheng Yen when he first arrived in New York towards the end of 1975. Shen Jiazhen of the Buddhist Association of the United States arranged the Master to take English lessons, and Nancy Bonardi was his English teacher. Starting from 1978, she became the Master's meditation student, and later served as secretary for the Chan Meditation Center. Now a board member at CMC, Nancy also teaches beginners' classes for Chan practice.

From a journal I kept in 1978, I made this entry on May 12: “I started a Zen meditation course in the Bronx...I hope I get something out of this...”

From English teacher to meditation student

Little could I foresee that by attending Shifu’s beginners’ class that my life would be transformed in a profound way. I had met him at Cambridge School, which offered courses in English to people from all parts of the world. It was the first time I encountered a Buddhist monk. Most every day, staff and students met in the lounge and chatted during the mid-morning break. Shifu was often the focus of attention—for his robes and for his friendly demeanor. He told us that he taught meditation classes, and he invited all to attend. In fact, when I taught him in a Level 6 class, all his classmates and I traveled up to the Bronx to visit the Temple of Enlightenment. While not knowing the right etiquette for addressing a monk, I sensed it was not proper calling him ‘Sheng Yen’ as it was written on the class list. So I asked him what we should

call him. The next day he came to school with ‘Reverend’ written on a piece of paper. It wasn’t until I actively studied with him, did I know to call him Shifu.

In my journal, I added that after visiting the temple and after listening to Shifu describe Buddhism, I didn’t think I could ever achieve a deep commitment, but I was very happy to help with his mission to learn English. Shortly after that, I took his basic classes, and the English student became my teacher, and this English teacher became a meditation student.

Right from the start, I realized it was a blessing studying with him. Even though I didn’t know Shifu very well and all that he represented, I was keen enough to realize his value. And right from the start, I observed that he showed great patience and availability for all his students.

I continued to attend his Saturday lectures and took the intermediate classes. Shifu offered tea and short talks to encourage us in our lives. He was readily generous with his time to help us with our problems and challenges.

Learning to smile like a Buddha or bodhisattva

In early 1979 I got married, and my husband and I moved to Jackson Heights, Queens. It was around then that Shifu was looking for a place to set up his own center, and by coincidence he found an apartment in Woodside, a mile from where I lived. It was then that the Chung-Hwa Institute of Buddhist Culture was first incorporated, although it was later called the Chan Meditation Center. By that time, Shifu was no longer attending school, so we arranged that I would tutor him. I met him once or twice a week, and we worked on his English skills. He could understand a lot, yet had difficulty speaking fluently. I always felt remorse that I could have encouraged him better, and worked harder with him; but by that time his responsibilities were growing. He returned to Taiwan every three months, alternating between Taipei and New York City.

With the support of generous donors, Shifu bought a small building in Elmhurst, Queens, which he renovated

with the help of his students. It became the first Chan Meditation Center, where he held retreats at least four times a year. He also led Wednesday classes and Sunday Open House. He was lecturing at local universities and meditation centers.

In the late fall, I was expecting a baby, and became apprehensive about the actual birth. During one of our tutoring sessions, I asked Shifu if there was a method I could use to reduce pain. His response: “Use the smile method.” I was taken aback. How could smiling help with childbirth? But I have to admit, while I don’t remember trying it at the time my daughter was born, I have used that method countless times in my life, and Shifu was right: it softens the pain of suffering. Once during a retreat, Shifu started his lecture by saying that when he looked at our faces, he saw strain and tension. He pointed to the statue behind him and told us to look at the smile and ease on the Buddha’s face. He reminded us to keep a gentle smile also.

Doing even mundane tasks with focus is practice

In 1980, during a meeting, he looked in my direction and said that I should take the minutes, thereby making me the secretary, a position I still hold. Every time Shifu came back from Taiwan, we held a meeting; and before he left three months latter, we held a meeting. Every June, we also had our Annual Membership Meeting, which lasted all day. We elected new board members, and we were given job assignments such as who would be in charge of accounting; car maintenance; mailing lists and publications—to name a few. Volunteers were vital at that time as they are now because there was no permanent staff. In fact, at a certain period, for a very short time, when Shifu was in Taiwan, the Center was empty. He offered to hire me so that I could go there to respond to phone messages, pay bills and keep up with the newsletter. Since CMC was a walking distance from my apartment, it was easy enough to do. I went every few days to take care of matters and wrote to Shifu with updates. Eventually, different volunteers stayed at the Center, and luckily, Guo

Yuan Fashi began living there as the head monk in Shifu's absence. I can recall that twice in the early 1980s, I was working with Shifu, and on one occasion we ate lunch together. Those were rare chances to observe him and chat about the practice. Of course as a beginner, I had trouble with the method, and he reminded me that with time, little by little, the method would become more natural. Once we were folding newsletters, and he made sure that the edges were perfectly aligned. I was somewhat careful, but I did end up redoing some of my work because he was watching, and I realized the value of doing even mundane tasks with focus.

Practicing ourselves to deserve the name “human”

Retreats were held every November, December, May and June. I attended my first one in the spring of 1979. In an interview, Shifu gave me the Three Refuges, and that was the second most profound turning point in my life. Once again, I recognized that something important had happened, and yet I was ‘unripened’ in the practice

to know what it meant. As all of us who attended his retreats know, his talks were always direct and uplifting. His compassion encouraged us to be brave as we faced ourselves. Particularly during those early retreats, he had us do repentance prostrations. He pointed out that many of us were sorry for ourselves because we felt unduly treated and insulted by others. This was all the result of karma, and we must face it. He continued, “If we hope to be human beings, truly, we’ve got to get rid of the black, dirty demons in our mind. No Buddha had hate or anger or greed in his mind. We must deserve to be called humans and not just wear the skin of humans. Through our repentance we must want to change to be clean. If we admit to ourselves that we have vexations and obstructions, then we can remove them and transform them into wisdom.”

Also in the early 80s, Shifu started a teacher-training class on Wednesday evenings with the plan that teaching beginners would be carried out by his lay students. Shifu told us, “It’s our spirit that must instruct and not just our words...we must have genuine interest in the practice so that the students will get something from it.” He pointed

out that if we truly wished to help people, we must practice doubly hard.

In fact, that series of Wednesday classes continued for many years. I have a notebook with entries from the 80s to 1994. The Wednesday class was changed to Friday nights, and in 1998, a more formal teacher training class was run by Shifu, Guo Yuan Fashi, and Guo Gu Fashi. Those in the program were trained, tested, required to audit the monastics' beginners' and intermediate classes, and pass final exams. I completed the program in 1999 along with three other lay students. A couple of years later, I was teaching a beginners' class at CMC, and as Shifu passed through the Chan Hall on the way to the basement, he paused and watched me for a moment and nodded. I felt so pleased to play a part in his vision and vows to spread Dharma in the West.

Founding the Retreat Center, friendly to the neighborhood

In 1997, he and his monastics finally found a retreat

center in Pine Bush, New York. Shifu was determined to find such a place, and his 20-year search was our great lesson in patience and acceptance in causes and conditions. Shifu recognized that they didn't have much manpower for many years, yet he persevered to find a suitable place for practitioners to attend retreats. CMC had become much too small. When he conducted retreats at the Dharma Drum Retreat Center, over 100 people attended, all with the help of his monastics and sincere volunteers. The renovations were costly, and there were initial problems with contractors, neighbors, local ordinances; and yet steadily, these problems were solved. Because DDRC was a non-profit organization and exempt from taxes, Shifu made sure that the local police and fire departments received donations. Neighbors were invited in for tea and tours, so that they could feel more comfortable about a meditation center in their area.

Again, in Shifu's absence, Guo Yuan Fashi was the abbot of both CMC and DDRC, often driving back and forth—about 2 hours each way. However, it was decided that a director was to be hired to run the Retreat Center.

