

# TEA WORDS

Early Chan Lectures in America (1980-1997)

Volume One

**Chan Master Sheng Yen**



Dharma Drum Mountain

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## About the Chan Meditation Center

In 1979, Master Sheng Yen established the Chung-Hwa Institute of Buddhist Culture, more commonly known as the Chan Meditation Center. Located in Elmhurst (in Queens), New York, CMC is a meditation and practice center, attended by a diverse and growing membership.

CMC has a varied and rich offering of classes in meditation and other forms of Buddhist practice; in particular, its Sunday Morning Open House, which is a very popular event for individuals as well as families. It features meditation, chanting, talks on Chan and Buddhist Dharma, and a vegetarian luncheon. All are welcome.

For more information:  
<http://www.chancenter.org>.

## About the Dharma Drum Retreat Center

In 1997, Master Sheng Yen established the Dharma Drum Retreat Center in Pine Bush, New York. It is a sister organization to the Chan Meditation Center, and is located about two hours from the Chan Meditation Center by car.

DDRC offers a rich schedule of Chan meditation retreats of varying lengths, from 1-day and 3-day retreats, to those of longer duration, typically 5, 7, or 10 days. While the retreats are open to all without regard to affiliation, it is preferred that participants in the longer retreats have at least some prior meditation experience and/or have attended at least one intensive meditation retreat. DDRC also presents family and youth-oriented events such as its Family Chan Camp, and many special events.

For more information:

<http://www.dharmadrumretreat.org>

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## Editor's Preface

### *Sojourn from East to West*

On March 17, 1975, Chang Sheng Yen was invited to the office of the president of Rissho University in Tokyo, to join several other scholars in celebrating his receiving a doctorate in Buddhist literature. As Master Sheng tells it, they were invited to a tea party but had coffee and cake. (Was this crossover to the culture of the West a good omen?) It was a happy occasion after six years of hard work and study. It was also sobering since he was a 45-year-old monk with an uncertain future. What was he going to do next?

In *A Journey of Learning and Insight* (聖嚴法師學思歷程), Master Sheng Yen's own account of his learning Buddhadharma, he recalls: "Actually, at that stage there was not much I could do...Although my Tonsure Master, Dongchu, hoped I could return to Taiwan to develop Buddhist education it was easier said than done, since I had no idea where to start. Therefore, soon after the meeting I returned to Tokyo. At the time, Mr. C.T. Shen invited me to come to the United States to teach, so under such causes and conditions, I left Tokyo on December 10 of the same year, and went to the United States."

And so, Master Sheng Yen once more crossed a watery divide to take on another challenge, in another country, in another language, at a temple in a very busy part of New York City, the Bronx. His new home was the Temple of Enlightenment, which was mainly attended by the local Chinese community. In April 1976, the newly arrived monk began to offer classes in Chan meditation with an eye to attracting Westerners. And they did come. Only four at first but the class soon approached double-digits, including Chinese people. Shifu (Teacher), as he was soon to be called, referred to it as the Special Chan Class. It met on Saturday mornings and included Chan meditation instruction and sitting, followed by a Dharma talk

accompanied by tea and cookies. Shifu called the talks “tea words” which gave a warm and friendly feeling to this rather exotic business of learning Chan Buddhism from a skinny, bald, spectacled, robed, and gentle master from the Far East, who spoke little English.

A critical event around this time which had large consequences for both Buddhism in Taiwan and Chan in the West was that Master Dongchu passed away, bequeathing his abbotship to Master Sheng Yen. Shifu had no choice but to suspend his activities in New York to administer his late master’s estate, leaving it in good order before returning to New York. Dongchu’s passing was a defining moment for Shifu: the lamp had been passed and seized.

#### *The Chan Meditation Center*

When he returned to the US towards the end of 1978, Shifu’s classes soon grew large enough so that the limited facilities at Temple of Enlightenment became problematic. In 1979, he founded the Chan Meditation Center in Queens. In addition to guiding CMC to growth and relevance, Shifu soon launched *Chan Newsletter*. It was to be functionally similar to its sister periodical, *Chan Magazine* (which had begun a year earlier) except it would be timelier, coming out once a month instead of quarterly. Equally relevant, his lectures on Sundays and in midweek special classes – orally translated, recorded, transcribed, edited, and published – were coming in profusion and high quality. The staffs of *Chan Magazine* and *Chan Newsletter*, as well as his book editors, were pretty busy. Such was Shifu’s energy and dedication towards sharing the Dharma.

### *About this book*

In August 1997, after 124 issues, *Chan Newsletter* was merged into *Chan Magazine* to streamline the Center's increasingly broad agenda. Though the doors of the publication were closed, the archived editions contained a treasure of Shifu's early teachings in the West, worthy of study by newer generations of Chan and Zen students. At some point, a decision was made to re-issue some of these talks; the ones selected were judiciously and lightly edited for internal consistency; so to speak, refreshed. The result is this book. The sangha and members of the Chan Meditation Center are therefore delighted to offer *Tea Words*, in memory of Shifu.

The talks appear in the same order as they appeared in *Chan Newsletter*. Not consecutively, since of the 124 lead articles in the *Newsletter*, about 50 were selected to be published in two volumes, this being Volume One. As to those not selected, about 40% of the 124 were compiled in other books, such as Master Sheng Yen's commentaries on the *Sutra of Complete Enlightenment* and the *Shurangama Sutra* (as of now, in Chinese only).

### *In the Spirit of Chan*

It could be misleading to characterize in a few words the themes that Shifu illuminated in these talks, but one could say that taken together they describe the "spirit of Chan." They speak of the attitude one should have to practice Chan Buddhism correctly and to good effect. But right attitude, though essential, is not enough: Chan practice must also be infused with faith in the methods and faith in oneself; it also needs to be guided by the correct concepts taught by the Buddha. Diligence and determination need to be present in good measure. And perhaps most important, one needs guidance from a wise and compassionate teacher.

In one of many anecdotes Shifu tells in this book, Chan Master Zhaozhou (Joshu in Zen) was visited by two monks. Zhaozhou asked the first monk, "Have you been here before?" The monk answered, "No, Shifu, I have not." Zhaozhou said to him, "Please have some tea."

Zhaozhou then asked the second monk, "Have you been here before?" The second monk answered, "Yes, Shifu, I have been here before." Zhaozhou said to him, "Please have some tea."

Later, Zhaozhou's attendant asked the master: "How is it that you offered tea to the monk who had never been here, as well as to the monk who had been here before?" Zhaozhou motioned to the attendant to come close and whispered, "Please have some tea."

It is not difficult to see in this story the notion that giving and receiving tea can be a metaphor for Chan practice. The Dharma that the teacher offers without choosing between "should" or "should not," "beginner" or "old hand," is like the refreshing and clear brew that a gracious host offers to all who come. And more, sharing tea in the spirit of trust and amity is much like what happens between teacher and disciple for the benefit of both.

In the spirit of drinking tea, please enjoy *Tea Words*.

Ernest Heau

## Acknowledgments

From the first issue of *Chan Newsletter* in November 1979 until its final issue in August 1997, many people – beginning with Master Sheng Yen – contributed to its publication in many ways: lecturing (Master Sheng Yen), contributing articles, translating, editing, providing artwork and photography, typing, printing, mailing, and so on.

First and foremost, our gratitude is to Master Sheng Yen who spoke these wonderful “tea words” on the meaning and practice of Chan.

Thanks to Mr. Ming Yee Wang who provided concurrent oral translation into English for most of the lectures compiled in *Tea Words*, to the extent of traveling with Master Sheng Yen to many outside New York venues, while going to graduate school.

Thanks also to the following individuals who actively participated in publishing the *Chan Newsletter*. Of those whose participation went unrecorded, or we were unable to identify, our sincere gratitude as well as apologies: Rikki Asher, Nancy Bonardi, Echo Bonner, Giora Carmi, Susan Chan, Meei Hwa Chern, J. C. Cleary, Lisa Commager, Peter Fell, Estelle Girard, Guo Chou Shi, Guo Gu Shi (Jimmy Yu), Guo Yuan Shi, Timothy Ide, Trish Ing, P. L. Jin, Paul Kennedy, Buffe Laffey, Wendy Lai, Wendy Luan, Chris Marano, Antoinette Meale, Harry Miller (Editor), Linda Peer, K. E. Robinson, Alan Rubinstein, Nora Ling-Yun Shi, Douglas Sipp, Kathy Sova, Michelle Spark, Dan Stevenson, Virginia Tan, Yeachin Tsai, Lawrence Waldron, Ming Yee Wang, Dorothy Weiner, Carl Zimmerling.

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Cover and Book Design: Chih-ching Lee

## Abbot's Foreword

Master Sheng Yen often said, "Buddhadharma is so wonderful, but so many people have an incorrect understanding of it." He also said, "It's not that Buddhadharma has no use; but that people don't use it." If you really wish to cultivate and uphold Buddhadharma or Chinese Chan, to gain its benefits, you must place equal emphasis on understanding and on practice. Hence, you will progress from incorrect to correct understanding, and then from correct understanding to actual practice, until you are in accord with the teaching; at that point you will realize Buddhadharma.

In this long process, you will pass through many barriers. In addition to blessings and merit, aspiration, faith, and virtuous roots, you need the proper guidance of an experienced teacher, so as to reduce the time you will fumble along. Having these causes and conditions will quicken the realization of your original wisdom.

As a lineage holder in the Caodong and Linji traditions, Master Sheng Yen taught Chan in the West for over thirty years, commuting between Taiwan and New York. During that time, he kept his compassionate vow to spread Chan Buddhism to the West, helping it to take root, flower, and bear fruit. This enabled people to study correct Buddhism and to benefit from its practice.

The Chan patriarchs said "To have correct understanding is more precious than just putting on sandals and walking." It is most important to have correct understanding; otherwise, if you walk in the wrong direction - for however long - you will never reach your destination. Therefore, my wish is that those who have an affinity with and the intention to study Chan will learn correct Chan from

Master Sheng Yen's experience and guidance. In this manner, they will progress from incorrect to correct understanding, cultivate and uphold the Dharma, and reach a point where they accord with the teaching, and finally, actualize it. In this way, they will limit wrong steps, and benefit themselves while spreading Chan Buddhism to the world.

With palms joined.

Guo Xing Fashi  
Chan Meditation Center, New York

## Parting Words

From Chan Newsletter No. 3, February, 1980

*On January 29, 1979, Master Sheng Yen returned to Taiwan to assume abbotship of the monastery of his teacher, Master Dongchu. He sent this letter to his students in New York. These were his parting words.*

It makes no difference whether I am in Taiwan or New York. We are close when you meditate; but, if you forget your practice, then even if I were to embrace you, it would be useless. My physical presence is unimportant; the essential thing is that our minds be in correspondence. However, as much as a master would like all his students' minds to be in correspondence with his, it is not always possible for every student to maintain this.

My guidance is always with you, as well as my expectations. Here are some thoughts I would like to leave with you. You should always keep in mind the purpose and proper attitude of your practice. In this respect, it is actually good for you that I leave every now and then. If I'm around, you can bring your problems and questions to me anytime as; I am always available. It is only when I am away that you realize how rare this opportunity is. You must learn to treasure this opportunity.

Another point I wish to emphasize is not to be selfish. What is selfishness? It is always acting for your own benefit and purpose. My goal in teaching Chan is to help you get rid of your selfishness bit by bit. You should avoid self-aggrandizement, as well as thinking of yourself as inferior. These two are often connected. A very proud person is this way because he is aware of his weaknesses and tries to cover them up. The person who feels inferior indulges their weaknesses for attention. Selfishness breeds other unwholesome qualities such as greed, dissatisfaction, jealousy, and even hatred.

Not being selfish does not mean that we give ourselves up completely; rather, we simply don't do things for our benefit alone. If we desire a healthy body, it is in order to enable us to better help others better. If we aspire for wisdom, purity, and virtue, it is also for the purpose of aiding others. In taking this attitude, will we forfeit our own benefits? No. Actually, we obtain all the benefits while escaping suffering. When we fail, we will not be unhappy. Loss will not cause great disappointment. A person who is truly unselfish will always be in a contented and pleasant mood. So, by putting down one's selfish concerns, all one's problems are solved.

What I have just talked about is the theoretical foundation of our practice. The most important thing is for our minds to be in harmony with the teachings. Some people can intellectually understand these things yet are unable to release themselves from morally unwholesome tendencies. They are unable to bring this knowledge to life in their own hearts. This can only be accomplished through practice.

We should not concern ourselves with how much benefit we are getting, and certainly not to seek even enlightenment. This kind of

thinking will obstruct you. However, not to seek or desire something does not mean you don't have to practice. Practice is a method for making real progress. Simply use and practice the method I have taught you and don't think about how much progress you are making.

## Shakyamuni's Great Vow

From Chan Newsletter No. 4, April, 1980

Practitioners come to retreat hoping to get great benefit and go home a new person. This attitude is very good in itself, but it can also become an obstacle to practice. Harboring this desire will distract you from your method, and the harder you press, the greater the obstacle becomes. Expecting to gain something, as well as being afraid of not practicing well, are both incorrect attitudes. But, while having a seeking attitude is counterproductive, you still need vows to keep yourself from faltering on the path.

When he meditated beneath the Bodhi Tree, Shakyamuni vowed to not rise from his seat until he realized supreme enlightenment. By fulfilling this vow he became a fully awakened being, a buddha. So, you should make a strong vow to put your whole self into your meditation and to be concerned only with the practice. Once you know the directions to your destination, just get on with the actual traveling. Even if you cannot yet see the final destination, you need not be doubtful or anxious. To make a vow is to set the direction and the goal, and the practice is your vehicle. Great vows and diligent

practice go together; without both, you will waste time and not receive genuine benefit. At best you may alleviate some karma.

There are many kinds of obstructions in practice and just about everyone has them. On this first day of retreat, some people are already experiencing obstructions. Some are angry with themselves but don't know how to pacify their minds. As great as their hope is to practice well, it is hard to do so. Being eager to practice is good but when one is over-eager for results, it becomes an obstruction. This is an example of how an obstruction manifests. In other cases, the obstructions have not yet manifested but lurk below the surface.

There is a saying that one is like an ant in a hot frying pan before being liberated from the cycle of birth and death. Someone who clearly understands the suffering inherent in the cycle of birth and death, and who works hard for liberation already has the proper urgency towards practice. Indeed, only after one has glimpsed their true self-nature are they truly anxious to end transmigration. By contrast, over-anxiety is usually based on an unwholesome attitude, such as envying someone who seems to be practicing well.

Then there are those who are practicing very well, or who think they are practicing well. They see lovely visions or hear beautiful music, or their body feels very comfortable, light, and joyous. These are signs that one is practicing well and it is natural to feel elated. But if they cling to these experiences, they become obstacles to progress. When experiencing these things, do not attach to them; just acknowledge them and get on with the practice.

## Tea Words

From Chan Newsletter No. 7, July, 1980

*Spoken during tea break; the Special Chan Class, July 13, 1980.*

Some people like strong tea, some like weak tea, and some prefer water. Strong tea stimulates and excites; weak tea quenches thirst, and water replenishes the body's fluids. Strong tea is like the scorching summer sun and loud thunder at the same time; weak tea is like the autumn moon; water is neither sun, nor moon, nor rain but it has extreme clarity and brightness. Some people drink strong tea to combat sleepiness or tiredness, most people prefer weak tea, and those who drink only water are few.

Drinking tea in the meditation hall can be a ritual, but it is most important to listen to the master's words. In fact, a talk like this is called "tea words." These words are like different strengths of tea, as the methods we teach vary according to a student's level of experience. Some methods are poisonously strong, some are lighter, and some have no particular meaning.

Strong tea is called "bitter tea." Those who have just begun to practice are not ready to drink this tea. After they have gained some

benefit from practice but are still not clear how to settle their mind, they should drink bitter tea. Like being baked in a hot sun or startled by thunder, this bitter tea gives them no chance to get lazy. They wouldn't dare fall asleep or indulge in scattered mind. This bitter tea will arouse them to "angry determination" to practice hard. This is why masters of the Linji sect used to beat and shout. Such methods are bitter tea to be given only to people who are already practicing hard. If a master beat or shouted at students who are not diligent, they may think it is very strange or even get scared away.

To beginners who thirst for practice but are not ready for bitter tea, I give weak tea. To them I will speak words of comfort and encouragement to make them feel happy to practice. The other type is those who have drunk bitter tea but are in danger of losing their resolve to practice. To them I will give weak tea as an expedient means. It's like telling someone just setting out on a journey, "There's a place over the horizon that is really idyllic, with trees, birds, and a beautiful landscape. If you just keep on going you will definitely get there."

One of the sutras tells about a man who yells at his ox, saying, "You are stupid and useless! Why can't you go faster with such a light load? Don't you see all the other oxen in front of us speeding along?" Whereupon the ox stopped dead in its tracks and refused to move, thinking, "Since I am useless, why should I move?" So the man, very upset, asked the other men in front, "How do you get your ox to go so fast?" They replied that they deceive their animals, saying sweet words to them, like, "You are so good and energetic. Without you, I would be nowhere. Awhile back you climbed that

hill like it was nothing. Now that the road is flat, you should really be able to speed along." So the oxen are very happy to go fast. Like humans, animals need comforting and encouragement.

Water is tasteless and it should be given only to those who have practiced extremely well but have not yet entered the door of Chan, that is to say, have not had some realization. They have already drunk bitter and weak tea and are attached to the flavor, meaning they tend to think too much and cannot stop their minds. They also cannot put their method down and may be attached to a goal of getting enlightened. They are burdened by their experience and intellect. To them I will give a flavorless method. For example, Master Zhaozhou of the Tang dynasty used phrases that seemed to have no meaning, such as: "The 10,000 dharmas return to one; where does the one return to?" Or, "When I was in Qingzhou I made a robe weighing seven pounds." Or, "What did Bodhidharma bring from the West?" Or, "In the garden there are cypress trees."

These are examples of "water words" that can induce a practitioner to give up all attachments, throw everything away, and reach the highest goal of enlightenment. But there are also people who can suddenly put down all their attachments with bitter tea. It works by giving them a shock. One can even attain this by drinking weak tea, but in that case, it can only be a very gradual enlightenment.

Who here has had the taste of water, where there is no sun, no moon and no rain, neither night nor day? Yes, but was it crystal-clear? When it is crystal-clear it has brightness in which all things all exist, but there is no discriminating mind, no taste. So subjectively, in this state, the person does not exist. If a person in

this state is out in the burning sun, he wouldn't consider that he is in the sun, but everything is still very clear. With bitter or weak tea, the mind is still there, but crystal-clear water is like the state of no-mind. Bitter and weak tea can help you towards no-mind, but eventually one needs to drink clear water.