After one such position was filled and then vacated, I received a call from Shifu the night before Thanksgiving in 2001. He asked me if I would consider being the director of DDRC. I was stunned because, as a teacher, I was not qualified to deal with the challenges facing the lawyers, contractors, and builders. I was living in Connecticut by that time, I was single again, and my daughter was away at college. I talked it over with friends and family; I thought long and hard about it. I knew it would be a rough job, and I didn't want to disappoint Shifu, but in the end, I didn't accept it.

When I spoke to Shifu, I said, "I can't take the job full-time, but I can give you my summers." So, in 2002 and 2003, I lived up at the Retreat Center as a volunteer. Eventually, a more capable person was hired, and he solved the problems with contractors and had the dormitories built. In 2006, a monastic ran the Center, and many positive results took place. In 2008, when Guo Xing Fashi and Chang Wen Fashi became the monastics in residence, they created a stronger, lasting stability. I should add that Buffe Laffey was a consistent staff member for DDRC as well.

One last blessing from Shifu: “Become like little Shifus!”

Steadily I continued with my practice. I attended retreats every year, taught beginners’ classes at CMC and other locations. I saw Shifu in group interviews, and occasionally I met him in the hallway of DDRC or in a meeting at CMC for a quick, quiet greeting. Many years ago, a long-time practitioner gave all of us advice, “Any time there is a break during the retreat, stay in the Chan Hall; that is where the energy is.” I was attending the summer retreat in 2005. During the last afternoon, we were told we could meditate or walk the grounds. I decided to stay in the Hall and practice walking meditation. Fortunately for me I did. Shifu walked up to me and gestured to go to the interview room. Not knowing it at the time, five of us had our final interview with him. It was more of a friendly chat, and yet it was a gift to receive his blessings and attention.

In November 2006, Shifu made his last trip to New York to lead the Fourth Transmission of the Bodhisattva

Precepts Ceremony at DDRC. By then he had been receiving dialysis, and we marveled that he had the strength to carry on. His monastics trained us for three days; there were so many participants that many of us had to stay in hotels in town. On the day of the ceremony, the clouds covered the sky; at the moment the vows were given, the sun appeared, a moment that touched all our hearts. Shifu certainly embodied great sacrifice for all of us. When the event had ended, people started packing up to leave. A participant needed to call a cab to go back to the hotel in Pine Bush. I overheard that and offered to take him since it was only 10 minutes away. By lucky chance, as I approached my car in the parking lot, Shifu was passing by with his attendant. I prostrated and told Shifu that I prayed for him and said “Thank you” to him every single day. He thanked me and continued walking. It was our last one-on-one exchange.

In the summer of 2008, Guo Gu had organized a trip for us to visit Shifu in Taiwan at Dharma Drum Mountain. Shifu talked to us about transmission, which he said was the “Passing on of responsibility, of carrying

out the mission of benefitting sentient beings through Buddhadharma.” He encouraged us individually to continue serving the Dharma and to maintain all our vows for the spreading of Chan Buddhism. When I heard him say that, another piece of encouragement came to mind: Over the many retreats I attended, I took time to notice that, as Shifu was winding down his evening lecture and people were starting to shift on their cushions, he often added one more sentence—quiet and subtle: “Become like little Shifus,” he told us once. He taught us to strengthen our lives through our vows and through our faith in him and in the Three Jewels.

Aligned in Aspirations while being Spiritually Independent

Ernest Heau

And yet it is not so easy for me to define, other than to suggest that this means one's aspirations on the path should align with that of the teacher, without the teacher having to point out every step of their common journey together.

So while there is unity and affinity between master and disciple,

they are still responsible for each other yet independent.

At least that would be true when the student reaches a point of maturity where he or she no longer needs to be coaxed or cajoled, or even praised and promoted.

Introducing the Speaker

Ernest Heau

In search of the meaning of life starting from high school, Ernest Heau decided to major in philosophy in college, and later walked into the Temple of Enlightenment in 1978, becoming one of Master Sheng Yen's earliest disciples when he was teaching Chan practice in the USA. As the Master was committed to using the printed word as part of his expedient means to spread the Dharma, Heau has contributed significantly in editing his writings for the use of English speaking readers. A long-time editor for the Dharma Drum Publications, he is still helping promote Master Sheng Yen's teachings on Buddhist practice through his editing efforts.

Early Searches for the Meaning of Existence

As an ethnic Chinese born in America (Hawaii) of immigrant grandparents from Guangdong, China, I had no particular spiritual orientation growing up, although I ultimately became a baptized Catholic because I went to a Catholic high school. I went to that school not because it was Catholic, but because it was the best college preparatory school in Honolulu that we could afford. And so did my elder brother, who himself became a Catholic. So in a real sense, I became an “accidental Catholic” because I was surrounded by Catholic friars, priests, and students, and becoming one of them seemed like a natural step. On the positive side, being a Catholic gave me a sense of spirituality in which, as a confused and often frustrated teenager, I could take comfort. Whatever doubts I had about religion was set aside for practical reasons: it made me feel better about myself.

However, by the end of my freshman year of college, I had given up Catholicism because I could no longer

subscribe to its tenets, though my admiration for Jesus as a teacher continues to this day. As a major in philosophy, the loss of my religion was replaced by a lot of study in metaphysics, and my search for something that could explain reality in a way that made sense to me. The closest I got to finding answers to my questions was in the so-called “process philosophy” of Alfred North Whitehead, an English professor of mathematics. To simplify it greatly, Whitehead saw the universe as an immense organism in which everything within it participated in an ongoing, ever-changing process of evolving consciousness.

One of Whitehead’s most pithy observations about reality could be something a devotee of the Huayan School of Buddhism might say: “In a certain sense, everything is everywhere at all times. For every location involves an aspect of itself in every other location. Thus every spatial-temporal standpoint mirrors the world.” To me that made sense, and I was thrilled to learn later that the *Flower Ornament (Avatamsaka) Sutra* has a view of the buddha realms that is something like that. However, at that time whether that idea had anything to do with Buddhism was

furthest from my mind.

Despite my belief in Whitehead's process philosophy, I did nothing with it since my priorities had turned to supporting a family, as I had a wife and child on the way. So I left graduate school to become a computer programmer for IBM. And thus I continued for nearly a decade being the father of two girls, until I had a fateful and only encounter with the psychedelic drug LSD, during which I became acutely aware that the world we perceive with our physical eyes was only a partial truth, and that there was another way to perceive the world that was closer to reality, although somewhat frightening in its strangeness. But what I did witness was a world characterized by "process"—an ongoing, fluctuating reality, a world in which absolutely nothing stood still, even for second. What I learned was that the world we perceive with our ordinary senses is not in itself the true world, but just a portal to a truer reality.

Seeking a Spiritual Path

Even so, my life as a family man was totally secular

and mundane, supporting a family, putting food on the table, educating two growing girls, and taking an occasional family vacation. When my daughters were in their young teens, their mother died unexpectedly, and I became a single parent, spiritually adrift in an unpredictable world.

At some point, I became attracted to Daoism, since while in college I had studied Taijiquan. In Laozi's *Dao De Jing*, I also found echoes and hints of Whitehead's process philosophy, but also that it espoused *wuwei*, the concept of virtuous non-action. Daoism also promised that one could attain spirituality by unifying with cosmic reality directly through cultivation. It was an attractive idea indeed.

So, at that time I resumed my practice of Taiji, and found a Korean master where I lived in Lower Manhattan, who also presented himself as a master of Qigong. As a result I became involved in the dual cultivation of Taiji and extremely intensive Qigong. He encouraged his students to make a maximum effort to release and liberate their *qi* channels to transcend one's ordinary bodily limitations.

The Qigong cultivation involved both standing exercises and sitting meditation, the latter being the most intensive and rigorous.