## **The Problem of Death**

From Chan Newsletter No. 11, February, 1981

The greatest problem that the ancient Chan masters had faced was getting their disciples to have an earnest attitude towards death. Without a deep sensitivity to the problem of death, it is very hard to practice Chan well. It is very difficult for young people or those who live in a very sheltered environment to get a feel for the topic of death. I don't know if any of you ever think about death, and if you do, whether you feel that it isn't all that serious, or that it does not concern you at this moment. I wonder how sensitive you are to the fact that life is impermanent, and that you are eventually going to die. Probably most young people can't really bring themselves to be moved by the fact of death.

Among practitioners who are moved by the fact of death, there are two kinds of attitudes. Most common is fear; that is, they don't know when they are going to die and they don't want to die. They may want to cling to the good things in life, or perhaps leave a legacy worthy of admiration for future generations. There is a great deal of self-attachment in this attitude.

Another type of attitude is held by people who are practicing well and have no fear of death. They are consciously aware that they are going to die, that death may come at any time, and they don't want to die leaving anything undone. They want to take advantage of all their time to practice hard. Since they still have not attained liberation, they don't know where they're going after death, but they know they are in contact with the Buddhadharma, so they want to use the present life to practice as much as they can. Of course, there is self-attachment here too, but this is necessary for practice. If there were no self-attachment you would not even be here, since it was to solve your problems that you began practicing.

The great masters of the past emphasized that, when practicing, one should put aside all fear of loss and death. In the past, when people left their home life, they told themselves that they were handing their body over to the monastery, and their life over to the spirits that protect the Dharma. Whatever the abbot or Dharma Protectors instruct them to do, they will do. They are just going to practice, nonchalant about their body and life. This is a good attitude for those who are not afraid of death, or who have an accepting attitude about it. One can practice well with it. People who are constantly worrying about their body during meditation – I feel a little pain here, a little discomfort there, if I keep on going, maybe something will happen to me – will never be able to practice well. Not only should you not worry about your body dying, but you should not worry about your spirit dying. If there's any kind of spirit left that could become a buddha, then it would definitely be just a demon or a ghost. If there is anything left there, whether a false or wandering mind, or a so-called true or correct mind, it has

to die, or else it's just a ghost. So what do you want to do – become a buddha or a ghost?

Once in China there was a monk who was so adept, he was able to leave his body. One time he left his body sitting there for a week and everyone assumed he had died, so they cremated his body. When this monk came back, he couldn't find his body. So he hovered in the air, calling out, "Where am I? Where am I?" Everybody in the monastery was frightened because for several days straight he was shouting "Where am I?" And now, some of you are also using this method, right? Have you found your body?

Anyway, as it happened, after he was shouting for a few days, the abbot decided to put an end to this. He placed a big tub of water right under where the sound was coming from, and the next time they he heard the voice crying, "Where am I?" the abbot yelled, "You're down here!" Upon hearing that, the spirit descended with a splash. Then the abbot called out to him, "You're already dead! All you did was turn yourself into a pitiful ghost. Did you really get liberated? Don't you know that neither the five skandhas nor the four elements that compose the body are you? Where are you now?"

Then this monk realized that his physical body was not the same as himself, and the death of the physical body was not an important issue. If he still thought that he was the water, he would have transformed to a water spirit. So if I put this glass of water there right now, and if someone were to ask, "Where am I?" and I were to say, "You are here" [pointing to the water], would any of you get enlightened?

## **Emptiness and Loneliness**

From Chan Newsletter No. 12, March, 1981

Do mind and matter genuinely exist? If we were to analyze them thoroughly, we would see that their existence is only temporary. But does this mean that mind and matter do not actually exist? If we were to break time down into all its separate moments, we would see that actually time does not exist. This is also true of space. If we kept cutting it up into smaller and smaller parts, we would not find the actual existence of space. But on the other hand, the connections between different moments in time does exist, and the spatial relationships between objects also exist.

Therefore, people who do not understand Buddhadharma may have one of the two false ideas about emptiness. The first, emptiness from a temporal point of view, is called “the emptiness of termination and extinction.” Those who hold this view think that things just arise and vanish spontaneously, without events in the past causing results in the present, and without events in the present causing results in the future. This is emptiness of temporal relationship. The other kind of false idea of emptiness can be called

“the weird sense of emptiness.” This is emptiness from a spatial point of view: one sees the phenomena as completely illusory, therefore not to be taken seriously. It is very likely that people who hold either of these two false conceptions will have moral or ethical problems, and may lack a central focus in their lives.

From the point of view of Buddhadharma, emptiness is much different. Buddhism believes that whatever was done in the past caused a result in the present, and whatever is done in the present will cause a result in the future. But if we split time into its many segments, then existence can only be true for that segment. It is not real in that sense. And since time is constantly changing, causes are changing, and the effects are also changing. There isn't any certain unchanging consequence, nor is there any certain unchanging cause. Therefore it is void, but cause and effect are still there.

Question: In Buddhist works they say that nirvana is not an effect that can be attained through some kind of cause. If nirvana is supposed to be the state of true reality, it seems that someone who reaches this state is exempt from cause and effect. Is this so?

Sheng Yen: Nirvana is not a thing; nirvana is when you personally experience, and understand, and recognize that everything is void, or empty. Through the practice, you gradually come to experience that there is no real space or time that you can hold on to. So you can say that nirvana is the result of practice, but it is not a result of something changing into something else.

If certain things happen, we cannot say that these things didn't happen. If we simply ignore the fact that these things happened, then we fall into the view called “the weird sense of emptiness.” But on the other hand we also realize that whatever happens is not

something eternal or unchanging. So there is no need to take it too seriously or to be attached to it. If we are attached to it, that is a vexation.

If you hold on to the false views of emptiness and if you deny the law of cause and effect (karma), then you are in a very dangerous position. You may think that all phenomena are unreal and you don't have to practice morality. With this lack of responsibility, you will create a lot of evil karma and you will suffer the consequences. Being attached to existence will give you vexations, but being attached to the false views of emptiness will give you even greater problems. If, seeking to avoid the attachment to existence, you fall into the trap of the false views of emptiness, then that is like being afraid of getting drowned and jumping into the fire. From the Buddhist point of view, we take the Middle Way; that is, in emptiness there is existence and existence itself is empty.

Question: Does a practitioner necessarily have to go through times when he has the two false conceptions of emptiness?

Sheng Yen: Not necessarily. It depends on whether he or she gets proper guidance. It may happen, especially to people without a good foundation in Buddhism. One student, after returning home from her first retreat, felt that life was very gloomy and meaningless. She felt like giving away everything, breaking all contacts with the world, and just practice by herself. Later, she borrowed and read many books from the Chan Center, and by the third retreat, her attitude changed and she really opened up to life and the world. Others have gone through a similar stage. The reason is that through hard practice these people experienced a deep feeling of emptiness without, however, having enough

understanding of Buddhism as a basis.

Question: Where does the feeling of a deep sense of loneliness come from?

Sheng Yen: People who cannot connect themselves with the outside world in terms of space and time, who do not understand cause and effect, and causes and conditions, will feel lonely. When I was in solitary retreat, I knew that I was together with all sentient beings in innumerable worlds. Even though I seemed to be alone in a small, enclosed room, actually I was in the company of many ants who found their way inside, and insects outside of the hut created all kinds of sounds in the evening. When I opened the sutras, people thousands of years in the past were speaking to me. How could I feel lonely? Some people think that I must feel lonely being a monk without any wife or children; not at all. I have the five precepts and the ten virtuous deeds as my wife, and my children are all the people with whom I have developed a karmic affinity, and who call me Shifu (Teacher). It is only people who isolate themselves and cannot establish a relationship with the outside world who feel lonely. If you keep yourself enclosed, even if you live among thousands of people you will still feel very lonely. However, if you keep yourself open, then even if you are living alone, you will still have a very full life. So, open your mind and treat everyone you meet as your intimate, virtuous friend.

## How to Practice Chan

From Chan Newsletter No. 14, June, 1981

If you do not have faith in yourself, then not only will you not get far in the practice of Chan, but you will not succeed in anything else. The basis of faith must come from your daily life as well as from an understanding of Buddhadharma. Understanding Buddhadharma gives rise to faith in yourself because you know that Sakyamuni Buddha was just an ordinary sentient being, and yet he reached buddhahood. Furthermore, he said that every sentient being without exception can become a buddha. So faith in yourself is connected to the belief that what the Buddha said must be true—that you can reach buddhahood.

From historical records we know that many practitioners, not just the patriarchs, used the methods taught by the Buddha to attain enlightenment.

The fact that we are still able to use these methods means that we can also attain enlightenment.

Related to this, not only must you have faith in the Buddha, but also in those who have experience, notably your master or teacher.

But it is quite a difficult thing to have absolute faith in your Shifu upon first meeting. Likewise, it is difficult in the beginning to have the confidence that you can definitely reach buddhahood. Only after deriving some benefit after considerable practice will you be able to believe that you can definitely get enlightened.

That is why I do not require my students to believe in anything at the very beginning. Rather, I just give them certain methods of practice. These methods vary according to the personality and level of practice of each student. And even the same person may be given different methods at different times. Only after students have derived some benefit from using the method will they develop faith in their Shifu. At that time, whatever method I instruct the students to use, they will go ahead with diligence. Then I will ask them to give up their attachments to their own life, their conceptions of themselves, and their experience. If they can do this, they will be close to the door of enlightenment.

Yet, even after faith is attained, if the student does not bring forth a great determination to reach enlightenment within this lifetime, then in spite of faith, they will not derive much benefit very quickly. Such people must put in a long time of gradual practice before they can naturally enter enlightenment.

Like rowing a boat upstream, unless you keep up your effort, there is a chance you may regress. This is true even if you have had some very good experiences in meditation. But after you practice for a while, you may feel exhausted physically and spiritually. If you don't doze off while sitting, you find that you cannot summon up any energy. Under these conditions, you may think: "Maybe I'll take a rest for a while. If I can't get enlightened today, then I'll try again

tomorrow. If not tomorrow, anyway, eventually it will happen." This is called being lax in the practice.

Thus we have a second requirement, namely, great angry determination. This means putting aside all concerns and pushing forward because you are aware that, "If I were to suddenly die, I would fail to accomplish my practice in this lifetime." With this attitude, you simply must work hard, putting aside any consideration of your own life and death. If a Chan practitioner does not have a very immediate, direct feeling that he or she may die at any moment, then it is difficult for great angry determination to arise. Some students may find my demands unreasonable, especially on retreat, where I may ask them to minimize their sleeping time as much as possible. So long as you are not about to collapse, you should continue working on the method. However, some students simply cannot sustain this kind of practice. In this case, I may take a comforting, alternative approach, suggesting that they should take a good rest until they are completely recovered, and then come back and practice again. Very often, this approach also works, and after sleeping, those students will practice even harder and develop great angry determination.

But for those who still cannot manage to bring up this determination, I will say that Shakyamuni Buddha dedicated himself to hard practice for six years because he wanted to save sentient beings from suffering, and after he reached buddhahood he taught his disciples the method to practice. Likewise, the great Chan masters through the ages all practiced for a great length of time before they got enlightened, and they transmitted these methods and experience down to our generation. Now, enjoying the

efforts passed down by enlightened people over a long time, you are very fortunate in so short a time to come in contact with Chan. Knowing this, if you are still not inspired to practice hard, you should feel shame towards the Chan masters, not to mention the Buddha himself. Furthermore, your parents gave you your precious body and so many other people have contributed to you in various ways. If you do not use your life to practice hard and get some results, you are being unjust to all who have given so much, and there is no way you can repay them.

After one has established great faith and developed great angry determination the third requirement for practice is to “investigate Chan.” In Chinese this is called *tsan chan*. The purpose is to give rise to the great doubt. This great doubt is not the ordinary doubt of suspicion or skepticism, but in fact, of having absolute faith in the method of practice. The doubt refers to the questioning attitude that one must have in order to investigate Chan. We use the method as a guide to ask ourselves what we originally are. The Buddha said that all sentient beings have buddha-nature, so why is it that I cannot recognize myself as a buddha? If I am not a buddha, then after all, who am I? We do not try to answer these questions using our knowledge, experience, or reasoning. Rather, we continuously ask ourselves until all thoughts suddenly vanish, the mind and environment disappear, and we are naturally in an enlightened state.

## Is Practice Necessary?

From Chan Newsletter No. 15, August, 1981

*Spoken at Columbia University*

In the West as well as in the East, there are many who have the misconception that Chan just emphasizes direct pointing to the mind and dispenses with all methods of cultivation. This misconception may arise from the view that, since everyone is originally a buddha and already enlightened, there is no need to practice. The second misconception is that, yes, we do have to practice, but all that is required is to sit, sit, and sit. A story from the early Chan School in China illustrates this second misconception. As a monk, Mazu Daoyi (709-788) spent a lot of time meditating. One day, while Mazu was sitting in deep meditation, Master Nanyueh Huaijang (677-744), sat next to him and started rubbing a brick with his sleeve. Mazu asked, "Why are you rubbing that brick?" Nanyueh replied, "I am polishing it until it becomes a mirror." Mazu said, "That's strange, I never heard that rubbing a brick could make it into a mirror." Whereupon the master said: "And I never heard that one can become a buddha by sitting."

It is impossible to become enlightened merely by sitting. But even more unlikely is the idea that without any practice at all one is naturally an enlightened buddha. Nevertheless, there are many who believe that not being enlightened is enlightenment itself and accordingly, there is no need to practice. A lot of people believe in this theory because it is such an easy path. For a period of time in America, bohemians took the free and easy lifestyle of the poet Hanshan (Cold Mountain) as the spirit of Chan. Buddhism terms this type of practice “the natural outer path.” You should know that the true practice of Chan follows a definite course with a basis and various ascending levels, each with its own accompanying method.

Everyone is most comfortable in cool or moderate temperatures, neither extremely hot nor extremely cold. Our practice should be the same, not too hot and not too cold. That is, you should not be overanxious to get rid of vexations or to seek wisdom and, on the other hand, you should not take it easy and be lax. This is called the Middle Way.

In the Buddhist sutras, coolness corresponds to wisdom and heat to vexations. However, extreme cold also represents vexations. There are two categories of hells – some are boiling hot and some are freezing cold. What is hell? Hell is the place of suffering, and suffering means vexations. Our objective is to replace vexations (caused either by over-anxiety or laxity) with the cool refreshment of wisdom.

Is there really such a thing as heat and cold? That is to say, does hell, or suffering, really exist? Depending on your mental state, you could say that there really is and you could also say that there really isn't. When you feel subject to vexations, then heat and cold are very

real; when you don't feel any vexations, then heat and cold simply disappear, along with the hells. Most people are afraid to fall into hell and desire to go to heaven. But in reality, both of them are vexations. Just as dreading cold or heat amounts to the same thing. So, if you get to heaven out of a desire for happiness, that happiness will also be a vexation. Therefore, you can't have one without the other. If hell exists, heaven also exists. But when your mind is free of vexations, both the hells and the heavens would cease to exist. Thus, from the standpoint of Chan there is no heaven, no hell, no Buddha, and no sentient beings. That is to say there are no vexations.

But, based on this view that there is no hell and no heaven, if you say you do not have any vexations, that is also a vexation. Any person who feels the presence or absence of vexations is not qualified to say there is no heaven or hell, nor is he qualified to say there are no sentient beings and no Buddha. In the *Vimalakirti Sutra* we find that if your mind is pure and without vexations, the land you are living in would also be pure and absent of vexations. Then would there be any heat or cold in that land? At that time, cold is just heat, heat is just cold; vexations are just wisdom and sentient beings are just the Buddha.

But now, no matter what I may say, it is obviously very hot in this meditation hall. Should we deceive ourselves by saying it is not hot while we are sweating and nearly fainting from the heat? And in the winter, when this place becomes very drafty, should we deny that it is freezing cold? Heat is just heat and cold is just cold. How can we say that there is no such thing? Are the sutras trying to deceive people by saying that cold is hot and hot is cold?

No, the sutras are not deceiving us. It is only when our mind is scattered and has not settled down yet, that we feel the changes in temperature. When our mind is in a unified state and does not wander outwards, we have already forgotten the existence of our body and bodily sensations; that is, we don't feel environmental factors such as temperature impinging on our body. Then, at that point, we would be naturally qualified to say that there is no such thing as hot or cold. It would not even occur in our minds.

## Opening up to Nature

From Chan Newsletter No. 16, September, 1981

*Spoken during an outdoor picnic.*

Within the confines of your own home you may feel you are the master, but if many others live there, the sense of being in your own space begins to diminish. When you go into the country, the expanse of sky and the earth form one big universal house and you can feel very small. At the same time, in that great open space you would feel that all nature is yours, and even with other people there, you still feel a sense of spaciousness. Therefore, after a period of staying indoors, people should go outside and experience, on the one hand, the smallness of themselves, and on the other, the largeness of themselves. In reality, our sense of largeness or smallness is entirely relative to how we see our surroundings.

Hanshan, a famous poet of the Tang dynasty, wrote that the clouds were his blanket, a rock was his pillow, and the earth was his bed. Because of his spacious attitude, though he owned nothing, there was also nothing that was not his. Such a person can live very freely and easily, without vexations.

Since people might feel a bit lonely coming out into nature by themselves, they tend to go out in groups. But often they just transplant their own little world out into the big world, and they still feel separation: “I’m with *these* people, not with *those*.” We should not be like a snail that carries its house on its back and shrinks back into it when another creature comes along. It is better not to put people into categories based on your social distance from them, whether or not you know them. It is also good to feel intimate with creatures around you – the birds, butterflies, and so on. Just as smoke from a chimney disperses into the air, we should disperse our sense of “group” or “family” and truly participate in the life around us.

If we come out here and just talk about the same things we talk about all the time, we may as well have stayed at home. When we visit nature we should put down everyday small-talk, subjective mental activity, judging and discrimination, and just open up and observe nature. Starting from the time of the Buddha, it was almost always the custom for those who have left home life to spend some time practicing in the mountains. Generally the hut they lived in was made so that it could be put up and dismantled very quickly so that the person could move on to another place. The purpose was to live a life that would not foster a group mentality, but rather to cultivate a holistic attitude where one would feel at one with all lives and the universe. Originally Shakyamuni Buddha did not set out to form a defined group or stay in any one place, because that would promote exclusive thinking, distinguishing between inside and outside, big and small, yours and mine.