After several weeks of this intensive practice at home, while sitting one day I suddenly felt a sudden surge of hot energy rising from the base of my spine all the way to the top of my skull. It was at once exhilarating and frightening. Being at home alone, it was also alarming, but when I later reported it to my teacher, he simply said, “Keep practicing.”

I had no prior experience of suddenly releasing so much qi, much less knowing how to control or use it. My disorientation and mental instability at that time was such that, working as a software consultant, it was very difficult to focus on my work, and commuting on the subway was a nightmare of confusion and paranoid thoughts. So many strange people! My mind / body was in a mess. To make a long story short, I stopped practicing Qigong, and also stopped attending this master’s classes. My main task was to find some way of coming back safely down to earth.

One night, still in a fog of despair, while on my bed listening to a classical music station, my eyes fell on an object across the bedroom—one of my late wife’s mementos. It was a small white ceramic hand from a broken Japanese kabuki-style doll, mounted on a wooden pedestal, facing me with an open palm. All of sudden, the word “Buddha” popped into my mind. And with that I breathed a sigh of relief...I had finally found the path I was looking for.

Entering the Buddhist Path

As one who considered himself well-informed and a student of philosophy, I knew a little bit about Zen, which had become popular in the United States. I had a couple of small books by Dr. D.T. Suzuki, and a few popular books about Zen koans. But I had never given it thought as a path for myself, probably because I doubted my own capacity for the discipline and austerity that Zen required. But now Buddhism, or at least the idea of it, was to be my path back to sanity and my task was to find a way to become engaged.

For spiritual seekers New York is a kind of paradise. Anything you desire in the way of spiritual practice, you can find in New York. Thus, I was able to visit some Zen centers to attend meditation sessions, but did not find a teacher of whom I could say, “This is the teacher I am looking for.” On the face of it, this is a strange thing to say: How do you recognize your teacher if and when you meet him or her? At that time, this was not a question I could answer.

Eventually I heard about a Black Hat ceremony that was going to be held in New York by the Sixteenth Karmapa, leader of the Tibetan Kagyu sect, which I attended and was much impressed with. With that bit of inspiration I found—amazingly—a Tibetan practice center called Dharmadhatu, within walking distance from my apartment. It was established by the enigmatic Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche though I never saw him there. As a beginner, my practice was *samatha* (following the breath), and I was greatly motivated to practice hard. I also attended my first one-week meditation retreat with that group in Vermont.

One limiting factor I found at Dharmadhatu was that I had no personal access to a teacher with authentic Tibetan training and credentials. My meditation instructor was in fact, a young American who was very nice, though just a few years from beginning Buddhist practice himself. Nor had he completed the preliminaries to be admitted to the full Vajrayana practice. From an admittedly selfish (and somewhat arrogant) point of view, I felt there was not much more I was going to learn from him after two years of steady practice and meeting some nice people.

Now this may sound like a cliché, but at this time I had some small residue of good karma that intervened. I happened to develop a nice friendship with a fellow student at the center, a young lady named Bonnie, who was a student of modern dance. I expressed to her the doubts I had, which she confessed she also had. But then she told me that her calligraphy teacher, a Chinese woman from Taiwan, knew a Chinese Zen master who had recently arrived from Taiwan. And furthermore, that he had a meditation class for Westerners in a temple in the Bronx section of New York! It took me less than ten seconds

to ask her to find out how and where I could meet this teacher. Within a week she gave me the name and address of a Master Sheng Yen, who was holding Saturday morning meditation classes at the Temple of Enlightenment in the Bronx section of New York. At that moment, I breathed a deep sigh of relief, and was determined to meet this Chinese master.

First Encounter with Master Sheng Yen

Around this time, every Saturday morning I would drive up to a small airport in upstate New York in the foothills of Shawangunk Mountain (on whose other side is now the Dharma Drum Retreat Center!) to take flying lessons—as a sport, not to become a professional pilot. The very next Saturday morning after my flying lesson, I drove to the Bronx and performed a small miracle—I actually found the Temple of Enlightenment! (It is easy to get lost in the Bronx.) It was a small single-story building with a stucco façade, with bold, golden Chinese and English lettering over a wonderful moon gate.

And just as I approached the entrance, a thin bespectacled Chinese monk in a brown robe appeared at the door. Of course I had never been there before, but without a doubt in my mind, I knew this was Master Sheng Yen. He looked directly at me with a friendly, welcoming expression. I introduced myself, offering my hand. He returned the gesture, looking at me directly in the eyes. At that instant, I knew that this was going to be my Buddhism teacher. With that he welcomed me in, and without further ado I joined his class of meditation students.

For about two years, Shifu and his class remained at the Temple of Enlightenment, faithfully following their new and beloved Chan master. My memories of that period are mostly colored by a sense of excitement and adventure, a strongly held belief that this monk from Taiwan was brilliant, authentic and convincing, and that by some miracle, I was not only studying with him but also finding small ways to help him spread the Dharma. It would not at all be demeaning to call this period “lots of fun,” as we were a happy little group. This was something I had never experienced before, and it was a revelation and inspiration

that thrives to this day. It is also the way many others felt, and among them are some of my closest friends today.

Founding of the Chan Meditation Center

By 1979 the meditation class at the Temple of Enlightenment was outgrowing the accommodations there, so Shifu decided to resign as abbot to start his own practice center. For a few weeks, his meditation class met at my small loft apartment in Lower Manhattan, and then he soon found a small apartment in Woodside in Queens, where he established the first Chan Meditation Center. A detailed history of the founding of CMC can be found elsewhere, but a fond memory was of Shifu asking Dan Stevenson (now a professor at Kansas State University) and me to help him draft the by-laws for his new center. Needless to say, Dan and I had only the vaguest idea how to do that, but between the three of us, we wrote the by-laws for what became the Chung-hwa Institute of Buddhist Culture, otherwise known as the Chan Meditation Center. It was a beautiful day outside and the sun poured into the living room as we three sat around a

coffee table, signing the papers of incorporation and the by-laws.

Beginning of Dharma Drum Publications

From the very first days with Shifu, I was aware that he was strongly committed to using the printed word as part of his expedient means to spread the Dharma. Almost without exception Shifu would have people who would record and transcribe his talks, including the ones from the Saturday morning class, as well as talks given on retreat. And of course, his remarks were translated concurrently in English. Almost exactly around the time I arrived, the first issue of *Chan Magazine* was published (I still have it). He had established it only a year after he gave his first meditation class to a group of Americans and Chinese students. At that time, the regular group was less than thirty people, so anyone who had any kind of transcribing, editing, or artistic skills was invited to become part of *Chan Magazine*. Naturally, I threw in my two cents worth of talent, but in the process also attracted Shifu's attention as someone who was willing to do some editing.

Of course, Shifu's commitment to publishing Dharma should not come as a surprise, since one of his first tasks from his mentor, Master Dong Chu in Taiwan, was to edit the monthly journal of Chinese Buddhism, *Humanity Magazine*. So we can see that for Shifu, the die was cast early in his career: Publishing was for him a principal expedient means for sharing the Chan Buddhism's very special teachings of Buddhadharma.

By the second year of the founding of the Chan Meditation Center, having already Chan Magazine earlier, Shifu now created the *Chan Newsletter*, which came out monthly, containing his Dharma lectures as well as current news on activities at the Center. It was clear that Shifu's intent to propagate Buddhadharma in general and Chan Buddhism in particular, was in place and functioning well.

Sometime in 1981 Shifu asked Sramanerika Guo Hsien, who was an American disciple, and me to join him in a meeting. At this meeting he told us that he wanted to publish his first book in English, and that he was tasking us with the project. The book was to be a compilation of

Dharma lectures from his Chan retreat in the US, as well as meditation classes. Considering that we were already publishing two journals, I was not too surprised that he would now look towards publishing books.

That the two of us were being tasked to do this was also not too surprising, because we were already involved with editing activity. But the downside was that neither of us had ever published a book before! People say “ignorance is bliss,” and this was true for us, because we had no idea what kinds of problems lay ahead. That Shifu trusted us to carry out the task meant that failure was not an option.

To skip over the details, with the collection of Dharma lectures he had chosen for the book and with no other instructions than to publish them, we produced a manuscript called *Getting the Buddha Mind*. But as the saying goes: “What next?” Clearly what was next was to find a publisher, but how to find a publisher was something we knew nothing about. Even so, we did make some feeble attempts to contact publishers, but there was absolutely no interest. Not because the book was not worthy of

being published, but because as amateurs, we had no idea how to approach and convince publishers to evaluate the manuscript.

At some point, we concluded that perhaps the best way to do this was to publish the book ourselves! (Yes, in this case, ignorance is bliss!) With that crazy idea in mind, we approached Shifu, explained our quandary, and suggested that we publish it ourselves. If memory serves me, there was not even any extended discussion about how to do it, or how much it would cost. He just said, “OK, do it,” or words to that effect. It so happened that we discussed our situation with a fellow disciple, Nancy Bonardi, who was helping us with transcribing. She said that she had a friend who owns a small printing firm, and he could probably handle the job. So the next task was to get an estimate on what it would cost. When we told Shifu the cost (I do not remember the number), there was no hesitation—he approved the project.

Once it was decided that Shifu would self-publish *Getting the Buddha Mind*, there was the question of whether

the book should be published under its own imprint. Its own imprint? The idea of an imprint for one small self-published book would seem audacious, if not pretentious. But it was also a kind of wish for better things to come, a prophecy that other books by Shifu would be forthcoming, as history indeed proves they were. So, we needed an imprint name. Little did we realize that the idea for an imprint name was right in the book itself! It was merely waiting for us to discover it. It comes from the chapter in which Shifu comments on Master Hongzhi Zhengjue's verse, "Silent Illumination" (*Mo Chao Ming*). In approximately the middle of the poem are the following lines:

*Drink the medicine of correct views,
Beat the poison-smeared drum,
When silence and illumination are complete
Killing and bringing to life are choices I make.*

In his commentary on these lines, Shifu says: "To drink the medicine of correct views is to infuse oneself with the Dharma; to beat the poison-smeared drum is to help sentient beings kill delusion and vexation. (In

Indian mythology, a drum smeared with a certain poison could kill enemies who hear the drum, even from a great distance.) Yet while compassion and helping exist, there is no sense of saving sentient beings.”

So what is this “poison-smeared drum” that Master Hongzhi refers to, if not a drum that broadcasts the Dharma so that all sentient beings may hear it and be transformed from ignorance to illumination—in other words, a “Dharma drum”? The meeting with Shifu to discuss a name for our new imprint turned out to be a very short: it would be Dharma Drum Publications.

The last step was to find someone to design the book, and with that we scheduled a printing of 2,000 copies of *Getting the Buddha Mind*, Shifu’s first full-length book in English, published in 1982. Since *Getting the Buddha Mind*, some thirty-or-so books in English by Shifu have been published in America, of which twenty-or-so have been published by Dharma Drum Publications. The remaining books were published by Shambhala Publications, North Atlantic Books, and Doubleday. Today, Dharma Drum

Publications still actively publishes Shifu's teachings in English.

Some Lessons on Practice from Shifu Sheng Yen

In December of 1977, while still at the Temple of Enlightenment, Shifu received news that his mentor, Master Dong Chu, had suddenly passed away. This meant that he had to return immediately to Taiwan to take care of the services for his master, but also to ensure an orderly transition for the next abbot of Nung Chan Monastery, himself. Before leaving he wrote a letter to his followers. Now, reading this letter again, I can think of no better summary of what I learned about practice from Shifu, than these few lines excerpted from that letter.

“My physical presence is unimportant; the essential thing is that our minds be in correspondence...My guidance is always with you, as well as my expectations...The most important thing is for our minds to be in harmony with the words...This can only be accomplished through practice...Simply use and

practice the method I have taught you and don't think about how much progress you are making."

– The Chapter “Parting Words,” *Tea Words Volume One*

“The essential thing is that our minds be in correspondence.” This admonition seems to be the heart of the matter when it comes to the relationship between master and disciple. And yet it is not so easy for me to define, other than to suggest that this means one’s aspirations on the path should align with that of the teacher, without the teacher having to point out every step of their common journey together. So while there is unity and affinity between master and disciple, they are still responsible for each other yet independent. At least that would be true when the student reaches a point of maturity where he or she no longer needs to be coaxed or cajoled, or even praised and promoted.

After the Chan Meditation Center was established on Corona Avenue in Queens, Shifu held monthly retreats there. The large hall on the first floor was not ready for

retreats to be held there, so Shifu held his retreats on the second floor, just large enough for about twenty participants. His early morning, daytime, and evening lectures were as usual very powerful and even better, he often sat along with us. One evening my concentration was such that I could no longer contain the energy, which rose up my spine and to the top of my skull—just like my Qigong experience—except that this time instead of it being frightening, I felt an expansive love for all beings. When I described my experience to Shifu, he asked me how I had changed. When I told him, he just quietly said, “This one has died,” turned around, and walked away. It was a comfort to learn that I was free to let go of whomever it was that died, without having to mourn him.

Today, the best way I can succinctly summarize the kind of practice I would like to follow is to cite Bodhidharma’s Four Practices: “Accept retribution, accord with conditions, seek nothing, and follow the Dharma.” I am certain the Shifu would think this is a good practice which would align with his own thoughts. It would be like two people sharing the same map towards a common destination.

For myself I can only say that I fall woefully short of this standard, given the opportunities I have had since entering the Buddhist path. This is also true insofar as I felt helpless to be of more aid and comfort to Shifu in his final years. Still, I do not believe in feeling sorry for myself, but rather to use my shortcomings as a spur to help in ways I can help, and not to waste time and energy in ways I can't help.

Perhaps a good way to see this is to imagine oneself as a child at the seashore building a sandcastle, only to have the next wave knock it down, and to laughingly start another sandcastle, knowing it too will be washed away. That would indeed be a good way to think about it.

Gratitude and Thanks to Shifu Sheng Yen

Like the proverbial blink of an eye, it is already eight years since Shifu Sheng Yen left his mortal body to continue his eternal vow to share Buddhadharma with all sentient beings. As I started this essay I felt a moment of sadness, but I know that he did not want his disciples to dwell in sadness, but rather to renew their own vows.

During his life Shifu said, “The universe may one day perish, yet my vows are eternal.” This vow puts him in the assembly of the great sages like Samantabhadra Bodhisattva who said “...as long as beings exist, as long as karma and suffering exist, so long will my vow remain.” Therefore, it is not hard to imagine that through the power of his vows, Shifu’s transition to a next birth would be indeed brief. In his luminous past lives, he already sowed the causal conditions for buddhahood, and we can imagine there is already a young bodhisattva, full of wisdom and grace, who will one day come forward to speak Master Sheng Yen’s Dharma. To this child, we would offer our heartfelt blessings and highest hopes on behalf of a suffering world, for as long as there will be future generations who inherit Master Sheng Yen’s vow, we will not see the Dharma Ending Age.

From the time I met Shifu in front of the moon gate at the Temple of Enlightenment until his transcendence from this life, seems like a long time. But by the measure of karmic destiny, those years were, as the *Diamond Sutra* says, “...like dreams, illusions, bubbles, and shadows, like

dewdrops and a flash of lightning.” Now, all the wonderful things that happened then still generate opportunities for the future of the Dharma. Those times were blessings, and in behalf of his many followers, I thank Shifu for all his kindnesses to all of us. I wish to express profound gratitude for all his gifts to those who had the good fortune, as I did, to encounter him in their lives.

Following is a verse, which I offer in homage to Shifu Sheng Yen and all the accomplished Buddhist sages of the past, present, and future.