So, on this outing we should experience the greatness of nature.

If we can truly open up to nature and nature accepts us, then, like the poet Hanshan, we are as spacious as nature itself. When we first arrived at this spot, one little boy was afraid of all the gypsy moths crawling on the ground. They do have a rather strange and scary look about them, being all furry and everything, and they eat the leaves off the trees. But when you think about it, human beings are nothing but big bugs themselves. We are also hairy and eat vegetation; only it's made into sandwiches. People tend to see themselves as exceptional compared to others and to nature, as if they were the crown of creation—an attitude that derives from our ability to reason and acquire knowledge. But actually, nature itself makes no distinction between intelligent and stupid.

The *Amitabha Sutra* says that in the Pure Land, the grass and trees are all very pure and majestic, and the breeze and the birds all speak the Buddhadharma. If people can cast off self-centeredness and just see themselves as part of nature, then when the wind blows and the birds sing, they would hear the Buddhadharma. With a pure and equal mind, there is no place that is not the Pure Land.

## **Right Attitudes as an Aid to Practice**

From Chan Newsletter No. 17, November, 1981

When you start practicing meditation, your first goal is to learn your method to the point where body discomforts are not a problem and the mind is fairly well settled. The next phase of practice is to use the method to unify body with mind, and then with self and universe. When body and mind are one, you are comfortable and at ease physically and mentally. If you can go further to where self and environment are one, you will feel that nothing in the world is separate from you, and everybody's well-being is your direct concern. If you have not progressed this far, just continue your regular meditation, but also cultivate wholesome attitudes in your daily life. Realize that your ways of thinking contain great potential, and if you direct your mind correctly and act accordingly, you will achieve your goal easier than with meditation alone.

We should work on our attitudes toward ourselves and towards others. First, we should give up at least some of our selfishness. If we do this, our vexations will lessen and we will be more able to help others. What is selfishness? It means seeking more of what we

desire and trying to avoid what we dislike. Both attitudes are self-centered. In fact, the prevailing modern mentality is to be overconcerned with one's own benefit. So although the standard of living today may be high, people are spiritually lacking, unable to find security, tranquility, and happiness.

A good solution is the attitude that whatever comes will come in due time, and whatever goes will go in due course. Whatever you have is yours, but there is no reason to be proud of your successes or remorseful about your failures. There is no use in worrying about possible future misfortunes or dreaming about a golden future. Our present situation depends very much upon our family background, our education, and our own efforts. We can easily recognize these factors because they relate to *this* life, but there are many circumstances that cannot be explained by these factors alone. For instance, two people of the same background and intelligence may not meet with similar fortunes. This is because our karma does not pertain only to this life but has been influenced by countless past lives. Thus, if we meet with misfortune we should view it as repaying a former debt, and we should feel happy that in repaying the debt we now owe less. On the other hand, if we meet with success, this means that we are withdrawing the wealth we have deposited in our past lives, so there is no reason to feel any pride. In fact, the more wealth we take out, the less will remain in the invisible "bank." So we should take care not to exhaust our deposit, and we must even make an effort to deposit more by engaging in meaningful activities. If we accept the truth of karma, we will not harbor so much resentment, and we will be able to take more positive actions in shaping our future.

As for others, we are often overly critical and expect too much. We are upset if they are less than perfect according to our preconceived ideas of them. If we were more forgiving and compassionate, we would ask ourselves how we would act in a similar position. As a result, we would be less vexed, others will find us easier to befriend, and they may even turn to us for help. There is a saying that fish cannot live in water that is absolutely clear. In other words, we should be satisfied with less than perfection from others.

There is no denying that some people have bad intentions. There are those who will keep their distance when you really need help, and when you are in a good situation they offer you their help, hoping you will reciprocate. But you should not think of them as evil. If people take advantage of you, be thankful for the chance to repay a karmic debt. If you add resentment and revenge to an already difficult situation, the other person will respond in kind, and so it goes in an endless cycle. Rather, move them with compassion, let the incident go, and the next time, offer your help without reservation. He may be touched and become your best friend. There is a common phrase in Buddhism to the effect that “one cannot conceive of all causes and conditions.” What this means is that relationships and situations constantly change, and we cannot predict what may happen even a second from now. If someone deceives you, it is a result of a combination of contributing causes and conditions. They may act differently given a different set of causes and conditions. A proper understanding of this truth will not only dispel aversion or resentment towards something that happens to you, but will allow you to influence others for the good, thus creating a better environment for everyone.

## Strictness and Laxity

Chan Newsletter No. 18, December, 1981

Once, when I was giving a Chan retreat in Taiwan, a certain middle-aged Chinese woman who lives in Florida returned to Taiwan on a visit. She expressed a desire to join a Chan retreat with me but I said, "No, you have come to Taiwan on a pleasure trip. You should be enjoying yourself, not undertaking a difficult practice." But she said, "The opportunity for this kind of practice is very hard to come by. I would like to give it a try." I asked her, "Can you meditate?" She said, "No." I said, "If you cannot meditate, how can you participate in the retreat?" She answered, "I haven't come here to practice meditation. I have come here to discipline my mind." I said, "This is very interesting. Okay, I'll let you try. When everyone gets up in the morning, you may continue to sleep. During the meditation periods, if you wish, you can get up and take a walk. If you feel bored, you can always leave the meditation hall. If you feel inclined to sit, you may join the others in the hall so long as you do not disturb their practice. You do not even have to sit on a cushion; you can even sit on a chair."

When the woman heard this, she said, "This is all quite fine, but why are you treating me differently from the others?" I said, "I don't believe you are really ready to practice. I think you have come here basically to have a nice time."

There was another woman participant who was more advanced in years and although she had studied meditation, I had also given her permission to take it easier because she told me, "I am very old already and I cannot take a very rough schedule. If I don't get enough sleep, I may not be able to last through the day. If I sit for too long a stretch, my back and legs will hurt and I won't be able to stand it." So I told them, "The two of you are a special case. You should both sleep in the same room. In fact, it does not matter whether you show up on time for meals or not. You are free to do what you like."

In the beginning the two ladies were having a good time. After sitting for a time in the meditation hall, when they felt a bit tired they would look at each other, and if one was ready to get up, the other would also get up. They came and left the hall together. In the evening when one was ready to go to sleep, the two would go off to sleep, even though the others were still meditating. After three days of this they noticed that everyone else was practicing very hard and they began to feel strange. They asked me, "What have we come here for?" I said, "Haven't you come here to practice?" They answered, "But if we continue the way we have for the last three days, after seven days it is doubtful whether we would get any benefit from this retreat." I said, "In that case would you like to join the others? However, I will not enforce any strict rules on you; you can still do whatever you like." So the two ladies decided to try

imitating the others and follow the strict rules.

On the fourth day, they went through a lot of pain and suffering. By the fifth day, they developed a strong sense of shame. The older woman thought her days were numbered and she did not have much time left for practice; the woman from Florida thought it was very rare indeed to be able to return to Taiwan and practice on a retreat like this. She should not have wasted her time. She thought, "Even if I die in the meditation hall, so be it. I will not get up to go to sleep earlier; I will do just as the young people here are doing." In fact, when she noticed some of the others moving around, she thought, "These youngsters really don't have any idea what the practice is all about. Only we older ones know what it means to practice. Our time is almost up; they are still young and healthy. Why don't they work harder?"

Once, the older woman sat without moving for a long time. The younger woman from Florida thought, "She is so old and yet she can sit there not moving for so long. I must be able to do the same thing." So she was actually competing with the old lady. After two hours she could not take it anymore. She was ready to stand up, but saw that the old lady was still sitting there. And she decided, "Forget about it! I would rather die in the meditation hall than get up from my seat. If the old lady can do it, I can do it." In the end, the old woman sat for four hours and she sat for six hours straight. Out of all the participants on the retreat, it was those two, and especially the woman from Florida, who obtained the best result.

This shows that in the practice of Chan, there are no hard and fast rules regarding strictness or laxity. Rather, it varies according to different situations. As a rule, if you do not enforce strict rules on

young people, they may take it too easy and eventually just leave. But older people and those in special situations may feel a strong sense of shame in that they may lose the opportunity to practice and regardless of the looseness of the rules, they may instead work very hard and achieve the best results.

## Where is my Master?

From Chan Newsletter No. 19, February, 1982

When Chan Master Gaofeng Yuanmiao (1238-1295) met Chan Master Xueyan Zuqin (1216-1287), the latter asked him: "You've been practicing for so long. At this point, do you have mastery of yourself when you are awake?" What Xueyan meant was, when you are awake, can you not think about things you should not, and can you not do what you should not? Gaofeng immediately replied: "Yes." This is already very good. Only someone who has practiced for a long time would be able to say yes. Xueyan questioned him again: "At night in your dreams, do you have mastery of yourself?" And again Gaofeng answered, "Yes." Xueyan then asked a third question: "When you are sleeping and not dreaming, where is the master then?"

Now Gaofeng had already been working on *wu* for quite a long time, but this question completely stumped him. [The practice of asking a question like, "What is *wu* (emptiness)?" is called *huatou* (Japanese, *wato*), and is related to the practice of *gong'an* (Japanese, koan).] He repeated the question to himself but could not give an

answer. So Xueyan told Gaofeng: "From now on, do not study Buddhadharma, do not read sutras or commentaries; just practice. And how does one practice? When you are hungry, eat; when you are sleepy, go to sleep. After sleeping, get up and practice."

From that time onward, when Gaofeng was hungry, he ate, when he felt tired, he slept, and just tried to practice hard. And what was his practice? He asked the question, "Where is my master?" Even during his sleep, he continued, "Where is my master?"

There are various stages involved here. The first one is whether we can be our own master when we are awake. What we do not want to think, we will not think; what we do not want to do, we will not do. How many of you can be your own master in this sense? If not, why not? By answering positively to the first question, Gaofeng showed that he was on a higher level of attainment than an ordinary person.

To be your master in dreams is an even higher attainment. It means that you can control your own behavior in your dreams, and moreover, can control the type and content of the dreams. You will not have random or meaningless dreams, and while dreaming, have a very clear mind. You are actually still practicing while dreaming. You will always maintain right mindfulness or virtuous thoughts, that is, you will not do or think anything in the dream which that is not considered permissible in daily life. To be your own master in your dreams means continuing the same practice while dreaming as during the day. If you prostrate to the Buddha during the day, then you will continue prostrating in the dream. If you recite Buddha's name, then even in dreams you still recited Buddha's name. If you are delivering sentient beings, then you also deliver

sentient beings in your dreams. If you are working on a *huatou* then even in dreams the *huatou* will not leave you.

Not to have dreams at all is on a higher level still, and difficult to accomplish. It is already very good if you can reach the level where you no longer have any confusing or evil dreams, but it is very hard for the ordinary person to not dream at all. Sages have dreamless sleep; they are just in a state of rest. Master Gaofeng had already reached the level where, at least most of the time, he was able to sleep without dreaming. But does that mean that all of his problems had been resolved? Actually, being able to sleep without dreaming only indicates that he had very good samadhi power. It does not necessarily mean he was enlightened.

Therefore, the question that Xueyan put to him was very appropriate, and it became a *huatou* for Gaofeng. He just kept on asking himself, “[When I’m asleep and not dreaming,] where is my master?” Because asking this question aroused a great doubt in his mind, Gaofeng kept asking this question for five years. However, remember that even before he started on this *huatou*, he had already reached the state where he was his own master when awake as well when he was dreaming. So his practice involved a very long process up to this point.

One evening Gaofeng woke up from sleep and reached for his pillow. At that point, the pillow fell to the floor with a thud. At the sound, Gaofeng shouted, “Aha! Now I have found you!” The cloud of doubt was dispelled; the bottom fell from “the barrel of black pitch,” and he saw the light. This is an example of one practitioner’s path to enlightenment.

## Emptiness and Existence

From Chan Newsletter No. 20, March, 1982

How we perceive “existence” and “emptiness” can reveal how shallow or deep our practice is. We need to understand this to avoid getting stuck and to be able to make progress. Before we have gained some real benefit from practice, we perceive phenomena as real and existent. In this ordinary state of mind, the “self” is still deeply embedded in things: “my” body, “my” house, “my” friends, and so on. After practicing well, we may reach a state of concentration where there are only a few thoughts in our mind. At this time, the sense of self is lessened, and we may feel that we have finally cast away the world and everything in it. “I have thrown off all thinking.” “I am enjoying the bliss of liberation.” “I feel so carefree and light.” Dwelling on feelings of liberation and happiness like this only means that one’s perception of “emptiness” is false and one still sees phenomena as existent.

When one reaches the state of only one thought, or one-mind, one may feel unified with the universe and that one’s powers are unlimited. One also feels great sympathy and compassion for all

sentient beings. At this point one is at the stage of “double affirmation,” or a deeper level of existence. Although there is an expanded sense of self, this sense is not selfish but rather, one feels a sense of energy and responsibility. The degree of mental power depends on the strength of one’s previous practice. One who is not backed up by a strong practice can still reach one-mind but will not have as great a sense of energy and responsibility – will not likely give rise to the feeling of being a savior. Therefore, great religious leaders are a rare occurrence in human history.

At the next stage of no-thought, or no-mind, one is said to be in the state of “double negation” in that one takes emptiness itself as empty. If a person is attached to emptiness (as in stage two), it is called “stubborn emptiness” or “illusory emptiness.” But at the stage of no-mind one actually recognizes that even this emptiness is empty. Since one has emptied out emptiness, then existence is re-asserted, but it is an existence of non-attachment. One will definitely not feel that his world is meaningless, nor, if asked “How is your practice doing?” will one give a reply like “Oh, It doesn’t really matter if I practice or not.”

We usually feel something “exists” when we have strong feelings about it. If emptiness is also based on feelings and emotions, then it is not true emptiness. It is only when, not bound by feelings and emotional attachments, one genuinely experiences things as existing just as they are, that is, at the same time genuinely existent and also genuinely empty. For practitioners, only this can be considered the first level of entering the door of Chan.

Question: Can progress in practice be described as a series of negating one’s previous stage of attainment and affirming

something new?

Sheng Yen: In actual fact the previous stage and what you are affirming now are not two different things. We say that vexations are just bodhi—that is, they are not two separate things. So “negation” is not saying that you have to detest or get rid of vexations before you give rise to wisdom. You cannot achieve nirvana by negating samsara—they are one thing. It is only that in the process of the practice one’s perception of it varies according to one’s experience.

## **Bitter Practice**

From Chan Newsletter No. 21, May, 1982

Many of the names by which we know Chan masters are not their family names but Dharma names, bestowed often by followers. Often they were names of mountains where the master settled. These names often reflect the wintry environment of the places where they practiced. Very rarely do we find names associated with summer. Winter, symbolized by falling snow, represents the spirit of Chan, whereas the spirit of summer is quite different. In hot weather it is very easy to feel sleepy and dull-minded, while cold weather, especially in the mountains, is very good for meditation. To give a few examples, one master's name was "Snowy Peak," another was named "Snow Cave," then there was "Snow Ravine," and "Snow Cliff." These Chan masters sought out places where there was a lot of snow.

Perhaps someone practicing on a mountain may be sitting poorly and think, "Maybe I will take a break and stroll down the mountain for a while." But when there is a heavy snowfall, all the roads are blocked off and if you were to venture out you may end

up falling off the mountain to your death. At times like that, even if you don't want to meditate, you still have to meditate. And with snow in every direction not only can't you go anywhere else but there is nothing to eat except snow.

Once when Master Ouyi was practicing at Chiu-hwa Mountain there was a tremendous snowstorm. There wasn't much around to eat and having very few clothes on, he was freezing. He noticed a pine tree that had a few nuts on it, but after eating the nuts he was still cold. So he made a fire with the nut shells. Then he started wondering when the snow would stop falling. The prospects didn't look very good and the things available to eat would only keep him alive for another day at most, so he thought: "This is it for me; it's probably my fate to die here." Originally he hoped to get some food into his belly and find some more clothing to relieve the cold, but as soon as he accepted the fact that he would die, he didn't feel like eating anymore and his body no longer felt cold. He just sat there waiting to freeze to death. Then he actually did freeze.

After a number of days some people passed by and saw him sitting there, and said, "Master! What are you doing here? We haven't seen you for a long time!" When he heard the sound of voices, he opened his eyes and said, "That is strange. I haven't died yet!"

Another case of bitter practice was Master Xuyun (Empty Cloud). One time he ran into a blizzard on the road. He had nothing to eat and his body was sick. Then he came upon a small shack on the side of the road. It had walls but no roof. Nevertheless, he went inside and sat down leaning against the wall where there was a little pile of snow. Like Master Ouyi he sat down preparing to die. The

snow piled up higher and higher until he was surrounded completely by snow. But at this point he had already entered into samadhi. Several days later a beggar came by and, brushing the snow out of the way, saw there was someone sitting there. Thereupon he pulled some straw off the walls and made a fire. Then he took out a pot, melted some snow in it and cooked up gruel out of some millet he was carrying. When Xuyun felt that sensation of heat, he revived. He saw somebody making porridge for him to eat and he did not die after all.

At the Chan Center here we have heat in the winter, fans in the summer, and plenty of food in the refrigerator. Nobody needs to feel that they are about to die here. That kind of feeling would never come up here. In fact, there is no example in the history of the Chan sect of a patriarch who practiced in such comfortable surroundings as we have. If every one of us takes this spirit of patriarchs as a standard, we will always feel ashamed. We would constantly be aware that we are not practicing hard enough and that our resolve is not sufficiently firm.

Some people have to suffer before they can really begin to work. Without suffering they cannot arouse any strength from the practice. These people have a very intimate relationship to pain and suffering. It is difficult for most people to accept the idea of death, but someone who suffers to the point where they are ready to die is very likely to get power from the practice.

## The Other Side

From Chan Newsletter 22, June, 1982

Once, while on a solitary retreat in the mountains of Taiwan, I walked down the steps of my hut, when my mind was suddenly filled with doubt. "Who was it that just walked down the steps?" It was me. "Who is the person standing here now?" It is also me. Then, was the "me" who walked downstairs the same as the "me" standing here now? Am I two different people? I became so wrapped up in these questions that I did not eat that day. This is an example of a situation where the doubt sensation arises spontaneously. There is a lot of power to that natural doubt. However, most people on retreat cannot cope with the doubt sensation spontaneously. Therefore, we give them a method such as a question, "Who am I?" to help arouse the doubt.