§

Lessons Learned from the Sages

1

From dawn to dusk,
living amidst illusion;
from moonrise to sunrise,
life recedes in dreams.
From minute to minute,
from thought to thought,
reality eludes the absent mind.

2

The real is there before us;
grasp it and it flutters away;
reach out and it vanishes.
Wiser then to pay attention
to the vital breath,
letting it come and go
on its own accord.

3

Within each human heart
there grows a seed:
call it wisdom,
call it compassion—
names are but illusions.
However long it takes.
nurture this seed with every pulse.

4

Seek the teacher outside
and you step into a thicket
sharp with thorns.

Be your own teacher,
you step on a nest of hornets.
Better therefore to seek
the Buddha who lives within.

5

Seek the Buddha within,
you will never find him.
Seek the Buddha without,
he is not there.
Therefore, seek not the Buddha,
seek only to think, speak,
and act as a Buddha would.

6

The sages speak often
of liberation's path,
showing the way
with patience and kindness.
We wander and stumble,
looking for this and that,
not knowing we are already there.

Listen to the sages
then let their words go;
thoughts are like dust in the wind.
Observe the lives of sages,
saving the best as sutras,
growing lotus out of mud,
revealing the wondrous Dharma.

Meeting Shifu

Gilbert Gutierrez

Bodhicitta represents observing the needs of sentient beings through our wisdom and therefore striving to move forward.

Bodhicitta can be developed through our spiritual cultivation.

If the whole society can accept this kind of practice, then the overall situation of our living environment will be improved.

This is the goal of Shifu coming to the west to spread and share the Dharma.

Introducing the Speaker

Gilbert Gutierrez

Gilbert is one of five lay Dharma heirs of Master Sheng Yen, with the Dharma name “Jingjian Chuanhui (‘sword of purity, transmission of wisdom’ 淨劍傳慧).” He first met Master Sheng Yen in 1995 by attending his public Dharma lecture in Los Angeles. An experienced practitioner and long-time participant of Chan meditation retreats, he was given Inka by the Master in 2000, and received the transmission of Dharma Drum Lineage of Chan Buddhism in 2002. He always emphasizes that a Dharma heir has the responsibility to teach Chan by giving correct guidance and practice Chan by acting in accordance with right views regarding the Buddha’s teaching.

The way Shifu and I first met was very interesting and it just so happened that he was seeking a new student around the time I found him. Shifu had come to Los Angeles to give a speech at UCLA and upon hearing this I decided to attend his lecture. Unbeknownst to me, that week he asked a scheduler of his by the name of Li Shu Ping to seek out a Western attorney in Los Angeles. She was puzzled by the thought considering she knew no Westerners much less Western attorneys but accepted nonetheless.

Causes and conditions were such that on that Saturday when my wife and I attended Shifu's lecture, the only remaining seats were a pair directly in front of him despite the fact that we arrived late. It was as if I was sitting across from him at a table. As I listened to him speak I realized that he had answered a question I had not yet asked. What is it that I practiced for? While I could not answer my question yet, I knew at that moment that no one that I had practiced with before had the answer.

I sat and simply meditated while he spoke and once his lecture had finished I opened my eyes to see him flash

me a nod and he smiled a wonderful and touching smile. Though I had not spoken to him yet I feel as though he touched my heart in ways that made conversation unnecessary.

Becoming Shifu's follower following a lecture

With the conclusion of his lecture came a rush of people, each with a question and so I left knowing I would have my chance to talk with him later.

What made Shifu's teachings so extraordinary was true wisdom; and with this profound wisdom came a remarkable simplicity that drew me towards him. Before Shifu I had studied with many other masters and read copious amounts of books regarding the dharma but I had never come across any book or master that could convey a message as clear and mundane as Shifu could.

Around the time I first encountered Shifu I was studying under someone else. However, after hearing

Shifu's first lecture I decided that the following day would be the last day I studied under the previous master.

Interestingly enough, Shifu's scheduler was on her way to the particular person that I studied with to request that he give Master Sheng Yen a treatment. After asking the favor she decided to ask if he knew any Western attorneys.

Much to her delight, he replied, "Yes, one to come in, in ten minutes if you want to wait to see him."

"Of course, I'll wait for him," she replied.

This occurred as I was driving to what would be my final class under that teacher. I walked in the room with this in mind and was greeted by Shifu's scheduler. "I represent Master Sheng Yen, and heard you want to help him!?" she said.

"Of course I will," I replied.

"Wait, I haven't even said, what do you want to help

him, or anything?" she questioned.

"I will follow him. I've already made my decision." I replied confidently.

She was taken aback by my response as she was prepared to face difficulty convincing me to make such a prompt decision.

All I had told her was that I had attended his lecture the previous night and went on to explain that by the time I had arrived at UCLA every seat was filled except for the two in front of him.

Upon completing Shifu's request, she returned to him. "I think I have found the person that you are looking for. He was at your lecture last night." She said.

"Yes, I know, his practice is quite good." He replied.

Though Shifu and I had not spoken he had already spotted me.

Eventually I asked him who those two seats in the front of his first lecture belonged to as it was very unusual that they were not filled. I learned that those were “VIP” seats but while some VIPs missed his lecture, I would like to believe it affirms the belief that a master chooses his students. Resulting from these causes and conditions was our wonderful relationship. I continued on following him in a dedicated manner to learn from his teachings and study Buddhism.

Receiving the Dharma transmission redefined the direction of my life

Shifu taught many lessons outside of a formal Dharma talk and were inspired by his interactions with others.

One story that comes to mind really exemplifies the ideals of the Dharma and how it must require selflessness.

Once I had attended a retreat and on the last day after the retreat I sat with some of my students who had also attended as we had found a number of books that Shifu

had written in a heap on a table. Shifu quietly approached us from behind with his hands behind his back and looked at what we were doing.

I picked up one of his books and pointed to a picture on the back cover, which was of Shifu, and asked:

“Shifu, what do you think of this fellow?”

“Him?” Shifu said, “I don’t know him!” he said with a smile.

It was such a wonderful and appropriate response. While it was humorous it truly exemplified the way that we practice and how we must spread the Dharma in such a selfless way. It had nothing to with Shifu thinking that he, as a person, was passing on the Dharma to the next generation. It was just simply something that needs to be done. We call this “following function” and when one follows function then the things that we do are done without self.

We follow our vows and simply do things for the benefit of all others. While the story is simple and short, it is deep and profound in meaning.

Shifu coming to the States with a goal to spread Chan teachings

I believe sharing the Dharma was something he felt in his heart that he needed to share. Bodhisattva vows are not just something one recites. It must be acted upon to complete a sincere vow.

However, when trying to spread it to a different shore you face difficulty such as when the Buddha-dharma was first spread in China in competition with Taoism and Confucianism. Nevertheless, there was a need for bringing this type of Dharma to China and I believe Shifu felt the same way about spreading the Dharma to the West.

The potential to study the Dharma is prevalent in those living in the West as much as it is in those in the East as exemplified in the classic exchange between Hui-neng

and Hong-ren. Hong-ren once remarked, “I did not know a barbarian from the south had buddha-nature or could practice.”

Hui-neng replied swiftly, “Do we not all have Buddha-nature?”

So the potential is always present but difficulty will always be faced when spreading the Dharma. We should instead focus on recognizing that via wisdom this wonderful training can be spread and if it is taken open-mindedly it can be cultivated.

For Shifu to come to the States was admirable because it is not easy to receive exposure here. He most certainly could have gained more popularity teaching in the Asian countries.

Shifu came teaching “Chan” and not “Zen” and while Western culture had been exposed to Zen before, Chan was new which made Shifu’s goal to teach Chan one of difficulty. However, what Chan had which attracted people

was its soft nature in the way it is practiced. Although it is soft, it is also purposeful and direct.