Of course, if you are not practicing hard at the time, this sort of question would not be very useful. On a retreat that I held, I asked student, "What is your name?" He replied, "Chen." Pointing to a name card pasted on the wall, I said, "That's wrong. Chen is over there!" He said, "What am I doing over there?" At that time he

couldn't figure out who he was. For over twenty years he had identified himself by his name. But now he realized his name had nothing to do with him. So who was he? From that time on, the doubt sensation arose in his mind. It's like being in a pitch-black room or inside an iron ball. You cannot see anything clearly at all but you know there must be some brightness outside and you really want to know what it is.

Once there was a baby who was born in prison. His father was related to the emperor of the previous dynasty, and when the new dynasty took over, they imprisoned the family members of the old dynasty. So this infant prince was doomed to spend his whole life behind bars and he didn't know of anything different. He thought that life was just like this and he never suspected there was anything outside. One day an old man got sentenced to life in prison and was thrown in the same jail.

He said to the young prince, "Since I was sentenced to life, I am thinking of escaping. Why don't you come along? We can either try to get out ourselves, or we can wait for someone to save us."

The boy said, "Don't be crazy. Here we have plenty of food, and clothes to wear. It's really pretty good in here. You're so old already, what do you want to out there for?"

The old man answered, "You don't understand, son. To lose your freedom is a painful thing."

The boy asked, "What's freedom?"

"Outside of this prison is freedom."

Surprised, the boy said, "Do you mean I'm not free now?"

Everyday, this old man constantly thought about getting out. One day, after he finished eating, he broke his bowl and used the

chips to start digging a hole.

The prince stood there laughing at him. "What are you doing that for? You're so old, by the time you dig your way out, you'll be dead. Besides, if the guards find out, they'll give you a terrible beating. So what's the point? It's so comfortable here."

In fact, the boy even told the guards, "This crazy old man is planning to escape."

After that they beat up the old man and locked him up for a few days without food. The prince was disturbed by that and he felt sorry for him. But as soon as he got out, the old man started digging again.

The prince thought, "This man must be obsessed." So he asked the old man, "What is it out there that tempts you so much?"

The old man said, "You just don't know. Out there is freedom and in here is just a place to punish criminals. I prefer to live outside for one hour than die here in this jail."

When he heard that, the boy was strangely moved. He thought, "Maybe there is something to what the old man says. It must be better out there; otherwise he would not be willing to keep on digging after all the beating and starvation." So he started helping the old man. But the boy was only a child after all. After digging for a while, he gave up and threw aside the chip. He said, "This is not fun anymore. What's so good out there anyway?" So the prince just watched the old man digging and digging. This went on for over a year, with the old man constantly working at it. The young prince would sometimes help him out, and then he would give up and rest. Then the old man would speak some words of encouragement and the boy would be moved and pick up the tile again. Eventually, the

old man finally got through the hole, and escaped with the prince.

When he got outside, the boy exclaimed, "The world is so big! Why didn't tell me about this sooner?"

The old man said, "I've been telling you all along how wonderful it was out here, but you wouldn't believe me."

"Yes, but the way you described it is nothing like what I see now!"

In terms of practicing Chan, you could say that the old man represents someone who has already had a glimpse of his own buddha-nature. He knows how good it is on the other side. So he is willing to practice with unceasing effort. Most people don't believe in their own buddha-nature or they don't believe it strongly enough. Thus, they may be moved to practice, but their lack of faith keeps them from practicing hard. Similarly, before you are able to give rise to a strong doubt sensation which will keep you practicing hard, you must first have attained some response from the practice. Otherwise, even if you use a method such as *huatou*, it would not bring up a doubt. It would only be the same as reciting a mantra over and over again. At most it would bring you to a state of deep concentration, or *samadhi*. But if you wish to use the *huatou* to attain enlightenment, you must first have a strong foundation of meditation practice.

## Cultivating Your Own Field

From Chan Newsletter No. 23, August, 1982

The purpose of cultivation is not to seek anything but to discover the faults in our own character and behavior. By opening ourselves to self-investigation, we hope to find out where our problems lie, and if after searching within ourselves we can see these faults and problems, this in itself is the fruits of practice. A woman on retreat told me that the more she thinks about her shortcomings, the more disgusted she is with herself. She said, "Probably I just don't have the ability to practice meditation." As I stood in front of her, the light overhead cast my shadow on the wall. I asked her, "When I am standing still, is my shadow moving?" She said, "No." Then I walked slowly away, and the shadow followed me along. I walked quickly and the shadow kept pace with me. No matter how I tried, I couldn't get rid of it. Like the shadow that sticks to us, wherever there is a self, there will be problems. But if you were to say, "I want to throw away my 'self'," that "I" who wants to get rid of the self is still there. This amounts to the self trying to throw away the self, which is impossible.

It would be like trying to get rid of the shadow while your body is still there.

This being the case, is meditation useful? Of course it is, since we can make progress. Wanting to be rid of one's faults may be a good thing, but practice does not consist in disowning one's faults because the self who owned them would still be there. No, the proper method is to decrease the importance of the self in your life, until it becomes so light that your faults will naturally diminish. We practice meditation not to seek anything but to discover the faults in our character and behavior. By opening ourselves to self-investigation, we hope to find out where our problems lie. If after searching within ourselves, we can see those faults and problems, then this in itself is the fruits of the practice.

However, you cannot be overly anxious to achieve fast results. According to Buddhadharma, it is possible to become enlightened even in one lifetime. But to completely eliminate afflictions and purify vexations takes three incalculable eons. Since our life is only a few decades long, we cannot expect to attain all that within one lifetime. Perhaps some people may feel: "Well, if I can't attain it in this life, it doesn't really seem worth it to practice." Actually, from the time of Shakyamuni Buddha's enlightenment, no one else has attained supreme buddhahood. The rest of us are just following his example, practicing. You should just concentrate on cultivating your own field. Of course you can try to calculate how much fruit you will attain from your labors, but it won't be accurate, and there's no need to do that. Just plant the seeds and eventually you will reap the harvest.

What about getting rid of vexations by purposely seeking out

suffering and pain? If you have gotten good results from a retreat, that is very good. But even if you just passed the week in pain and suffering, you have still gotten something out of the retreat. At least you are paying off karmic debts. However, I know a practitioner who believed that she could melt away karma by purposely sitting there in pain. She also thought she could melt away other people's karma by taking on their pain. This is a wrong attitude. Removing karmic obstruction is not done by purposely looking for hardship. Pain will come by itself; to look for it is misguided. This is like standing before a judge who just sentenced you for a crime you committed. If you slapped yourself in the face a few times and told the judge, "No need for a jail sentence, your honor, I just punished myself," would the judge suspend your sentence? Striking yourself will not get your sentence suspended. You must still receive legal retribution for your misdeed.

Similarly, it is useless to deliberately punish yourself in order to reduce obstructions. The purpose of practice is to train your mind, not to experience suffering. However, in the course of practice, if pain and suffering come of themselves, you should accept them. So, although you should accept suffering as a form of retribution, neither should you seek it out. Otherwise, you may even increase our obstructions instead melting them away.

## Letting Go

From Chan Newsletter No. 24, September, 1982

Ming dynasty Chan Master Hanshan Deqing (1546-1623) [not to be confused with Hanshan (ca. 800-900 CE), the Tang dynasty poet] taught people to practice by letting go of thoughts as they arise in the mind. Whenever a thought arises, immediately let it go. This does not mean resisting or rejecting the thought; it just means not letting it affect you. So, if you are not getting anywhere in your meditation, the reason is probably that you are unable to let go of your thoughts. Even when you are paying very close attention to your method, stray thoughts may appear. This is very common, especially in the beginning. But rather than letting it disturb you, let it be a cause of your working harder on the method.

The problem with stray thoughts is that the more you try to reject them, the more they will surface, because the effort to reject them is itself a stray thought. Like flies hovering around a plate of sweets, if you shoo them away, they will be back the moment you take your attention off the plate. The best way to deal with this is simply to ignore the wandering thoughts, and eventually they will

go away, just like the flies.

The second problem is not being aware that you are having stray thoughts. By the time you become aware, you are already following a whole new train of thoughts other than the method. This is like dozing while riding a horse that leaves the path to go grazing. By the time you wake up, you are already off the path. This type of wandering thought is most likely to happen when you are mentally or physically tired.

When you realize you have wandering thoughts, don't get upset. Anxiety will just cause more thoughts to appear. Instead of regretting that you were immersed in wandering thoughts, just let them go; relax your mind and go back to your method. To practice letting go, first, let go of the past and future and just be in the present. That is not as easy as it sounds, since stray thoughts usually are connected with the past or the future. But even if you are able to let go the past and the future, at some point, you must also let go of the present. Letting go of the present has two aspects: the external, meaning the environment; and the internal, which consists of your body as well as your mind. First we must give up the outer environment because contact with it through our senses will lead to sense impressions, which can lead to thoughts. If we weren't aware of anything outside it would be impossible for thoughts to even arise. The temperature, cars, birds, wind, people walking, light or darkness, the sound of someone breathing, all influence you to give rise to stray thoughts. Since it is normally impossible to meditate where there are no outside impressions, the best thing is to let go of sensations coming from the environment. Until you reach the point of concentrating only on your mind and your body, you will hear

noises from outside, but just drop them as they arise.

After letting go of the environment, let go of yourself beginning with the body. Long ago, there was a Chan practitioner who always fell asleep while meditating. To cure the problem, he placed his meditation seat on a rock at the edge of a cliff. He knew that if he dozed off he would fall into the ravine. A person like this will practice very well because he is prepared to die if he does not practice well. So, if you're always worried about all kinds of bodily discomfort—being hot or cold, pain in the legs, itching, and so on—and indulging your body at every turn, then you will never enter a good condition of meditation. Some people may think it's easier to let go of the body than the environment, but it is extremely difficult not to pay attention to your body. When you itch, it seems the longer you try to endure it, the worse it gets. So you think that if you just scratch it, the itch would go away. But once you give in and scratch, another part of your body will itch. If you can just ignore it, the itch will eventually go away. Similarly, to deal with pain you should not tense up as that will make your whole body painful. Just relax and isolate the pain and think, "It's just my knee that's hurting; that has nothing to do with the rest of me." Better, just observe the pain with the attitude of tolerant non-concern with your body. Observing your pain may make it seem more painful, but eventually it will disappear. After doing this, you will be able to return to your method with better concentration. If you just keep single-mindedly on the method, eventually you will forget even the existence of your body. When there is neither environment nor body, there is still one thought left, awareness of the self. The final step is to let go of even that, and that would be letting go of the mind.

## Practice is like Tuning a Harp

From Chan Newsletter No. 25, November, 1982

There are some people who practice what we call peaceful Chan. Those who practice this way give the impression of being very consistent, practicing all day every day. But such a person might practice for a while then think, "Oh! It's about lunchtime." After lunch they will rest for a while and then resume practicing. Suddenly, "It's about time to do my laundry." After the laundry they're a bit fatigued so they take a break. Soon it's time for dinner. After dinner, their stomach is a bit full so they have to wait a while before continuing to practice for a little while. Before you know it, it's time for bed. Some practitioners will continue doing this day after day for years and people will regard them as great practitioners. But, in fact, they may still be the same as when they began to practice. If they seem stable and free of vexations, it is because they do very little, perform no serious work, and avoid involvements or contacts.

I once met a monk who told me, "While I was practicing I attained great liberation."

I then asked, "At that time, is it correct that you never had worries about food or clothing, never had to deal with quarrelsome people?" This person answered, "Of course, I was practicing. People gave offerings of food and clothing and nobody ever came to quarrel with me." I then asked, "And now?" He told me he now had many vexations because the environment was different. I said to him, "If you attained great liberation then, why aren't you free from vexations now?" Actually, people like this will never become enlightened, never be a Chan master. They are just wasting their time, wasting their lives, wasting food.

There is yet another type who will work very hard for one or two days as if their life depended on it. But after a couple of days they get very tired, have a headache, their legs and back are sore and their whole body is hurting so that they can't even sit up. At this time they will say, "Maybe enlightenment isn't so easy, I'd better take a good rest. After my strength is built up I'll come back and practice." After their body has recovered and they feel well rested they will come back, in the same manner. However, there is really no difference between these two types of people. Again, people like these are often admired as great practitioners who throw their whole lives into the practice, but actually this kind of practice is of no use.

There is a third type who well remembers the Buddha's words that practice should be like the tuning of a harp. Just as strings of a harp should not be too loose or too tight, so one's practice should not be too loose or too tense. Some people take this to mean that one should practice very hard until tired, rest for a while, and then continue practicing. They believe they are practicing proper meditation. However, this is still useless. It's like climbing up a rope;

you climb very energetically for a while, but then you feel tired and take a rest, allowing yourself to slide back to where you started. You can't make progress that way. This third type of person needs the guidance of a good master to tell him or her when to practice energetically, and when to take a rest, without sliding backwards.

For example, a person meditating who hears the sound of bell may think, "Ah! Time is up. I should be tired now so I think I'll stretch my legs." At these moments, this person needs a good master to use very strong, even fierce, methods to make that person realize that though capable, their laziness is rendering their practice useless. People tend to easily forgive themselves, but with the strenuous prompting of a master, such a person may develop an "angry determination" in which there is a deep disgust for one's present state, and a strong determination to practice diligently.

It is very important for the master to recognize whether a practitioner's mind is ready to generate the "great doubt sensation." The master may even tell the disciple that they should rest before continuing. However, once it is clear that the student has aroused the great doubt sensation, the master will be like someone driving a herd of wild animals, and there can be no stopping. Unless the student has a prior medical condition, once the great doubt has been generated, their body can come to no harm from working very hard. This is because at this stage this person is in complete harmony with the universe. The power of the entire universe is available to the individual. So, at this point the master must push the practitioner to keep going and going in the hope that a world-shattering explosion will take place. If not, perhaps a smaller explosion. Of course, for those with the sharpest karmic roots, like the Sixth

Patriarch Huineng, none of this is necessary. Such a person will not need the guidance of a master. But for most people having a good master is needed to persevere and attain some good results.

## **Chan, Meditation, and Mysticism**

From Chan Newsletter No. 26, December, 1982

*Spoken at New York University*

Some people think Chan and meditation are one and the same—that Chan is meditation and meditation is Chan. This is not the case. Chan is actually the stage at which one has progressed through the various levels of meditation experience, but has transcended these stages. If one only practices meditation and does not transcend the meditation state, one can at most attain a mind that is unified and unmoving. This is called samadhi. When a person in samadhi re-enters the dynamic, everyday world, they would very likely revert to ordinary mind. To maintain the samadhi state one needs to practice continuously. It would be best to withdraw from everyday affairs and go to the mountains. However, even when a person in samadhi returns to the world, that person will be changed by virtue of having experienced samadhi. He or she would tend to be more stable and have a better understanding of the world than those who have never been in samadhi.

The true Chan experience goes beyond samadhi. When one's

mind reaches a very concentrated and unified state, the Chan method urges you to press on until even that unified mind is transcended—shattered or dissolved if you will—and one experiences no-mind. At this time the mind will not easily return to its original scattered state because it is not there. However, after a certain period one's residual attachments may cause the mind return to the ordinary, deluded state.

I describe the stages of practice as going from a scattered mind to a unified mind. This is the meditation state. But the final stage, called Chan, is reached when even this unified mind disappears. In Chan, even the unified mind is considered an attachment to a large self, as opposed to our normal small self. In the meditation state the self is limitless and unbounded, but there is still a self-center to which we are attached. Because of this attachment one still discriminates between the "real" and the "unreal." For example, religious figures often say they alone speak the truth. These positions are based on their religious experiences and the convictions which stem from them, but they make a clear separation between the "real" and the "unreal." This person will often feel they have left the false world and entered into a truer, more real kind of world. A feeling of opposition to the "false" world arises as this person has no wish to return to his previous state. So in this struggle to reject the false and cling to the real a kind of friction, or dualism, develops between these opposing worlds.

In Chan there is no bias towards the "real" or rejection of the "unreal." Chan encompasses the totality of all things and sees them as equal and not different. Thus, a characteristic of the Chan sect are the many stories and sayings, called *gong'ans* that seem paradoxical

or illogical. I myself have a saying, "Birds swim deep in the ocean; fish fly high in the sky." Is this nonsense? Actually it's very simple. Birds and fish are originally without names, why not call birds fish? Also, our lives are simply the way they are. What is wrong with them? What need is there to search after some real world? Why do we insist on seeing the world as confused and unhappy?

Each individual existence is real, but reality is not separate from illusion. Chan transcends the ordinary and then returns to the ordinary. But it would be deception to say that we already understand what Chan is. First, one must practice to attain a unified, concentrated state of mind, then cast off this mind and return to the ordinary world. At this stage one is truly liberated and free to roam in the world. To use an analogy, the ordinary mind sees mountains and rivers as mountains and rivers. Next one reaches a state where mountains are no longer mountains and rivers are no longer rivers. This is the mind of non-discrimination. Finally, even this state is transcended and we again see mountains and rivers as part of the ordinary world. This is the state of no-mind that but it has embraced the real world as it is. There is no distinction of "real" and "false." world.

So if one wants to compare Chan to mysticism, we may say that the practitioner has mystical experiences but Chan itself is not mystical. Rather, Chan is ordinary life. Actually, the mysticism spoken of in academia and books is not what I regard as genuine mysticism. Those who speak of mystical states but have never experienced them will of course think of them as strange and extraordinary. Perhaps when one first begins to practice meditation, or possibly through the practice of other religious disciplines, one

may have such an experience. At this point one would feel their state to be different from their ordinary, practical life. But, their experience is still not complete and their understanding is still vague and not totally clear. One still regards the experience as mystical and strange.

However, when one deeply experiences unified mind or the transcendence of Chan, this experience is not viewed as strange or extraordinary. On the contrary, the experience is seen as real and true; there is nothing mystical about it. It is simply normal, ordinary life. From this standpoint one may say that the world as ordinary people see it could be considered strange or mystical, while the world as enlightened people see it is true and ordinary. So, I would say that in Chan there is no mysticism at all!

## **Compassionate Contemplation**

From Chan Newsletter No. 27, February, 1983

The purpose of compassionate contemplation is to help us eliminate anger and arouse the desire to alleviate suffering in others. We practice compassionate contemplation with a mind of bodhi to help sentient beings free themselves from bodily and mental suffering, and if causes and conditions are right, to help them derive happiness from the Dharma, and ultimately to reach nirvana.

Here are some ways to practice compassionate contemplation. First, we contemplate how we tend to see sentient beings as beneficial or harmful to us, or as neither beneficial nor harmful. Therefore, we should contemplate our relationships to others to better understand how we can help them.

Second, we contemplate how we respond to others with like or dislike. We see that our feelings are often based upon the perceived benefit or harm we receive from others. If we understand that the mind is an ever-changing succession of sense impressions and delusory thoughts, we would see there is no reason to like or dislike our interactions with others.

Third, we investigate what really happens when we interact with others. We see that praise and blame are only sounds or vibrations entering our ears; a smile or a frown is only light rays perceived by our eyes. Just as the body is illusory, so are these external phenomena illusory. Once we realize this, we no longer need to give rise to feelings of like or dislike and we will treat all sentient beings as equal.

Fourth, we contemplate why sentient beings suffer, which is that they are ignorant of the true nature of the self. Up to now, there is still no true compassion in our contemplation. How can we feel compassion towards sentient beings that possess an illusory self? Not knowing why they act in certain ways, sentient beings don't know why they feel happiness or anger. They are attached to emotions and possessions and are fearful of loss. This causes suffering. They are not as free in body and mind as they imagine; they know they shouldn't do certain things but do them anyway, and this also causes suffering. Sometimes it seems we have two selves, each struggling towards different ends. Sentient beings are born, grow old, get sick, and eventually die. In the very short life span, each sentient being endures all kinds of afflictions of body and mind. Because of the suffering they undergo we should have compassion for them.

Finally, we contemplate sentient beings not as beneficial, harmful, or neutral, but as equals. We realize that our relationships with them are not fixed or unchanging. We cannot say that those with whom we now share affinity were not once our enemy or vice versa. There is no definite, unchanging relationship of closeness or adversity. Seen from the perspective of the infinite past, present, and

future, all sentient beings have had some interaction with each other in the past, and probably will have in the future. From this point of view we can see all sentient beings as equal to ourselves, and can feel compassion for them.

## The Four Marks of Self

From Chan Newsletter No. 28, March, 1983

In the *Diamond Sutra* the Buddha speaks of four ideas that a true bodhisattva does not attach to. These ideas, referred to as “characteristics” are: “self,” “other,” “sentient beings,” and “life-span.” Actually, all four characteristics derive from the first, the idea of self. What is meant here by the self is that which is mine, as well as that which is not mine, but which I desire. Except for that which we have but wish to get rid of, and that which we do not have but wish to obtain, there is nothing which can be termed self. However, most of the time we are probably not aware that we want to get rid of, or obtain something; all we are aware of is our own existence. First of all we are aware of our body and its needs: our body requires certain things, so we sense that there is a self that needs something. In other words, the body calls attention to the self. Second, the activities of the mind give us a sense of existing. Therefore, outside of the body and the mind there is no sense of self.

More precisely, it is the mind which experiences self-existence. But what is the mind? It is the non-stop continuous flow of thoughts.

Through spiritual cultivation we can come to realize that the self we normally experience is really unsubstantial. Thus, the self is subjective and originally non-existent; it exists only in the sense of body, the body's needs, and the constant flow of thoughts. This is the characteristic of self that the *Diamond Sutra* mentions.

As for the second characteristic, "others," it exists only through the sense of the self projecting its own existence to other beings. Due to our own sense of self, we experience others as distinct and opposite to us. Therefore, from the standpoint of the *Diamond Sutra*, if the self is originally non-existent, so are others non-existent; if I myself am not "here" then of course, others likewise are not "there." It is only because of our relations with others—the benefits they give us, the losses they bring to us, etc., that we sense our own existence as well as theirs.

There are four billion people in the world [as of 1983], but the number we are personally acquainted with is very few. The only people whose existence we deeply experience are those connected to us in terms of gain or loss. The rest of the people on the planet, we barely know exist; whether they are there or not doesn't really affect us that much. Others only exist in terms of their relationship with us, and when the self does not exist, these others also do not exist.

The third characteristic, "sentient beings," includes all that may not necessarily be related to us as "others," but still exist in the world with us. Those whose practice has already reached a very high stage have already solved their own problems and dilemmas; they naturally feel great compassion for all sentient beings. They go from having solved their own problems to taking on the problems

of sentient beings. The problems of sentient beings become their own. Yet from the point of view of the *Diamond Sutra*, if self does not exist, then neither do sentient beings exist. The Buddha said that even after all sentient beings are saved, no sentient beings are saved. In other words, if one has an idea that there are sentient beings to be saved, and of one saving sentient beings, then there is still the sense of a self.

The fourth characteristic, “life-span” looks at self from the point of view of time as experienced through death and rebirth. This characteristic derives from the ideas of self, others, and sentient beings. If there is no idea of self then an individual and separate life-span has no meaning. But sentient beings are attached to existence; they hope to live long and avoid an early death, to maintain security in their lives, now and for the future. They try to protect or insulate their lives in every way. However, for those without a sense of self, whether they die tomorrow or in ten thousand years is of no consequence. When one has experienced no-self, all these problems are settled.

To sum up, “self” refers to our own sense of existence; “others” refers to those with whom we have contact; “sentient beings” refers to the marks of “no-self” and “no-others” as extended to all sentient beings. Finally, “life-span” refers to the process of living—going from desire of long life, to having no concern about the length of one’s life and, in fact, not worrying about time at all. As the *Diamond Sutra* says, in the mind of a true bodhisattva the four characteristics become no self, no others, no sentient beings, and no life-span.

I once heard a *fashi* (Dharma master) speak on the four characteristics. Afterwards he asked the audience if they were able

to understand and put into practice what he said. Some people said yes and some understood nothing. The fashi then said, "I know that all of you can put into practice and understand the teaching of the four characteristics." Using an analogy, he said that normally, when a person is eating something very delicious, at that moment, they have no sense of others; otherwise they would want to share the food. Again, when there is a lot of work to be done, at this time there is no self, because without a self, there is no one who needs to work. When there is a disaster and a lot of people need to be helped or saved, during this time there are no sentient beings; otherwise one would be very busy saving sentient beings. When one is intent upon obtaining a lot of money they don't really need, then at this time there is no life, because at that time life doesn't really matter; it's only the money that's important.

Looking at it this way, it seems as though sentient beings are all very selfish. This is because in these situations the four characteristics are not empty as they should be—there is still a strong sense of self. It takes much practice before one can realize no self, no others, no sentient beings, and no life-span.

## **Buddha-Nature, Sentient Beings, and Ignorance**

From Chan Newsletter No. 31, August, 1983

Buddha-nature is pure and unchanging. However, if sentient beings are originally buddhas, how did we become impure and how did we fall into ignorance? When we say that sentient beings are originally buddhas we are stating a universal principle that everyone has the potential to discover their innate buddha-nature. We often hear the saying, "Anyone can become president of the United States." This means that any native-born citizen of the United States has the potential to become president. But that does not mean everyone *is* president. Similarly every sentient being is capable of becoming a buddha but not every sentient being has realized buddhahood.

How did sentient beings originate in the first place? No religion or philosophy has yet answered this question to everyone's satisfaction. Certainly it would be nice if we began as buddhas and did not suffer vexation. But Buddhism does not address these questions of origin, and will say only that there is no fixed point in time when sentient beings were created. If we say that God made

sentient beings, then many questions arise: Why did He create heaven and hell? Why did He create suffering? Why do sentient beings commit evil? Buddhism does not seek to answer these questions; it only tries to answer the question of why sentient beings suffer, and how suffering can be alleviated.

In one of the sutras, the Buddha tells the story of a man wounded by a poisoned arrow. This man begins to ask all kinds of questions about how he came to be wounded by a poisoned arrow. The Buddha said, rather than ask a lot of questions – what kind of poison was used, the lineage of the man who shot him, and so on – it would be wiser to remove the arrow and begin healing. Similarly, Buddhism tries to cure the disease of suffering, not to answer philosophical questions.

As to why we do not now have the purity of a buddha, it is because over countless lifetimes we have accumulated karma, doubts, and vexations that have clouded our minds with ignorance – in Sanskrit, *avidya*. Our inability to recognize our own original buddha-nature is a result of this ignorance. What then is *avidya*? Buddhism regards phenomena as occurring in time and space, are impermanent and changing. These characteristics are interdependent. For example, a movement in space takes place over time, and both conditions result in a change to our physical and psychological environment. Something that is universal and eternal is unchanging. It is impossible for a universal to exist “here” and not “there.” When we say that sentient beings are originally buddhas, we refer to their unchanging buddha-nature, not the local, temporary, and changing vexations they experience.

Let’s use the analogy of space: space is originally unchanging

but when enclosed by a container—round or square, large or small—the space *seems* to take on the shape of the container—it becomes round or square, large or small. Actually, the space itself remains unchanged; it just temporarily takes on the appearance of the container. Similarly, when the ordinary mind responds to a stimulus in the environment, its mental content changes accordingly and there is a potential for vexation to arise. This is avidya, a mental state of moment-to-moment change, which remains ignorant of the real nature of phenomena.

Ignorance has been present since time without beginning, causing sentient beings to continue the cycle of birth and death. But ignorance itself is not eternal, universal, or permanent. It is a space-time phenomenon that is continually in flux. When we use our practice to bring our minds to an unmoving state, avidya—in the form of greed, hatred, and ignorance—will not arise. In this state, our unchanging buddha-nature has a chance to be revealed. When our minds are not excited or tempted by the environment, ignorance does not exist for us. There is only buddha-nature.

Until we completely remove all ignorance, we continue to discriminate and use a mind limited by avidya to contain that which has no limits. When ignorance and its containers are removed only tathagata—the universal, unchanging buddha-nature, remains. Ignorance, on the other hand, has no original existence; it can only exist conditionally. If it had true existence, it would not be in a state of constant change.

The analogy of water and waves is used in the sutras to illustrate this point. In the absence of wind, water is still and calm but when the wind blows, waves form. The waves are the same substance as

the water, but originally they did not exist. In this same way ignorance did not originally exist, until blown by the winds of the individual's karma. In this analogy, water is the ever-existing tathagata, waves are ignorance. Water can exist without waves but waves must have water to exist.

As I said earlier, when we say that sentient beings are originally buddhas, we are speaking in terms of principle and potential. If we say that Shakyamuni was the Buddha, and he died twenty-five hundred years ago, we are speaking of a buddha who took on the appearance of ignorance to help sentient beings. The real Buddha, the tathagata, is eternal. He never came, and he never left. The Buddha took a human form so that he could speak on the level of the sentient beings. Free from avidya, the Buddha only reflects the ignorance of sentient beings.

To reach the universal, eternal and unchanging, requires a great deal of faith and practice. On the basis of faith, people can say that they have met the Buddha. This is also true when we have gained some benefit from practice. However, when most people make such a statement, they only have an intellectual understanding of what it means to meet the Buddha. Unless your spiritual convictions are strong, you won't be able to directly experience buddha-nature. Most Buddhists seek a spiritual life but don't necessarily want to see the Buddha. Those who want understanding will only see the Buddha as light or sound. Those whose religious faith is strong will definitely see the Buddha.

## Samsara and Nirvana

From Chan Newsletter No. 32, September, 1983

According to Buddhadharma, samsara is the continuing cycle of birth-and-death that we experience until we reach nirvana, and nirvana is enlightenment and final release from samsara. But according to Buddhadharma, samsara and nirvana are not separate. How is this so? Two analogies may help to illustrate this seeming paradox. Let us first take the example of visual error: when we view objects or designs in a certain way this may create optical illusions. Also, there is a "flying mosquito syndrome" where one has the impression that little specks, like insects, are flying in front of one's eyes. The sutras speak of the illusion of seeing "flowers in the sky." Usually, if we have any of these problems we know that it is a vision problem, but some people may think what they are seeing is real. When the problem goes away or is cured, we no longer see these things. Is this because the mosquitoes or the flowers have suddenly disappeared? No, it is because the vision problem has been eliminated.

The second analogy is about gold: after gold ore is mined, it is

smelted and processed until everything else has been removed, leaving only refined gold. Some people might think that the gold ore was somehow changed into refined gold, but a chemist knows that the pure gold was there from the beginning. If it was not there from the beginning, there would be no gold to be refined.

How do these analogies explain samsara and nirvana being the same? Samsara is what we experience when we have vexations. This is a problem of the mind. We saw in the first analogy that when the vision problem was cured, the illusion of mosquitoes or flowers went away. More important, we realize that there were no mosquitoes or flowers to be seen in the first place. Likewise, when we cure our mind problem, that is, we become enlightened, we no longer “see” samsara and, indeed, we will understand that it never existed.

Mind problems and mental diseases are unknown to a surgeon but a psychiatrist may have some sense of them. The deeper your practice the more you will understand the nature of mind problems. Some people have said that this Chan Center is like a mental hospital, and in some ways this is true. The Buddha said that if you have a physical problem, go to a physician; if you have a mind problem, go to Buddhadharma.

From the point of view of Buddhadharma, everyone has a serious mind problem. How many of you think you *don't* have a mind problem? If you raised your hand, then that in itself shows that you have a problem. If you did not raise your hand, at least you have some idea that you have a problem. A total drunk will not admit that he is a drunkard. If you notice that you are woozy and admit to being drunk, then you are to some extent sober.

What does it mean to have mind problems? It means that your mind is not balanced—rationally or emotionally—and that your judgment cannot be one hundred percent correct. You will feel like a husband whose wife and her sister are taking sides against you. Or you will be ambivalent. A disciple once told me that he wished I would go away, but he also wanted me to stay at the Center. He wanted me to go so there would be no one to tell him what to do, but if I left there would be no one here to help him. A heroin user is faced with such a problem—he wants to give up the drug but cannot. When people act on the basis of such confused mental states, they will often commit crimes. When people act harmfully against us, we should realize that they may have mental problems, may not know what they are doing. Or, if they do realize what is happening, they might not be able to help themselves—like a car with faulty brakes.

How can we be cured of such sickness? Many people do not realize that the mind or spirit needs a great deal of education. Certainly, there is research for treating cancer, heart disease, high blood pressure, etc., but not that much attention is given to healing problems of the spirit. First, we must investigate our hopes, fears, desires, and other vexations. Only by such self-examination can we improve. The best method to accomplish this is meditation; with practice we can have fewer and fewer stray thoughts. Too many thoughts, and we cannot see ourselves clearly. Once we master our thoughts we can think or not think as we please. At this point, our mind sickness will begin to disappear. Our mind will not be so confused; we will have fewer random thoughts; we will be in harmony with nature, our judgment will be unbiased. We will be

able to accept the bad things that happen to us, as well as the good things that come to us.

When the mind is finally cleared, we will discover that there is no virtue and no evil; there is no difference between samsara and nirvana. To practice well, at first we need the idea that there is samsara and there is nirvana; it increases our faith and our motivation. It is like medicine for the sick; after they are cured there is no need for the medicine. In the same way, when our minds are cured, we will not need the ideas of samsara and nirvana. We will realize that they are not two different things; indeed they are not even one thing. They are illusions that a clear mind will know never even existed.

In the gold analogy, pure gold refers to the pure mind in each of us; it represents the potential in all of us to be free of suffering. Like the eye once beset by illusion, now free of mosquitoes or flowers, our refined mind will be rid of the impurities of vexation and suffering. Through practice, we will have discarded our impurities and refined our minds. And when we reach enlightenment, if we ask what has been discarded—the impurities—can we say that they exist, or that they ever existed? It is at this point that our analogies might break down. They are only analogies, guides to practice. They cannot be followed completely.

From the point of view of Chan, vexation and wisdom, samsara and nirvana, these are not different. They do not, in fact, even exist. Like water whipped into waves by the wind, the essence of water is the same no matter what state it is in. This is the most important thing for us to understand. We must also remember that we should only use analogies in so far as they make sense and guide us in practice.

## Thinking without Purpose

From Chan Newsletter No. 35, January, 1984

To think means to investigate, to look into something, to analyze with reasoning and logic. First, we should understand that thinking by itself does not necessarily cause vexations. For example, statues of bodhisattvas and buddhas and certain patriarchs, especially those in the Tibetan tradition, often have their heads tilted to one side, signifying thinking. But there is a difference between thinking with purpose and thinking without purpose. People ordinarily think with a self-benefiting purpose in mind. When there is a purpose there is a goal, and when there is a goal there is a self that wants to accomplish that goal. Bodhisattvas, on the other hand, engage in thinking but without a specific purpose—people who are not self-centered will have no self-benefit in mind when they act.

The thinking of a bodhisattva arises out of unified mind, which we call samadhi. To have a sense of self implies that there is a conscious entity, the “self,” that is separate from the object of one’s thinking. In that state at least two thought-streams exist: the self and what that the self is thinking about. With two thought-streams, one’s

mind cannot be completely unified and one cannot enter samadhi. A bodhisattva without a self-center can abide in samadhi and still act without mental constructs. Does this kind of thinking still function as regular thought? By all means, but the thinking of a bodhisattva is more open, clearer, and suffused with wisdom.

It is not necessary for buddhas and bodhisattvas to think. They do think, however, when they speak the Dharma and when they help others. Mahayana Buddhism holds that buddhahood has triune aspects: dharmakaya (the Dharma or truth body), nirmanakaya (the incarnation body), and the sambhogakaya (the bliss body). Thinking is not necessary for a buddha in the dharmakaya aspect, but an incarnated buddha does engage in thinking. What kind of thinking? An incarnated buddha who appears before human beings would of course use human thinking. The difference is that incarnated buddhas and bodhisattvas do not have specific ends associated with their actions, and they do not have a sense of self when performing them. Ordinary sentient beings, despite what they may say or believe, always have a sense of self.

While most of us are not at the stage where we can function without a sense of purpose, it is still beneficial that we understand that it is possible. This understanding is especially important in daily life, when we are prey to a sense of gain and loss, when self and environment come into conflict. At such times it is important to remind ourselves of *asamskrita*, the unconditioned state in which we can act without self-centered purpose. We will not always be able to do this, but we should still emulate the buddhas and bodhisattvas. When conflicts arise between self and others, or self

and environment, we can reflect that we are caught up in our sense of self and our sense of purpose. If we can move towards asamskrita, then these conflicts may be resolved.

Samskrita, the conditioned state, involves a self. When there is a self, whatever we encounter will be in the realm of the six kinds of sense data, of which the sources are our own bodies and the environment. Since the six kinds of sense data are based on phenomena, can thoughts be separate from phenomena? Even when we think in abstract concepts, we still have to use symbols which are to the mind, also phenomena. That is to say, without reference to phenomena, we cannot think.