There are several challenges to spreading Chan Buddhism in the US and the Western worlds.

Three challenges facing the spread of Chan Buddhism in the west

I believe one challenge in spreading Chan to the Western culture is the name of Chan itself. Had Shifu called “Chan” “Zen”, and it certainly would have been erroneous for him to do that, but he would have made faster headway in receiving exposure. Instead by explaining to others that Chan is just an older brother of Zen, people begin to understand and relate to Chan more. The more we speak of Chan, the more people begin to identify with it.

Another difficulty in spreading Chan in the West is that there are already existing beliefs and biases deeply ingrained in Western culture stemming from religions such as Judaism and Christianity. I believe the introduction of Chan in the

East met less resistance as Chan more closely resembled Eastern religions such as Taoism and Confucianism as opposed to the religions that are predominantly practiced in the West. However, should people give Chan a chance, upon listening to it, regardless of religion or background, they can identify with it. It is a result of the universal truth about suffering and the cause of suffering.

Another hindrance in the spreading of Chan is the abundance of options people have when looking for something to practice. Some of these choices serve as a metaphorical version of instant gratification. For instance, if one needs to go from “point A” to “point B” and they quickly stop for a cup of coffee to quickly get their fix before they are off running again. Others may find and seek a feel-good method of practice and want it fed to them like an instant microwavable-meal. In a sense, Westerners are not used to methods of practice that involve truly working but instead leave it to ministers to deliver it to them. Chan is practiced beyond words and phrases, beyond conceptualized ideas. One must investigate and contemplate which may seem foreign to Westerners.

Instead of focusing on gratification, Chan differs in the sense that we start by talking about suffering which some people may fear. The Self does not want to hear about suffering nor does it want to be exposed as the true cause of suffering. It only seeks to hear how “I can become a better person?” and “how can I polish the self?” It is afraid of the practicing of no-self and thus seeks defensive action.

When we look into self and see that is illusory, it presents a challenge to somebody to look deeper and see what is truly there through the Mahayana version of the Four Noble Truths. By doing so, one finds that the practice of the Buddha-dharma is very enriching and filled with deep wisdom. Oftentimes people would rather go to something resembling a weekend seminar to seek some form of false enlightenment; what I like to call a “feel-good” experience in which everyone is hugging those around them when the weekend draws to a close. Unfortunately, with such “enlightenment” they will return to a mundane full of the same pre-existing problems.

Sharing the wisdom of Chan by speaking to modern times

Chan is not a drug but instead a cure. It is stated in the *Sutra of the Inconceivable State of the Buddha Dhatu* that we do not give out sweet candy. When someone is sick, we give out the bitter astringent medicine because that is what people truly need. Only by taking this medicine can they overcome this illness. In the same way, should a Western doctor give out peppermint candies to people instead of true medicine, many people would be ill and suffering would continue.

We approach teaching Chan from the idea that little by little as people see the value of Chan, they themselves will yearn to pursue it. The best way to draw others to Chan, in a sense, the best salesperson for Chan is a Chan practitioner himself.

“How can you do what you do? Don’t you get tired?”

“How can you be so calm, doesn’t anything bother you?”

Chan gives us a way to handle our problems and our relationships. Chan gives us a study-guide that focuses on how to deal with other people in a harmonious manner. Master Hanshan Deqing said the purpose of the Chan practice is to live in accordance with whatever state of mind that arises in order to relinquish our habitual tendencies. This is walking in a state of Chan.

The system behind Chan has been cultivated over the course of centuries which caused it to be refined. Chan has its roots in Buddhism from the Buddha's twirling of the flower in Mahakasyapa. It was developed in the Abhidharma, challenged by the Yogacara school and forged in Nargajuna's Madyamaka doctrine. Amongst the copious amount of sutras are the Mahayana, the Prajna Paramita and Tathāgatagarbha sūtras. In addition to sutras are the many treatises with their own style of practice set forth by many previous masters who have not altered the formula of the dharma but enhanced it in their own ways. Current masters change the dharma only by making it relevant to the current society while preserving its essence.

When the Chan is adapted it makes no difference if we are teaching today or 2,500 years in the past, it will always be relevant. It is the challenge of those seeking the continuation of Chan to keep it fresh and lively.

Chan has a great historical background but it is important to know that Chan is kept by those who present it the most. The greatest challenge that one may face when presenting Chan is respecting that which has been written before and the fundamental principles so that they are not ignorant of what they pass on to others. In doing so they are able to adapt the teaching of Chan to be relevant in any day and age.

However, in order to teach Chan with such fluidity, the presenters cannot be mere presenters; they must be true masters through study not only of Chan Buddhism but the scriptures from which it originates. Not only should one know of the history of Chan but the history of other religions because by understanding the views of others, one can find common ground to communicate a more harmonious message free of ignorance.

I have had students that claim they are of a different religion but interestingly enough, they more closely resemble a Buddhist practitioner. However, I do not press them to convert their beliefs. It is never a matter of trying to convert people but instead a matter of presenting to them a message that can serve to be valuable to them in life and in doing so we uplift humanity. We do not value recruiting as many members as possible but instead making sure that the character of every existing person in our group and around us can be the best human being they can be. Ultimately we seek to deliver all sentient beings through the transcendent wisdom that drives our Mahayana vows.

Applying Chan in daily life

We must learn to practice in accordance with our abilities. We practice by way of principle and practice by way of practicing itself. The principle itself is practice and practice is principle. In this way principle is the Right View which teaches us how the mind works and thus we apply it to our daily life.

Practice is any instance in which we apply wisdom and determine what we do in any situation. Master Hanshan Deqing said that the purpose of Chan is to harmonize with whatever mental state arises at that moment, so that one can fulfill the Buddha-dharma and relinquish us of our habitual tendencies so that we can realize the Self Nature of Mind. Every moment presents the opportunity to apply wisdom and when we apply wisdom we do not allow the discriminating mind to arise. Rather, we see things for what they are. This is *paccicca samuppada* (Causes and conditions never fail). When we see things in this way, that is, present appearances had a cause and our resultant reaction of body, speech, and mind will be the cause of future conditions. With this in mind, our actions change in accordance as do our speech and our thoughts. Our thoughts, speech, and actions become governed by wisdom in our moment to moment choices. A time will come when we are off the principle of practice but we must know to reorient ourselves to return to the practice. Shifu said that a person with a vow to break is a *bodhisattva*, and a person with no vow to break is a non-practitioner.

We apply our vows to our daily life so that we can learn to practice well. When we do not practice well we will begin to notice a difference. When a non-practitioner makes a mistake in his life, he is ignorant of it. As practitioners, when we make a mistake and break our vows we are aware of it, which differentiates us from non-practitioners.

For example, if we are to call someone a bad name or say something rude we are aware of how our vow has been broken. It is measurable in the present moment what destruction we have caused by our words as we can see it in the other person and in our own emotions. This enables us to feel remorse and develop a sense of shame for what we have done and leads us to renew our vows and correct our behavior.

As practitioners, we are destined to make mistakes; so long as we acknowledge them, then it enables us to correct them. If we approach the practice with sincerity, then gradually our practice will improve and we can see the bigger picture. That picture is one in which we acknowledge the environment around us and juxtapose our past actions with our present actions in order to

conduct ourselves properly and spread wisdom. That gives us faith to practice through the definitive proof of how our actions affect our environment.

Using this wisdom we generate compassion, but it is a compassion that is non-discriminatory and important. This genuine compassion is not what I refer to as the “dead baby-raccoon compassion.” If we were to come across a dead baby-raccoon we would say: “Oh no, look at the dead baby-raccoon. I feel sorry for it so I shall bury it.” On the other hand, if we encounter a dead rat we would say: “Yuck! A dead rat!” and then we would grab it by the tail and throw it in the trash can. This is not true compassion.