If we were to say that we must have phenomena in order to think, and that the spirit realm can only be reached through thought, we will arrive at materialism, the belief that phenomena are real. But the Buddhist scriptures do not lead us towards a materialistic point of view. The *Sutra of Complete Enlightenment* shows that thinking arises only when our mind interacts with the six kinds of sense data. We can turn this around and say that without the functioning of the mind there would be no sense data. For example, if you are in a sound, dreamless sleep, what exists in the world? It can be said that nothing exists. By the same token, when the mind is completely dull, as in a coma, nothing exists because the mind is unaware of anything. On the other hand, when the mind is completely clear and most acute, once again, it is unaware of the material world. Thus in these two opposing states – when the mind is extremely clear or extremely dull – there will be no awareness of the material world. The existence of ordinary sense data, ordinary material things, is present only when the mind is in its ordinary state.

This line of reasoning leads to the view that phenomena exist only when the mind is aware of them. When the mind lacks such awareness, phenomena cannot be said to exist. So this is the opposite of materialism. Are we to say that the *Sutra of Complete Enlightenment* leads us to pure idealism? The mind can function only when it is interacting with phenomena, including purely mental phenomena. If we posit that phenomena exist only when they are experienced by the mind, then neither phenomena nor mind really exists. If phenomena had independent existence, they would not have to rely on the mind's awareness of them, and if the mind had real independent existence, its functioning would not rely on the material world. Thus we can reject both materialism and idealism.

If we know that the mind is an illusion without real substance, to use an illusory mind to seek buddhahood would result in more illusions, like seeing flowers in the sky. We might go a step further and see the flowers blossom and bear fruit. The fruit that comes from illusory flowers cannot have more substance than the flowers themselves. Therefore, it is futile to try to probe the depth of buddhahood with a self-centered, illusory mind.

Sentient beings may aspire to buddhahood but approach it with self-centered attitudes, an impossible task. It is not easy to let go of these attitudes. To get results, a practitioner can summon extraordinary effort for a while, but this is very difficult to persist in over a long time. Most people are not willing to endure untold suffering to reach a goal. The result is that they may realize that practice is not so easy. Ridding oneself of vexations is not easy, let alone becoming a buddha. In fact, some people develop more vexations after they begin to practice. At some point they may feel,

“I’ll stop for a while; when I am ready I will come back again.” I have met a number of people who put forth a great deal of effort at first, but slacken after a while and ultimately turn from the path.

It is best not to seek anything from practice. The more we seek spiritual attainment the more we live in illusion, and the further we drift from seeing buddha-nature. Instead, we should maintain a calm and stable attitude and just follow the teachings of the Buddha, not concerning ourselves with progress or getting rid of vexations. Free of such concerns, vexations will lessen of their own accord, and we will make progress while being unaware of making progress. If we are anxious about progress, disappointment is likely, and we may become disillusioned and eventually turn away from practice. When we are free from thinking with purpose and have let go of self-centered mind, then complete enlightenment and buddhahood are possible.

## **No Anger or Love between Master and Disciple**

From Chan Newsletter No. 43, February 1985

Practitioners should not feel proud if a meditation master thinks highly of them, wishes to accept them as disciples and shows them affection. Conversely, if they are turned away by the master they should feel no anger. Similarly, the master should not feel pride even if surrounded by many disciples. Nor should the master be unhappy if disciples leave, believing their teacher to be not worthy. Maintaining equanimity is not easy. Ordinary people find it difficult to be impartial when considering their own merits; they are reluctant to see their faults for what they are or they may disparage their genuine good points. Though they seem different, self-deprecation and pride are come from the same source – attachment to self.

Self-deprecation usually stems from a feeling of insecurity or worthlessness, which can lead you to conclude, “What can someone like me accomplish? I can’t do anything well.” But insecurity can also be positive; it may help you to strive toward your goals, attain success and fame, and gain self-respect. But then you may feel,

“What I have done is not easy; other people cannot equal my achievement.” This is pride. For example, the boss lectures his employees, “You want a raise? Consider this: you would not be working if it were not for me. You depend on my intelligence and my effort. When you reach my level, then you can come and bargain with me.” This boss is very proud.

Spiritual masters can also be proud. A master might say, “I have practiced for many, many years and have followed and visited many spiritual masters in my time. Now I have reached my ultimate attainment but you, my disciples, have not reached this state. You are far from my level of attainment. You must still go a long way before you achieve what I did.” This master’s attitude shows pride, does it not? Even if a Chan master acts like a tyrant, that attitude alone is not sufficient proof of pride. The question is whether the master feels pride within himself.

Once I was riding with two disciples, a man and his wife. The husband was in the driver’s seat; his wife was sitting next to him. They asked me, “Have you had any problems recently?” I responded, “As far as I am concerned there are no problems.” The husband did not answer but the wife said, “Shifu, as soon as I saw you, I knew that you were proud. There are always problems. As the saying goes, ‘Unless you have been through it, you can’t understand the problem.’ So how can you always avoid problems?” In other words she saw pride in me.

If I set about to do something, the obstacles I encounter do not appear as problems to me. If something cannot be accomplished, I do not waste time attempting it. Thus, nothing poses a problem to me. Can my attitude be considered pride? If a thing can be

accomplished, I find no difficulty in doing it, whatever the obstacles. But if something is impossible—my having a baby for instance—then I would have no problem with it. To truly see pride and insecurity in someone, you should look closely at their motivation as well as their actions.

Suppose that many people came to the Chan Center, as many as go to Hare Krishna and Transcendental Meditation centers. I might say, “Before I could not compete with these groups but now I am catching up with them.” This is pride because I am competing with others and comparing myself to them. We really should not compare ourselves to others; it is simply not necessary. If you compare yourself to others, you will usually find that they are either shorter or taller. Even if you happen to be the same height, you might well look to see if they are thinner or fatter.

In ancient China, in a province called Yue, in spring and autumn a search was made for the most beautiful girl in all the land. They found this girl Hsi Ssu, whose renown became equal to that of Helen of Troy in the West. Hsi Ssu underwent long training in the arts of walking, applying make-up, singing, playing musical instruments, and speaking. At the same time another beauty named Tung Ssu also lived in Yue. Not as beautiful as Hsi Ssu, she was extremely jealous and imitated Hsi Ssu’s walk, her make-up, the way she spoke. But her imitating never produced the results that she sought. The more Tung Ssu copied Hsi Ssu, the more makeup she applied, the less beautiful she became.

Learn to not compare yourself to other people. Almost everyone at one time or another will say, “I am really no good,” but if you say this, you may just be looking for praise. In the same insecure mood,

you might feel that those around you are unfriendly and you deserve their unfriendliness. But suppose someone came up to you and said, "In many ways you are really a good person." How would you feel? You might change your tune: "After all, I do have some good qualities." There is no ordinary person who does not enjoy praise, who does not seek the approval of others; even animals act this way. If you have a dog, it will be happy if you praise it, "You are a good dog!" But if you give it a scolding, "You lazy, greedy, dirty dog!" you might spoil its whole day.

In ordinary people, pride and insecurity are to be expected. It is the extremes which are dangerous. If you feel totally useless, like a piece of garbage, then your insecurity is a very bad problem. And if you are bloated with pride to the point where you feel omniscient and omnipotent, then you may become another Hitler, Stalin or Mao Zedong.

On the other hand, a Chan master is more likely to show pride than insecurity because no one who is insecure would become a Chan master. Someone who felt inferior would say, "I'm not good enough to be your Chan master. How can I be a master and teach others?" Such a person has no self-confidence. Self-respect, however, is a normal feeling to develop in the course of practice. Indeed, you should experience it. Self-respect is a sign that your faith is growing stronger. As a result of practice, you gradually come to see things that others may miss, and from this recognition springs compassion for others. A practitioner feels that all people deserve pity, and out of compassion wishes to save them all. It is the duty of Chan masters to teach their followers to practice so that they may leave their state of ignorance. But the more that people come to masters, the heavier

they feel the weight of responsibility and the greater the sense of mission.

Suppose a practitioner says, "I have followed many masters and studied with them, so it is just like having studied with no master. It is impossible for these masters to teach me anything because everything I know, I learned by myself. In fact, they owe me gratitude for being their disciple; I enabled them to become a master. It is they who ought to thank me." Is this a proper attitude?

Or a disciple might say, "I am like the ocean, content as I am. As the master you do all the work carrying me from one shore to the other; it has nothing to do with me. Why should I thank you?" As before, is this the right attitude? No, as I have said before, the disciple should be reverent to his master, dedicating himself unconditionally. Thus, the attitude of a disciple should be nothing like that in the two examples above. The proper attitude for the student is not the same as the proper attitude for a master.

## **Is Buddhism Theistic?**

From Chan Newsletter No. 46, June, 1985

A Christian I met told me, "I have some understanding of Buddhism, but it seems like a muddle to me. There are so many bodhisattvas, arhats, and deities, how do you decide which one to pray to? There's the Buddha, Guanyin, Manjusri, Amitabha. It must be very difficult to decide who to turn to when you have a problem. Being Christian is very simple. Whatever the problem, you just pray to God." There is some confusion here but from this Christian's point of view Buddhism seems to be polytheistic. When you look at it, in other ways, Buddhism may seem to be monotheistic and in some ways even atheistic. These characteristics and viewpoints, at least on a superficial level, appear to be contradictions.

First, we must affirm that according to Buddhadharma, all sentient beings are equal with Shakyamuni Buddha and the buddhas in possessing buddha-nature. This is a fundamental principle of Buddhism. Nor should it be understood that some buddhas are higher than others, that a buddha dwells at the top,

followed by bodhisattvas, arhats, deities, heavenly beings, and so on down to humans and animals. In Buddhism all beings including buddhas, are equal. This is not to say they are identical – each being has a different level of ability; each will put forth a varying degree of effort.

One person may achieve more than another by exerting greater effort. In Dharma practice, we can say that someone may have started earlier and worked harder than another. He or she may achieve greater merit, power and wisdom, and will be closer to buddhahood than someone not as diligent. Those with more wisdom and strength should help those who are less fortunate. Such is the case within a family. So it is through the whole universe: beings of greater ability should help those with lesser ability. Deities and heavenly beings help humankind, while they are in turn helped by arhats and so on, through the bodhisattvas and the buddhas.

Since Buddhism does not believe in a supreme, all-powerful God, it would seem that we have a polytheistic view. In polytheism there is an ordering of the universe where various domains are divided among greater and lesser gods and deities. Each god has his or her rank and sovereignty. The god of fire has the highest power over fire, and so it is with the gods of water, winds, and mountains. Each god rules supreme in his domain. According to certain beliefs in Greece, India, and China, you may find a god or deity associated with rivers, mountains, and trees. There may be one god who is highest or several gods who contend for supremacy. But Buddhist teaching is really quite different from this.

Buddhist culture and society do show signs of what may appear to be polytheism. In China, a childless wife may pray to Guanyin

(Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva) for a child. In Japan a woman in the same circumstances might pray to Kshitigarbharaja Bodhisattva. Thus Chinese and Japanese pray to different bodhisattvas for the same purpose.

But the sutras say that all buddhas have the same wisdom and power, and any bodhisattva can respond to any problem. These beings may manifest different characteristics, but that is because of the vows they have made. Thus Kshitigarbharaja made a great vow to liberate even sentient beings in hell. Avalokiteshvara is known for great compassion, Manjusri for great wisdom. But there is no need to choose a particular bodhisattva for help with a particular problem.

In this sense Buddhism is not polytheistic at all. Practitioners develop according to their karmic roots, causes and conditions, and method of practice. They may pray to Manjusri, Avalokiteshvara, or Kshitigarbharaja, but it is as a method of practice. They do not regard each bodhisattva as a separate deity and therefore pray to them all for maximum benefits. That would be polytheistic. Not everyone fully realizes this. There are visitors to the Chan center who prostrate first to the statue of the Buddha, then to the statues of Avalokiteshvara and Manjusri on either side of the Buddha. Depending on what is in these people's minds, they may see the three bodhisattvas as separate gods.

Is Buddhism monotheistic then? For the purpose of practice, it is useful to classify enlightened beings according to their attainment as arhats, bodhisattvas, and buddhas. The highest goal we set for aspiration is the Buddha, but our essence is that we are all the same as the Buddha. In sentient beings, including all animals, this is called

buddha-nature. For non-sentient beings, this essence is called Dharma-nature. Someone who has attained buddhahood also has attained the Dharma Body, which includes buddha-nature as well a Dharma-nature. While this Dharma Body pervades all beings, only sentient beings may attain buddhahood. With the principle that all sentient and non-sentient beings are the Dharma Body, the whole universe is in unity.

The Buddha sees all sentient beings as future buddhas, so in that sense we are the offspring of the Buddha. Although the most perfect of beings, a buddha does not have the authority of a supreme God. In this respect Buddhism is different from monotheism. But if sentient beings are not separate from the Buddha, why can't the Buddha control the actions and fates of all beings? The reason is that sentient beings have their own karma. Even though sentient beings are part of the Dharma Body, a buddha cannot influence the course of someone's karma.

Christians speak of being "brothers within the Lord." I once asked some Christians, if God created the universe, how can anybody be outside of the Lord? One of them replied, "From a theological standpoint everyone is within the Lord, but those who do not believe do not return to the Lord." So in a sense there are brothers who are not within the Lord. I am just trying to point out that even in traditional monotheism there can be inconsistencies.

I meet people who say something like, "Since I'm not a Buddhist, from your point of view, I am a man standing outside the gate." To them I answer that there is no gate. Every sentient being has buddha-nature and will become a buddha in the future. We are never separate from the Buddha, so it makes no sense to speak of

being outside the gate.

Other religions emphasize faith and conversion, but Buddhism emphasizes causes and conditions: if you do not accept the Dharma now, you may in the future, and in the future you will become a buddha. Some object: "I don't believe in your religion and still you insist that I will become a Buddha!" I say, "I am not a follower of your religion and you may consider me to be a disciple of Satan, but even though you don't follow my religion, I still consider you a future buddha."

Now we get to the question whether Buddhism is non-theistic or atheistic. First, both these terms apply to people who believe in nothing outside of matter. Such people do not believe in spirit or any supreme power in the universe; they do not believe in any realms that transcend this material world. A second meaning of non-theism is that the universe is not ruled by a unique, all-powerful God. Yes, there are deities but not one unique God, who controls the universe. This form of non-theism is found only in Buddhism.

The materialist form of non-theism can be terrible and costly to life and society. They believe that once the body dies, life ends and there is no future life. Non-theists are not necessarily bad; they may have ethical principles and be concerned about people of later generations. But there are many others who don't share these concerns, and who have no fear about the consequences of their actions.

## Four Views of Chan

From Chan Newsletter No. 52, February 1986

*Spoken at the Great Daoist Center, Washington, D.C.*

Let me begin with a *gong'an*. In the Tang dynasty (618-907) there was a Chan patriarch named Yao-shan Wei-yen (750-834), whose disciple asked him, "Before First Patriarch Bodhidharma came, was there Chan in China?" The Master replied, "Yes, Chan was already in China." "In that case," the disciple continued, "why did Bodhidharma come to China?" The master said, "Precisely because Chan was already here, he brought Chan to China."

So you see I've come to Washington because Chan is already here. I've come here because all of you know about Chan. Those who know something about Chan, please raise your hands. Those of you who didn't raise your hands probably know more than those who did!

Tonight I will talk about Chan from four points of view. These topics should help you to raise some questions about Chan: the theory of Chan, the experience of Chan, the goal of Chan, and Chan training.

## Theory of Chan

There is really no theory in Chan. If we theorize about Chan, then it is not Chan. Chan cannot be understood by logical reasoning nor can it be explained in words. Nevertheless, I will use some theoretical description in my talk. There are two basic concepts associated with Chan: one is *causes and conditions*, the other is *emptiness*. These concepts are inextricably linked; they cannot be separated. When we talk about causes and conditions and emptiness, we are really talking about the nature of existence, which is temporary and impermanent. All phenomena arise due to the coming together of underlying causes and conditions. Correspondingly, all phenomena perish due to causes and conditions.

In China, Taoists and Confucians use a divining system based on the *I Jing* (“*ee jing*”), or *Book of Changes*. “*I*” means continual, constant change, more specifically, it means constant arising. This means that causes and conditions continually change; therefore phenomena that arise from this matrix are themselves ever-changing, that is to say, impermanent. Sentient beings perceive things as arising and then perishing but in the *I Jing* there is no perishing only constant arising. Seeing something disappear, you will miss seeing something else arising.

In the Buddhist view, when causes and conditions change new phenomena arise. But because this arising is rooted in constantly changing causes and conditions, the phenomena that arise can themselves be nothing more than temporary. Because they only have temporary existence, they are said to have no enduring self-identity. Hence these phenomena are said to be “empty.” Emptiness

only means that there is no unchanging enduring existence; it doesn't mean that nothing exists at all.

Phenomena can come into existence (arise) only because they are intrinsically empty. Moreover, because they are empty, there is nothing permanent about them. If things never changed, there would be no arising. If nothing changed in our present configuration here, it would mean that this lecture would go on indefinitely but actually, when my talk ends the configuration will change. If everything were unchanging and solid, if there were no emptiness, then this lecture would go on forever. It is precisely because of the present situation—this particular configuration of constantly changing causes and conditions—that we are all gathered in this room.

Therefore when we talk about Chan, we find that it is just a word, a bit of terminology. Very few people can say what it is. For over a thousand years, Chan masters and their disciples have been asking questions like, "What did Bodhidharma bring to China?" Many people have sought the answers to these questions but the masters never gave direct answers. Some simply ignored the questions, or if they didn't ignore the question, they give very simple answers.

Master Zhaozhou was visited by two monks. The master asked the first monk, "Been here before?" The monk said, "Shifu, this is my first time." "Please have some tea," said the master. The second monk wanted Zhaozhou to confirm his Chan experience. In response, Zhaozhou said, "Please have some tea." Zhaozhou's attendant was quite puzzled: "Shifu, I don't understand. When the venerable wanted you to confirm his Chan, you just invited him to

tea." Zhaozhou whispered into his attendant's ear, "Please have some tea."

There is another story along the same lines involving Zhaozhou. Two monks were arguing, and one of them said, "Master Zhaozhou said that a person has buddha-nature but a dog doesn't." The second disciple said: "That's impossible; he could not have said anything like that." They both went to see Zhaozhou. One said, "Shifu, you couldn't possibly have said anything like that." Zhaozhou said, "You're right." The other disciple insisted, "I'm positive that is what you said." The master said, "You're right." A third person, the master's attendant, said, "But Shifu, only one of them can be right." To which Zhaozhou said, "You're right."

These stories sound like nonsensical exchanges but the underlying idea is that existence or non-existence, ideas of right or wrong, are things which only live in your own mind, your personal experience, your knowledge. These things can't be Chan.

### Experience of Chan

The experience of Chan must be personal and direct; it cannot come from education or arrived at by logic. In a retreat I will often try to help a student experience Chan by telling him to bring himself to the state of mind that existed before he was born. After birth we begin to acquire experience, so when we practice, we try to look beyond what we have learned. *Before your life began, who were you? What was your original face?* How would you answer these questions? There is a story of a Chan master who told his disciple to wash a piece of coal until it was white. The monk complained that it was simply impossible. Another somewhat dimwitted disciple took the

coal and began to wash it. He didn't have a thought other than his master telling him to wash the coal. One day he asked the master why the charcoal was still not white. The master asked him, "Isn't it already white?" The monk took another look at it and said, "Indeed it is white; it has always been white." When most of us look at charcoal we see black but the master and disciple saw it as white.

In Chan we say that training and practice will make our discriminations disappear. These thoughts and feelings of liking or disliking come from our experience. If you can go back to the state before you were born, then you arrive at the point where discriminations do not exist. It no longer matters whether something is black or white. What is important is that your mind is free from discrimination and conceptualization.

During the Northern and Southern Dynasties (420-589), a well-known Taoist hermit and scholar named T'ao Hung-ching had the respect of the emperor, who asked T'ao to be his minister. When T'ao declined, the emperor wanted to know what was in the mountains that attracted him so much, that he preferred hermitage to the glories of the court. T'ao answered with a poem:

You ask me what I find in the mountains  
 I say: white clouds are in the mountains  
 This I alone can enjoy  
 It is not something I can offer you.

The emperor read the poem and thought something made no sense: white clouds can be seen anywhere, not just in the mountains. But the point was that the white clouds that T'ao Hung-ching saw were

quite different from the ones the emperor could see. This is the nature of individual experience: a hermit's vision of the Tao is different from that of an emperor.

The famous Tang dynasty poet and monk, Hanshan, when asked what he owned would answer, "The clouds serve as my blanket, the earth is my bed, the mountains, my pillow, and the four seas are not big enough for a bath or a somersault." That was his experience of oneness with nature; he saw no separation between himself and the world. But people thought that he had nothing—his sandals were made from tree bark; his trousers from leaves.

Only after you've put down everything you have acquired since birth can true Chan manifest. I tell my students to first separate their thoughts into past, the present, and future. Then I tell them to discard the past, then the future, leaving only the present moment. Next is to let go of the present moment, which is only a bridge between past and future. When you let go of the present moment Chan can manifest, but only at the most elementary level.

Here is a question that might occur to you: if we discard our experiences until we reach the state before our birth, does this mean that a new-born baby is closest to Chan? No, a new-born baby does not know about Chan because its mental faculties are hardly developed, and it is not in control of them. The control of mental functioning is necessary. When you have this control, then you can let go of knowledge and reasoning. Then there is a possibility that Chan can manifest.

If you knock someone unconscious is that Chan? That is nonsense. If you know nothing of past or future and your mind is a just a blank, that is also not Chan. A mind that is blank in this way

is a very tired mind; only a very clear, alert mind can experience Chan. I can describe the experience of Chan by comparing a bowl of water with a mirror. A bowl of water will move at the slightest touch but a mirror is unmoving. A mirror can be obscured by dust, but remove the dust and it will reflect clearly. Agitated water will reflect only a distorted image. The movement in water is like the movement in our minds. Our minds move because of the knowledge we have and the experience we have acquired. Because of these things, we are constantly making judgments. Just as moving water is a poor reflector, a moving mind cannot see clearly – at that time, what we see or think we see is illusory, not real.

For example, there are about fifty people here; you have different backgrounds, different experiences, and different levels of education. Because of these differences, each of you will hear the same thing a little differently. Each of you will judge this lecture in your own way. It may be one lecture, but it could also be fifty different lectures. That is not Chan. If it were truly Chan, when one person spoke it would be as if there was one person listening. And were that the case, there would be no need for me to open my mouth – you would know what I was going to say before I said it.

In the early days of the Chan, the emperor asked a certain master to give a discourse. To prepare for the occasion, the emperor commanded his workmen to build an elaborate platform from which the master would speak. When the time arrived, the master mounted the platform, sat down, and then quickly left. The emperor was quite surprised. The master said, "I've said everything I wanted to say." The unspoken Dharma and only the unspoken Dharma is the highest Dharma. Whatever can be said or described is not the

real Dharma. Chan masters have been saying this for many, many years.

When we compare the clarity of reflection in water to that of a mirror, a perfectly clean mirror reflects better than still water. Even so, the Sixth Patriarch Huineng pointed out that intrinsic mind was not a mirror that needed to be wiped clean. So to speak of the mind being like a mirror is not Chan. Nonetheless, today we use the mirror as an analogy to make a point. Later, we will throw out the mirror.

A mirror reflects what is external to itself. If a person's mind is in a mirror-like state, everything outside is reflected as it is, without distortion. For such a person, there is no self involved. What he sees and feels is only phenomena, for when there is no self there is no discrimination, of liking or disliking. But this is not the ultimate state because there is still a self that is aware of the environment. Someone in this state is certainly in a unified state because there seems to be no self, and only the environment seems to exist. This is one-mind but it is still not the no-mind of true Chan. True Chan cannot be compared to an all-reflecting mirror, since phenomena still exist without the mirror. In the true Chan state everything is seen very clearly, but there is no concept of outside or inside, existing or not existing, having or not having.

### **The Goal of Chan**

What is the good of the Chan experience? For myself and many others there are so many benefits to Chan practice. These benefits can be seen on three levels: first, there is a health benefit, there are mental balance and good mental health, and lastly a spiritual

benefit – the potential to become enlightened. The reason for an unhealthy body is really psychological imbalance. By helping a practitioner attain a more stable mind, Chan practice can improve physical and mental health. Chan practice can also strengthen mental power and capacity. Even with ill health, a practitioner will have a positive attitude and will not be hindered from doing what he or she needs to do. Good mental health is a fundamental aim of the practice but in the beginning, physical strength is acquired through sitting. Practicing in this way helps maintain and focus the flow of energy, or qi (chi). Taoism and Yoga also share this aspect of practice.

Of course the highest benefit of practice is the genuine Chan experience – enlightenment. But what good is enlightenment? I can only say this – before enlightenment there are things that one needs and things one would rather be without; there are things that one likes and things one does not like. After enlightenment there is no such thing as needing or not needing, liking or not liking. Do you understand? That’s why I said that all of you already know Chan. You see, before we are enlightened we have many vexations, and there are many things that we have to do; there are many things that we don’t want to do. We may seek and attain enlightenment but once we have experienced it there is no longer any such thing as enlightenment. At this point there is nothing that we have to do, nothing that we don’t have to do.

Before he became a famous Chan master, Linji Yixuan (d. 866) was studying with Master Huangbo Xiyun (d. 850). When Linji became enlightened, Huangbo did not become aware of Linji’s realization. One day Huangbo was making his rounds to see that all

of the monks were practicing hard. He came upon Linji lying down on his mat, fast asleep. The master knocked on the floor with his staff and asked Linji, "How can you be so lazy, when everyone around you is practicing diligently?" Linji just looked up at Huangbo and went back to sleep. Huangbo walked over to another monk who was practicing very hard. Huangbo hit the monk with several stiff blows and pointed to Linji: "There's someone over there practicing Chan; what are you doing idling like this?" The master's oldest disciple said to himself, "This old monk has really gone crazy." From that point on Linji didn't remain sleeping; he traveled to spreading the Dharma. The lineage that evolved from him is called the Linji sect (Japanese, Rinzai). Linji's story shows that after enlightenment there is nothing, no practice or striving, that is needed for oneself; there are only other sentient beings to work for and to help.

### **Chan Training**

Chan training can be seen as occurring at three levels: first, we go from a scattered mind to a concentrated mind; second, we move from concentrated mind to one-mind; and finally, we let go of even one-mind and reach no-mind. The scattered mind is easy to see; we are all aware of this state where thoughts come and go in a haphazard manner. Let's try an experiment: everyone raise your index finger and look at it. Just look and don't think. Do this in a relaxed manner. [Pause] Alright, we did that for thirty seconds. Were you able to do it without thinking? If you couldn't do it, you had a scattered mind. When we do things with a scattered mind, we are not using it to our fullest capacity.

Master Zhaozhou once told his disciples, “Chan practice is like this: when you’re hungry, eat; when you’re tired, sleep.” One monk said, “I know how to eat and sleep; everybody knows that. So is everybody practicing Chan?” The Master said, “No! When you eat, your mind is not on eating; and when you sleep, your mind is either filled with dreams or lost in a muddled blankness.” Once in our Center in New York, we hired a carpenter to do some work. He was nailing something to a wall when he saw a pretty woman passing by the window. He hit his finger and twisted the nail, and had to start all over again. Where was his mind? It certainly was not on his work. Most of us function like this; therefore, we must use special methods to bring our scattered mind into a concentrated state. Do as Zhaozhou said: when hungry, eat, when tired, sleep. When you practice, keep your mind concentrated. Then if you hear a sound, see, or feel something – whatever you do, you will be doing just that and nothing else. This is concentration.

When you expand this state further, you will eventually get to the point where the separation between self and environment disappears – there is no distinction between you and the world. If you are repeating a mantra, you become one with the mantra. There are many levels to this state. At the elementary level you and your method of practice become one. A deeper state is when whatever your senses perceive, what you see and hear, is just yourself. At this point there is no distinction between what you see and what you hear. The sense organs no longer have separate functions. This is an intermediate level. Deeper still is the state where you sense a boundless universe within yourself. This is still not Chan. From here we must use the methods of Chan – such as *gong’an* and the *huatou* – to shatter the one-mind. In this way we can reach Chan – enlightenment.

## Light and Quakes

From Chan Newsletter No. 55, August 1986

In the sutras, when Buddha expounded the Dharma, he often emitted a brilliant light that radiated throughout the universe, and he generated six kinds of quakes that shook through all the buddha worlds. Light is visible and it represents the hopefulness the Dharma can bring; quakes can be felt; their motion and vibration represent the energy of the Dharma. These phenomena would have been sufficient by themselves for the Buddha to express his teaching. In other words, the Dharma can really be expressed without words or language. Dharma is in fact inconceivable; it cannot be truly discussed or approached by reason. When the Buddha spoke many sentient beings saw this light and felt the tremors, yet did not all understand their significance. Therefore, it was still necessary for the Buddha to use words.

There are many levels of light and motion. The most elementary level of light is what all ordinary beings can see; the most elementary level of motion is the kind ordinary beings can feel. However, there exist higher levels of light and motion that ordinary

beings are not able to see or feel. Our eyes are normally receptive only to visible light, a small spectrum. And we notice only grosser kinds of movement—very subtle forms of motion elude us. Depending upon the situation or occasion, sentient beings saw the light the Buddha emitted during one of his discourses. The kind of light sent forth varied from one discourse to another, and each gathering [of buddhas, bodhisattvas, arhats, monks, nuns, and laypeople] elicited light according to the needs of the listeners. But only sentient beings with the proper causes and conditions could see the light the Buddha radiated and only they could hear the Dharma.

Sentient beings can see different kinds of light according to their level of attainment. Bodhisattvas can see the same light as ordinary sentient beings but light visible to bodhisattvas will be invisible to sentient beings. Accordingly, the light the buddhas emit to each other is invisible to bodhisattvas. Light and quakes may also serve as signals in much the same way that, in a temple, the clapping of boards announces lunch, and the sound of the bell a lecture. When the Buddha generates light and quakes, it often means that he is about to expound the Dharma to bodhisattvas of a higher level—the first bhumi and above. At such a time no words are necessary—the light and quakes are sufficient for the bodhisattvas to understand the Dharma.

Light can also represent the Buddha's wisdom; quakes can represent merit and virtue. Light guides and helps sentient beings. Quakes and motion are the actions of the Buddha helping sentient beings. The Buddha enjoys the totality of all wisdom but he may only use a part of this wisdom, depending on the needs of sentient

beings. When he speaks to sentient beings he will use sentient-being Dharma to help them; if he speaks to advanced bodhisattvas, then Buddha will use bodhisattva Dharma or Buddhadharmas. The light of the Buddha's wisdom can be small or grand and intense. The light described in the *Shurangama Sutra* is the greatest kind and the Dharma expounded in it is the most important.

Shakyamuni lived 2,500 years ago and according to the sutras, when he discoursed, light radiated and quakes occurred not just in India but throughout a myriad of worlds. Why weren't these events recorded in history? The answer is that only those sentient beings with the right causes and conditions could see the light and sense the quakes. Otherwise these phenomena are invisible and inaudible.

There is yet another function of light and quakes in Buddhadharmas. Light can signify the power and ability to help others. To the extent that we have this power, people will see us as an embodiment of hope. In that sense we can give off light. Quakes embody the power to move others; when we do good deeds, others will be touched by that. And when we do evil, others can be shocked by what we've done. Either way, the actions we take affect others.

While Mao Zedong lived it was said that one word from his lips could move the world. Or if someone were to try to shoot a president, one or two bullets could bring incalculable political consequences. Good actions too can have global significance. Someone able to avert a war would affect the whole world. Are you capable of emitting light and moving others? We can all do this. No doubt when I speak I am emitting some light; you in the audience also emit light. When my book *Getting the Buddha Mind* came out many people liked it and found it helpful. But it wasn't only my

doing that caused it to happen; many people were involved in its publication. The moving and touching of others was brought about by many people. We all have light.

I just spoke of a kind of metaphoric light. But there are people who, as a result of great practice, wisdom, merit and virtue have an aura. You can actually see it; it's not symbolic—it is really visible light. Over thirty years ago, when I was in the army in Taiwan, a general came to visit our unit. He was dressed like an ordinary soldier but I could sense he was someone special. On another occasion I met Chiang Kai-shek. I always imagined that he would be tall and striking, but when I saw him he looked quite ordinary, but there was something about him that made me avert my eyes. He gave out a sense of being larger than he really was.

If you have great faith and attainment in practice, you are able to see the aura of a great practitioner; otherwise you need close karmic affinity with them to see it. A Taiwanese woman I met had a power of psychic seeing. Once I was giving a lecture and as I spoke, she saw a light emanating from me, and she noticed that my translator absorbed the light. The more the light was absorbed the more the translation improved. The woman also saw a third figure standing behind us who seemed to merge with the translator. When told about this, my translator replied, "When I began, I concentrated very hard on what you were saying because I was nervous and didn't want to make a mistake. Later I felt I didn't have to be nervous. I just asked Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva to help me." Who was the third person standing behind the translator? It may not have been an incarnation of the Avalokiteshvara, but I believe it was an extension of his power.

I was unaware of the light myself, so I asked the woman what it looked like. She said that when I first started to talk about the Dharma, a glow came from my head; then as I continued to speak, the light seemed to come from my whole body, spreading in all directions. This is because when I first started to speak, I had no idea what I would talk about. Thus the light came from my head as I thought about what I would say. Later I spoke spontaneously and according to this woman, the Dharma light emanated from my whole body. That is why statues of Buddha are sculpted to show symbolic light radiating out from all sides.

Someone within the aura will not be able to see the light; they must be outside the aura to see it. If you can't see the light, either you don't have karmic affinity with the practitioner or you're already inside the aura. This is like hearing about a person's greatness. At a distance he or she may appear great, but the closer you get, the more the semblance of greatness diminishes.

Perceiving a practitioner's greatness is a different story. Whether near or far, the greatness will be apparent to someone who has karmic affinity with them. But strangely enough, with a very great practitioner, even though you may have a karmic affinity with them, if you are not a practitioner, you will sense their greatness when far away. But when close, you will lose the sense of greatness.

One evening the monk Deshan Xuanjian (819-914) visited Master Longtan (no dates) in the latter's chamber. After a brief chat Master Longtan said, "Isn't it time you retired for the night?" As he was about to go out, Deshan turned around and said, "It's already dark." Longtan said, "I'll get you a candle." Longtan then offered Deshan a lit candle. Just as Deshan reached for the candle, Master

Longtan blew it out. At this moment, Deshan had realization and was enlightened.

Did Deshan get the light? That would be the light of wisdom. Without wisdom, even in broad daylight, you walk in darkness. When the master blew out the candle the younger monk became enlightened. He no longer saw the outside as dark and the inside—lit by the candle—as light; he saw no difference between outside and inside, darkness and light. The light of wisdom was thus derived from darkness. No longer fearing darkness, Deshan was then able to radiate light and move others.

Practitioners need to attain a certain level before they can use the light of wisdom and the moving power of merit and virtue. Till then the light of wisdom is dormant and people must rely on the power of their virtuous karma. One still gives off light but it is not yet the light of wisdom. After enlightenment the true light of wisdom arises. It is like a backup generator that has been still and silent in the storeroom, but suddenly it is turned on, and begins to create electricity in a steady flow. Practitioners also generate light that shines brighter and brighter as they approach buddhahood.

You can generate light to help sentient beings; it will shine even when there is no one there to benefit from it. When you are truly ready, others will sense your light. If you help them, if you move them to practice, then you will give forth light and generate Dharma quakes.

## Ten Thousand and One

From Chan Newsletter No. 56, September, 1986

In the *Platform Sutra*, The Sixth Patriarch Huineng said, “We may explain [the Essence of Mind] in ten thousand ways, but all the explanations may be traced back to one principle.” To explain Dharma we use words, but we also know that Chan does not rely on written or spoken language. So whatever Dharma is explained cannot be Chan; it could be attempted in 10,000 ways and 10,000 times and it would still not be Chan. To explain, the mind needs to make distinctions. The “ten thousand ways” signify all the various explanations that might be presented. In his sutra the Sixth Patriarch says that anything can be explained – in heaven, on earth, in our human world, sentient beings, all deeds, words, and mental activities. However, none of these explanations would be Chan.

Chan is not based upon any written or spoken language and yet Chan literature is among the most voluminous of all. Regarding this seeming paradox, someone once asked a Chan master, “Shakyamuni Buddha said that he had uttered not a single word of Dharma. In that case, how is it that so much Buddhadharma is

found in the Palace of the Dragons?" The master replied that it is indeed true that not a single word of Dharma can be uttered, but rather two or three or more *can* be uttered. Whereas the first principle in Buddhism *cannot* be spoken, the second and third principles can be spoken, and so on. Difficult as it is to accurately describe and explain ordinary objects, it is even more difficult to try to describe people. If you've never met someone and have just heard about them, or read about them, it is altogether different from personally knowing them. This is also true for Chan or buddha-nature.