We should have compassion for all sentient beings, and this compassion is a result of wisdom; this compassion develops what is called “Bodhicitta.” Bodhicitta is what we use when we help others. It is the idea that we are working to benefit others which leads us to lend our body a purpose that we had not previously recognized. Right View applies to wisdom and to compassion in a progressive manner. This is Mahayana practice.

The Best Things I Learned About the Buddha-Dharma from Shifu

I believe the best thing that you learn of the Buddha-dharma is to put down the self and have a plan of action for your life. Sadly most people live life without an idea of what they are doing here in this world. One may live a life in which he or she goes to school, starts a career, gets married, has kids, retires, and then dies. They have no idea of what they truly could have done in their lifetime. The practice of the Buddha-dharma enables one to see a bigger picture, a picture beyond one's self and even one's lifetime. Whatever is done creates a ripple that stretches far into the future of practicing the Buddha-dharma and this Bodhi-heart is extended to all sentient beings. You receive a much better focus regarding the purpose of this particular body.

My Reaction to Being Selected by Shifu to be the Dharma Heir

Interestingly, before he designated me to receive dharma transmission, he had conferred upon me Inka,

which is the authority to teach. My initial reaction was one of fear that other people may misunderstand Shifu's intentions. The other reaction was when I realized that in that moment my life goals were changing dramatically because of such a big responsibility. There was not an expected feeling of pride or joy or accomplishment so much as a repurposing of my life towards delivering the Buddha-dharma.

My Vow to Continue the Legacy of Shifu's Buddha-Dharma

In the words of Shifu, "To vow to deliver all sentient beings before one's self is the initial generation of the Bodhiheart of a Bodhisattva." To all who read this, know that this is my vow and that I vow to deliver you before myself. Please join in making the same wondrous and powerful vow. Palms joined.

(Compiled and edited from interviews at Dharma Drum Mountain San Francisco Chapter in May 2013 and at Dharma Drum Retreat Center in October 2010)

Sowing the Seeds of Chan Teaching in the West

Žarko Andričević

The main question during the transition is precisely the question of differentiating essence, form and function. While it is quite clear that the essence of teaching should stay the same, the form it takes and expresses itself through, as well as their functional aspects, is subject to change. Shifu's modernization of Chan gives us answers to these questions and offers a set-up ground for further development of the school—in the West, as well as in the East.

Introducing the Speaker

Žarko Andričević

Born in 1955 in Croatia, Žarko Andričević attended a seven-day retreat led by the late Master Sheng Yen in 1996, and decided to follow him to study and practice Chan, the very core of Buddha-dharma. In June 2001, during a two-week retreat in the USA, Žarko received Dharma transmission from Master Sheng Yen, and became one of the Master's five Dharma heirs in the West. Now an established Chan master, he not only teaches in his home country Croatia, he also travels frequently around the globe such as the USA, Switzerland, Slovenia, Norway, Germany and Taiwan.

At this occasion I have decided to talk about first and only retreat that Shifu held in Croatia. There are two reasons why I decided to talk about that subject:

Firstly, that retreat was tremendously important for our community, it marked a certain crossroad for our application of the Buddha-dharma and for our future development; since that retreat we started to follow the tradition of Chinese Chan Buddhism.

Secondly, I think that the retreat speaks a lot about Shifu and the manner of his teaching in the West, and is therefore especially relevant to this forum.

Shifu's arrival aroused a great interest and enthusiasm

Allow me first of all to say a few words about the circumstances that proceeded and led to Shifu's arrival and retreat in Croatia.

Before I met Shifu I was a teacher in a group that had

up to that point practiced martial arts, yoga and Buddhism for over 20 years. I was, however, searching for a meditation teacher and wanted to make a connection with a living Buddhist tradition. Our practice until then was, in lack of an authentic teacher, more of a sort of free exploration and experiment, then it was following a clearly set and well-defined, traditional Buddhist path. My investigation led me to Shifu and Chan Meditation Center in NY where I took part in my first seven-day retreat. At that occasion I explained to Shifu our situation in Croatia and invited him to lead a meditation retreat. As Shifu was supposed to make a European tour the very next year, he immediately accepted. I was surprised by his willingness to come, but also glad about his decision. He told me that he could only spare five days for Croatia, so we decided to have a three-day retreat and a public lecture in addition to that.

We had four months to prepare for Shifu's arrival. We printed large posters as an announcement for Shifu's public talk and made a reservation for a venue at the city center. We also printed a small booklet containing several of Shifu's talks. But the main and most difficult

task was to prepare our Center for the three-day retreat for which some 30 members of our community applied. Our Buddhist center was at that time actually a rented family house in the countryside near our Croatian capital. To make it suitable for a meditation retreat for 30 people, we had to build an extra bathroom with toilet and pull down the wall between two rooms to make a larger one. That is how we got a Chan hall that could barely accommodate that number of people. Despite all the difficulties that came with preparations—and I have to mention that it was a time shortly after the war in Croatia—there was an incredible inspiration felt within the group and we have eagerly anticipated Shifu's arrival.

You have to know that an arrival of a Buddhist monk to Croatia was not a common thing. Shifu was one of the first Buddhist teachers to visit our country, the first one coming from the Chinese Buddhist tradition. Announcements for his lecture arouse great interest in the city, so that more than 200 people came to a large hall at the main square in Zagreb. It was filled up to its capacity. Some people even sat on the floor.

Three attributes characteristic of the manner of Shifu's teaching in general

And so the next day the retreat began.

First of all let me say that during this three-day retreat Shifu lectured everything that he would normally talk about during seven, or even ten-day retreats. As if he knew that he would not be coming back to Croatia so soon, if ever at all. In addition to correct views and approaches, he especially elaborated on the methods of practice, mainly meditation on breathing and silent illumination. We found ourselves within the true treasure house of Dharma. How much of that treasure we were able to use at that moment, that is a different story. But the truth remains that this short and only retreat that Shifu held in Croatia marked a new beginning for us, and our community still derives inspiration from it.

Not going into the subjects of Shifu's talks, I think that the manner of his teaching at this retreat contains certain attributes characteristic of his teaching in general. Among

these, I would single out the following three points:

1. teaching in accordance with needs;
2. presenting Chan as being inseparable from its broader Mahayana context;
3. essence of teaching above form.

I think that these attributes are also important in the emergence of the Western face of Buddhism in general, and Chan in particular.

1. Teaching in accordance with needs

Remembering that retreat and reading transcripts of Shifu's talks, the fine attunement of his teaching to our immediate needs—that is to say, to our level of familiarity with and knowledge of the Dharma, our experience in practice, but even social circumstances that shaped us as a group, becomes clearly visible. Even the way in which he introduced himself during the opening talk is a good example of how to make Dharma more accessible. Shifu knew very little about us, but one of the things he did know was that we had studied Buddhism for a number of

years and that we were somewhat familiar with its larger context. He said that the origin of his teaching reaches much further back than Chan or Chinese Buddhism, and that it includes Indian Buddhism as well, through all of its phases of development (early teachings, Madhyamaka, Yogācāra, Tathāgatagarbha), and that in that sense he considers himself to be primarily a Dharma master, not a Chan master (if we take the word in its narrow sense) as many in the West take him to be. And then he gave a beautiful definition of a Dharma master: the one who takes Dharma as his master. It was an exceptionally skillful way to point out what we have in common, what brings us as a group and him together, before he ventured into the field of practice which we did not know sufficiently, but which we were keen to find out more about.

I witnessed that skill of Shifu's at many other retreats as well. His approach would change depending on the background of the group he was teaching to. A good example is a retreat on silent illumination that Shifu held at Vipassana Center in Beatenberg, Switzerland—he discussed silent illumination comparing it to the

Mahāsatipatṭhāna Sutta, or the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. Such an approach to teaching is based on an understanding that Dharma is a medicine that has to be administered depending on a disease. This skill of Shifu's was especially apparent during interviews. Generally speaking, that skill is made up of a very thorough knowledge of Dharma, deep experience in practice and an open mind aware of the moment, aware of another's state of mind and therefore of the way in which they can be helped.

One day during the retreat Shifu simply disappeared from the house and was gone for a while. During the evening lecture he told us that he went for a walk because he was interested to find out how would people react on seeing strangely dressed men, Chinese on top of that, that they might be seeing for the very first time in life. He told us that he was pleased with what he discovered, that people have looked at him a bit oddly, but that they were all very polite and returned greetings. His conclusion was that Croats are fairly open-minded.

2. Presentation of Chan as being inseparable from its broader Mahayana context

During the same opening talk Shifu also wanted to present Chan in its proper light. To present it as a path that cultivates the Bodhisattva ideal, as a school deeply integrated with teachings of Mahayana Buddhism, especially Tathāgatagarbha. At the same time he emphasized that this experience of the Buddha-nature, expounded by Tathāgatagarbha, is no different than the experience of emptiness and no-self that Shakyamuni Buddha realized at his awakening.

Shifu touched upon certain deviations that took place in the past, mentioning possible misunderstanding of Tathāgatagarbha teaching as actually postulating Atman or Self. Then he also referred to some teachers and practitioners of Chan / Zen who only follow teachings of Patriarchs and limit themselves to practice of kung-an without relying on basic teachings, sutras and commentaries. Shifu said that it was a reason why Chan school declined in the past. But even today we are witnessing a certain misuse of the famous definition of Chan that says it is a teaching transmitted

outside the scriptures, not founded upon words and letters but on the direct looking into the mind to discover the true nature. Although this definition is attributed to Bodhidharma (founder of Chan school), scholars today are saying that it was actually created much later as an attempt to distinguish Chan from other schools. Of course, the problem is not necessarily with the definition itself, but with the ones who are giving it wrong interpretation. So in this, as well as in other retreats, as well as in his books, Shifu presented theory and practice of Chan—in other words, correct views and methods as inseparable. Shifu would often compare the two with a map and a journey. If we truly want to reach a certain destination, we need both. Japanese Zen in the West often adheres to previously mentioned definition, and therefore to literal non-reliance on teaching. Such an understanding of Zen as a pure, religion-transcending experience led to emergence of Christian Zen. Shifu's teaching both in the States and Europe alleviates this deviation.

3. Essence of teaching above form

I will return to our retreat as a starting point. Due to conditions, the whole retreat was a sort of improvisation.

Shifu's amazing adaptability again came to the fore. He did not insist on anything, but instead fully adapted to the conditions. Starting with the seating arrangement that was mixed (men and women), to the morning and evening service that was shortened. But in spite of simplified and changed form of the retreat, during both stillness and movement we attempted to apply the principles of practice.

We are aware that the manner of Shifu's teaching constantly changed and evolved during the years. These changes were result of Shifu's experience with other Buddhist traditions that he encountered in Japan and later in the West, but also of his constant effort to make the essence of Dharma more accessible to his students.

In the previous point we discussed inseparability of teaching and practice. Shifu had a rare ability to present a very complex Mahayana teaching in a very simple and usable manner, ensuring therefore that their purpose is directed towards navigating and illuminating the practice itself, not enticing surplus thinking and mere ideation.

At the very end of the three-day retreat Shifu told us a story that compares personal experience of Dharma with faith and devotion, which is also an example of emphasizing the essence of Dharma.

He told us that once he was in a company of three men who walked through a village in line, with a distance between them. After they passed the village they discovered that one of them was bitten by a dog. No one saw or heard it. The man said that the dog simply appeared out of nowhere, did not bark at all but simply bit him and run away. Then one of the company said that it is probably a result of his action in previous life—he must have bitten the dog and now is paying off his karmic debt. The other said that the dog is probably a bodhisattva who was trying to help him by giving him a chance to practice his patience and perseverance.

Hearing that, the man who was bitten said that he does not know whether he did or did not bite the dog in his past life. He also said that he does not know if the dog is a transformation of a bodhisattva who wanted to help

him to practice patience. But what he does know is that he bit his tongue in the morning and that it was painful. And now, after the dog bit him, it was also painful.

After the story, Shifu gave us a very thorough explanation, but for this occasion I will try to summarize it in just a few sentences.

When we try to alleviate difficulties of life, we can use the approach of the two men who gave an explanation of the event that comes from the sphere of religion, faith and devotion. Or we can use the approach of the man who was bitten by a dog. It is an approach of a Chan practitioner who does not discriminate between inner and outer conditions. It resembles an occasion when the left hand cuts the right one. To bite one's own tongue or to be bitten by a dog is experienced in the same way. We remain in the reality of the experience itself, which is actually a pre-requisite to both understanding and freedom from afflictions. Such an approach is not based on speculation nor does it leave room for skepticism or doubt. It is based on the given experiential situation where, within the

absence of mental constructs, the nature of experience reveals itself. Such an approach keeps the teaching alive, and only a living teaching can be truly healing. Through being attached to form we lose the essence and end up with listless agglomeration that only serves itself.

Shifu's modernization of Chan teaching, a solution to its introduction to the West

I think that these three attributes are of special importance, especially in the context of the emergence of Western Buddhism and further development of Chan in the West. The first one emphasizes the necessity to adapt to the local culture and peculiar circumstances for the seed of teaching to spring and take its roots. The second attribute shows how important correct views are. Without them, our practice loses its proper direction and ultimately loses what is called the Four Seals of Dharma. It is this attribute that positioned Shifu's Chan teaching in regards to Japanese Zen in the West, bringing it back within the sphere of the original tradition. And finally, the third attribute about "essence above form" is typical attribute of

Chan as a school advocating direct experience of Dharma being of primary importance. In light of that experience, also called the experience of emptiness or no-self, or simply freedom from attachment, Chan very easily takes or discards whatever is secondary, like certain cultural characteristics, finding the most suitable way to express its basic qualities: wisdom and compassion.

Buddha-dharma is a universal teaching; it is its universality that enabled it to take roots in different civilizations and cultures. However, process of transition from one culture to another is not always smooth or without obstacles. In case of Chinese Buddhism, the process took four or five centuries. Today we live incomparably faster, and it can be said that we are far less patient, so therefore the process of transition is accelerated. It has both its advantages and shortcomings. The main question during the transition is precisely the question of differentiating between essence, form and function. While it is quite clear that the essence of teaching should stay the same, the form it takes and expresses itself through, as well as their functional aspects, is subject to change. Shifu's

modernization of Chan gives us answers to these questions and offers a set-up ground for further development of the school—in the West, as well as in the East.

*(A talk given at the GIS NTU Convention Center on June 27, 2014,
for the 3rd Forum for Followers of Dharma Drum Mountain)*

Appendix

DDM Pocket Guides to Buddhist Wisdom

- E-1 Meeting of Minds*
- E-2 In the Spirit of Chan*
- E-3 A General Introduction to the Bodhisattva Precepts*
- E-4 The Effects of Chan Meditation*
- E-5 The Meaning of Life*
- E-6 Why Take Refuge in the Three Jewels?*
- E-7 The Buddhadharma in Daily Life*
- E-8 A Happy Family and a Successful Career*
- E-9 Chan Practice and Faith*
- E-10 Establishing Global Ethics*
- E-11 Wu Ming Exposes Ignorance*
- E-12 The Buddha Mind, Universe, and Awakening*
- E-13 The Dharma Drum Lineage of Chan Buddhism*
- E-14 Master Sheng Yen*
- E-15 The Six Ethics of the Mind*
- E-16 Living in the 21st Century: A Buddhist View*
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- E-18 Encounters with Master Sheng Yen II*
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What I am unable to accomplish in this lifetime, I vow to push forward through countless future lives; what I am unable to accomplish personally, I appeal to everyone to undertake together.

– Master Sheng Yen (1930-2009)