There is a Chinese saying that ducks are the first to know when spring comes. As they paddle around in the river, ducks feel the water getting warmer as spring approaches, again pointing to the superiority of direct experience. At a retreat I led last year, someone asked what it is like after enlightenment. I said that there was no way to answer such a question, no way of knowing what it is like until you are there yourself. Someone at the retreat had never eaten a mango. Some of the others tried to explain what it was like to him. They described its shape, size, color, and taste, but in no way could he understand what it was like. After the retreat someone bought him a mango. He tasted it and finally knew for himself. Yet, when asked what it tasted like he couldn't say.

The words, "We may explain the Essence of Mind in ten thousand ways" can be taken two ways. First, one could attempt a verbal description of buddha-nature (Huineng's Essence of Mind). This would call for many words, possibly more than 10,000, and yet it might still not be complete. Second, one could also speak of the many methods that can be used to reach the goal of seeing buddha-

nature. The sutras say that there are 84,000 such methods. Here, "84,000" is not an actual number but simply signifies a very large number. To make these Chan practices clear, all kinds of descriptions are necessary, many of them very lengthy. Language as a means of description or communication is necessary, but not when using the best method.

"But all the explanations may be traced back to one principle." The roots, the foundations, are traced back to "one principle," which cannot itself be described in words. According to Chan, this principle is not established on any particular language or description because it simply cannot be described in those terms. When described, it is no longer that one principle. In fact, in calling this the "one principle," it is already not that principle because we are trying to attach a description to it. However, since language is necessary and since we want some means of expression, I shall continue to use this term "principle." In our daily life we find language to be very important, but here we see that it is neither so important nor so necessary for functioning. In fact, we may find that this way of communicating is not even very practical. If one lives genuinely, language is not necessary, and may even be useless.

During the retreat I mentioned above, no one was permitted to talk. At first everyone thought this rule was too confining. However, after a couple of days they found that they could get along quite well. In fact, communication without words is in many ways superior. Many unfortunate events in our everyday world have their origins in words. Were people allowed to talk freely during retreat, they wouldn't be able to devote themselves to practicing. Therefore, whenever I saw someone talking, I scolded them. Some felt hurt

over such encounters but soon recovered; others continued to be resentful. However, many realized that silence allowed them to grow closer—that it was more genuine to communicate this way. It adds fervor to the practice and eventually helps one to derive some benefit, some experience. Oddly, if a practitioner were to be asked what he or she felt, they wouldn't be able to describe their experience. Were you to ask a Chan master what the first principle is, he might say that it is like the wooden horse whinnying to the wind or the earthen cow mooing at the moon. Who would be able to hear such a mooing cow? Who would be able to hear such a whinnying horse? According to the same Chan master, a leper might be able to hear the mooing cow through his eyebrows. To hear the horse, however, he would have to rub his eyes.

I want to ask you a question: there is a person who has gone out but he has not left home, and yet he cannot be found at home. What kind of person is this?

You may think that this is a puzzle to be solved, but I want you to understand that this is a koan (Chinese, *gong'an*), and a koan is not to be solved like a puzzle. By contemplating this koan you might, or might not find, that there is just this Chan, just this first principle.

The philosophy of the Huayen sect speaks of how all the buddhas of the past, present, and future turn the Great Wheel of Dharma on the tip of a hair. This can be explained quite readily: at the tip of a needle held in my hand all of the functions of the light bulbs in this room are expressed—all comes to one principle. But is this principle great or small? We should not speak of these comparisons. In fact that one principle is as small as that which cannot be smaller, and as great as that which cannot be greater.

## Change and Changelessness

From Chan Newsletter No. 57, November, 1986

In the *Shurangama Sutra* there is a story about King Prasenajit, who was 62 years old when he talked to the Buddha about getting old and how it was possible that there can be anything that does not suffer change. He said, "I'm getting older not only year after year, but month after month, day by day, second after second." The Buddha asked him, "You have seen impermanence but have you seen permanence?" As the king was unable to answer, the Buddha said, "Have you seen the water of the Ganges? Was the water you saw when you were three years old different from the water you see now?" When the king said that the water in the Ganges then was not different from the water now, the Buddha said, "All external phenomena are in a state of change, but the nature of that which changes is unchanging."

We are all in the process of growing old, but we generally aren't aware of it. From the ages of 10 through 20 there are changes; from the ages of 20 through 30 there are also changes, and so on. When we have finally grown old we realize that we have gone through

many stages. There are two very painful times in a person's life: separation from a loved one who is still alive, and separation from one who has died. It can actually be more traumatic to be parted from those who are still alive; when a person is dead there is nothing more that can be done—most likely after the initial suffering it will be understood that it's useless to go on bearing the grief. But in both cases there is still a great deal of pain.

Most people fear death and wonder if there will be life after death. Even those who believe in future lives are distressed by the idea of death, because they cannot be sure they will be reunited with the ones they love. In the Chinese novel, *Dream of the Red Chamber*, the main character observes a peach tree losing its blossoms at the peak of their beauty; she reflects that human life is also like this—just when people are at their peak, they die. She weeps as she watches the blossoms fall and prepares a burial for them. She thinks about her own death and wonders who will bury her; she reflects that there is parting, separation and death, and that is all.

On the same theme of impermanence, Tang dynasty poet Pai-chou wrote a poem, called "Grass":

Abundant grass growing in a plain  
 Every year it flourishes and withers.  
 So abundant a wild fire cannot burn it all  
 In the following spring it appears again.

The difference between sorrow of the young woman in the novel and the musing of this poet is that the former sees only the decaying of things, of impermanence, while the poet expresses an

understanding of a cycle of renewal; he sees that although there is a withering, there is also another flourishing. This is a Taoist thought, and because he speaks of causes and conditions, it is Buddhist as well. All things come together because of causes in the past that disperse and come together again. Within existence there is emptiness, and within emptiness there is existence. The poet is not despondent over impermanence; he just notes the changes.

In the *Shurangama Sutra* it is said that all things are in a state of change but what is it that is not changing? The water that King Prasenajit insists is the same is really unchanged in name only. The water that someone can bring back from the Ganges today is definitely not the same water that the king saw. There are philosophers and theologians who will argue that there is some changeless substance in the universe, or a great being such as God. This is not the experience, however, of the Buddha. The changelessness of buddha-nature permeates all things. It is eternal but not outside of phenomena. There is no basic substance nor is there an extra entity called God. Another poem from the Tang dynasty runs:

A year ago today in this doorway  
 there was a girl and peach blossoms.  
 Both were shining, red, and beautiful.  
 Today, this year, the girl is gone  
 but the peach blossoms are here.

One year the peach blossoms gave the poet great happiness, and another they brought sadness. What the poem is really saying is that

although nature doesn't change, people's feelings do. The point is that vexation is just superfluous—the natural world is always in a state of change; it is a constant arising and perishing. If we understood this we should not be happy when something comes into existence, or is born; nor should we be despondent when something dies. We shouldn't feel joy upon acquiring something good, nor feel depressed when experiencing a loss.

Once when I was in Tokyo, I made arrangements with friends to take a train ride. This train always goes the same route and encircles the city. When I arrived at the station, one of my friends still hadn't showed up. Someone suggested that we go on without him, but another person objected, saying, "But what if he has gone on ahead?" I said, "It doesn't matter. The train always comes around again."

As far as change is concerned, we really can't know what things will turn into; we can't clearly predict the future. But there is one principle we can be sure of: what we are related to now, we will have relationships with later. Everyone has probably had the experience of feeling that they've known someone before, even though they've just met them. This is probably a case of being acquainted with that person in a previous life; they may have been family members or close friends. Some people have the attitude that a bad situation is something they should try their best to escape. An artist from Taiwan felt it wasn't safe there, so he moved to the United States; some time later he died in a car accident in Florida. In another account, a man was told by a fortune teller that he was going to drown. So he played it safe and stayed at home. Three days later he died as he was washing his face. Improbable events like these do

happen, but what you are fated to meet, you will meet. Within the changeless there is change. If the person who was told that he was going to drown had gone out one of those days, he might indeed have died in a river or pond, but according to his circumstances it occurred at home.

Causes are always changing and effects are always changing, but the principle of cause and effect remains the same—it is permanent. Things are constantly being born and perishing, but for an unenlightened person what is permanent is just this passing away. The vexations of ordinary beings stem from not being clear about change and changelessness. Not only do people change physically, they also go through change mentally. A person may be born poor and become rich, or start out rich and end up poor. An uneducated person can be educated; a low, mean character can be transformed into a sterling character. We are all in a perpetual state of change. If we aren't getting better, then we're getting worse. But there is one thing that is changeless, and that is our buddha-nature. Even the worst kind of person will in the end repent; it was simply his personality at the time that drove him to his actions.

Most people hope for a future life. They are not fully convinced that they will have one, but they still hope. They think that the change will be just a new face with the same benefits. This is a selfish attitude and only leads to vexation. On the other hand, completely liberated persons do not suffer change. You could say there is nothing that is not their body; no place where they definitely are, no place where they definitely are not. They are everywhere, with no fixed location. This is real freedom, true liberation.

## Creations of the Mind

From Chan Newsletter No. 58, December, 1986

During his long life, the contemporary Chan Master Xuyun (Empty Cloud) (1840-1959) traveled to many places in Asia, and wherever he found a Buddhist monastery or temple in ruins, would collect donations and rebuild it. Many people were quite amazed at his ability to do this [even as he was advancing in years], and came to him saying, "Oh, Master Xuyun, how is it so easy for you to build one monastery after another, when for us it is difficult to build one simple hut!" Xuyun replied, "That is because I have monasteries in my mind." When people asserted that they too had monasteries in their minds, Xuyun said, "I have been building monasteries in my mind for a long time, so these monasteries were already built. Now, when I want to build a monastery, it just happens. However, until you have truly started to build monasteries in your mind, they are just daydreams."

The *Shurangama Sutra* states that all phenomena are creations of the mind. However, we can't interpret that as saying that all things are created by a wandering mind. If you just daydream and do

nothing about it, you will not be able to create phenomena, much less Dharma. But if you conceive of something in your mind and then actually do it, then what you accomplish can certainly be called “a creation of the mind.” Similarly, if you feel anger, sadness, and happiness, and you have relationships with people based on these feelings, then these can also be considered creations of the mind. It is said that the mind is like an expert painter who can create all sorts of worlds from a single palette. It’s true that what is in the mind can be manifested eventually, and what previously existed can turn up in the future.

The process is something like this: you have a large tank of water with a lot of fine-grained sand at the bottom. As the water is stirred the sand grains rise to the top; when the stirring stops the sand grains sink to the bottom again. Each movement of the mind is like adding a color to a certain sand grain. Sometimes you add a very strong color that is long lasting, and sometimes you add just a tiny dab. The grains that are colored will sink to the bottom, and then appear again at the top as the water is agitated. But those with a lightly applied color will gradually get paler—only the strongly colored grains will retain their hue. Good and evil karma work like this—thoughts and actions of different intensities (“hues”) may seem to “disappear” for a while, but they all come back at some time [when the water is stirred by the action of karma]. We just don’t see their effects until they rise to the surface.

So sometimes we have good fortune, and sometimes we have disasters—all of these events are our own doing. We often speak of promoting welfare for others or for ourselves, but we do not often speak of promoting disaster. Nonetheless, we tend to create our own

disasters because what exists in our mind will likely manifest in the future. In fact, it would be really difficult for it not to result in some consequence. Of course, it depends on how strong the karmic forces are, just like the analogy of pigments applied to the grains of sand – the stronger colors will last longer.

In the city of Gaoxiong in Taiwan, there was a plant that treated waste water generated by the many households and industries. Eventually this plant was itself producing large amounts of waste water and was therefore unable to treat it all. So, though the purpose of this plant was well-intentioned, it in fact generated further waste. It is similar in our lives – we do not intend to create evil karma but we somehow end up doing so; we do not want to cause other people harm, but very often the end result of our good intentions is to bring some harm. Many wars in history have occurred due to political and religious views. The leaders who brought about these wars were not necessarily evil; many of them sincerely believed that they were acting for the good of mankind. Yet, as a consequence, many people underwent great suffering.

Someone asked Master Xuyun: “Why are you building monastery after monastery? Eventually they will fall into ruin or be destroyed by others. So by building monasteries you are in fact providing the occasion for other people to destroy monasteries. You are giving them the opportunity to do evil karma. Why bother to do all this then?” Xuyun answered, “When sentient beings do not have good enough merit and virtue, yes, the monasteries will go into ruin or be actively destroyed. But on the other hand, when sentient beings do have better karma, better merit and virtue, then they will need the monasteries. Later the monasteries will go again into ruin.

I do not concern myself with that. According to Buddhadharma all things are actions done by sentient beings in the mind of sentient beings. They are like visions of flowers in the sky or the moon's reflection in the water. They are all illusions but nonetheless, these Dharma activities are things I would like to do at every moment."

In achieving our goals it is important to ask ourselves if we have seriously started fulfilling these wishes or vows in our minds. If we are already going in the right direction for achieving our goals, then the saying that all phenomena are creations of the mind is definitely true. If you really want to achieve something, such as attaining buddhahood, you must have sufficiently strong determination.

Once there was a childless couple in their late forties. They really wanted to have a son, so they went around to many temples, praying to the deities. All of their supplications were in vain until they finally found a temple where an old monk gave them advice. He said, "Fine, go around to different monasteries and temples, and see if there is any monk living there who is growing old and sickly, with no one to take care of him. You should then take him home, care for him, cure his illness, and you will eventually have a son." In time, after visiting several more temples, they found an old monk who was seriously ill, and had no one to take care of him. So they brought him home. They were very nice to him and cured his illness. However, the monk was indeed quite old, and in two years was about to die. He said to the couple, "You two have been so kind to me. How can I repay you?"

They replied, "You really don't have to pay us back, because we are doing this in order to have a son."

Eventually the monk died. Not long after, the couple did indeed

have a son. He was very intelligent and quite a nice boy, as it turned out. His parents were really proud and pleased to have him. After many years had passed and the boy was in his teens, an interesting thing happened. The old monk who originally gave the advice to the couple came to visit. When he saw their son he said, "Why, you are actually an old friend of mine!"

The boy then realized who he was and said, "Well, I hadn't much choice. I had to repay this couple."

The story ends here. Perhaps it was really not so smart to repay the couple by being reborn as their son; it is kind of a foolish thing for an old monk to do. Nonetheless, there is an important point in it. When we seriously want something, we should also make an effort to help other people, and eventually our wishes will be realized.

## **Buddhism and Fate**

From Chan Newsletter No. 61, August, 1987

*Spoken at the Buddha's Birth Celebration, Sunday, May 10, 1987*

There's something to be said for fortune telling. In fact, I've met some fortune tellers who were quite talented; unfortunately none of them had particularly good fortunes themselves. It would be difficult for someone who believes that their fate is predetermined to have a happy life, but one who believes in the Dharma, and who also realizes that their life is not predetermined, *can* have a very happy life indeed. The Buddha did not teach that fate controls our life, and he did teach that all phenomena arise from the mind. So it is not true that Buddhists believe that their fate is predetermined. The important thing is to have the right view in accordance with Buddhadharma, to live correctly and practice diligently. It is through living by right view, right living, and right practice that we make progress. Believing in a predetermined fate can lead us in circles, but the help of Buddhadharma we take each day and start anew.

Today we celebrate the birth of the Buddha and it is the beginning of a new life. As Buddhists we believe that we are not

controlled by fate; we believe our future depends on what we do now. If we act properly we can turn our fate around. Many years ago I met someone who tried to predict my future by the day and hour of my birth. He predicted that I would have two wives and three children. Well, I still do not have a wife, and I don't expect that I will for the rest of my life.

An old Chan master in Taiwan once heard that there was a blind man who could tell fortunes by feeling one's bones. He would run his hand along his subject's spine, arms, and legs and arrive at a prediction. So the old monk decided to try it. The blind fortune teller told him that he would have a wonderful life—lots of wives, concubines, and children. The old monk paid him and left. Later he commented, "This is a blind man speaking blind words."

I can believe in astrology but I have a greater faith in the Dharma. If you accept the Dharma, then your fate will not manifest in a predictable way. But if you don't live according to the Dharma, your future can be predicted quite accurately; your fate will be set. If you heed and practice the Dharma, your life will not be dictated by fate.

In astrology it is understood that the very moment you are born determines what will happen to you throughout your life. Therefore, astrologers in the Far East have used four conditions to interpret one's fate: the year, month, and day, and the hour of birth. This is how astrologers make a living. Other fortune tellers may use facial features, palms, body shape, bones, and voice to uncover your fate. When Shakyamuni was born, his parents called in the most famous astrologers in the land. They were regarded almost as deities. They said that the young boy was very special and that

when he grew up, he would either become king of the world or he would leave home and achieve enlightenment. If we examine the biographies of outstanding monks, we can see that their births were accompanied by strange and extraordinary events. They either had remarkable personal characteristics, unusual physical features, or strange phenomena occurred when they were born. Even when they were babies, it was known that these men were destined to become great masters.

There is then another question. Do two people born at exactly the same time share exactly the same fate? I am sure that on the exact day and minute that President Reagan was born, many other people were born, too. Does this mean that all of these people are destined to become presidents? The sutras tell us that before the Buddha was born, many came from other worlds to prepare the people of this world for the coming of Shakyamuni Buddha. There were others who came after his birth specifically to be his disciples, so that they could continue the teaching. There were people born at exactly the same time as the Buddha, but only he attained buddhahood. Have you ever met someone who was born on exactly the same date and time as you? If you did, you would find that both of you lead completely different lives.

I once met a rich man who was born in the Year of the Horse, the same year I was born. He asked me the season and location of my birth. I told him that I was born in the winter in a cold region of China. He said that it was logical that I was poor now because I was born under such barren conditions. There was no grass for a poor "horse" to eat, so, naturally, I did not prosper. I am sure that if I had been born in a warm area, my astrologer could find an explanation

for how I arrived at my present circumstances.

At the moment of our birth a great deal has already been determined, in that we have a body which came into being as a result of karma created in innumerable past lives. All of this karma converges in us on the day we are born. However, if we have the opportunity to learn Buddhadharma, and we accept and practice it, our fate can change. Even our facial features will change.

A famous astrologer from Taiwan took the Three Refuges with me. He confided in me that now that he is in the United States, he feels a little uncomfortable working as an astrologer. He realized that he was practicing an outer path, not true Dharma. But I told him that it was all right to be an astrologer because there are ordinary people who might be helped by his advice. I asked him if he could read his own future. He said that he was having some trouble with that. In the past he felt that he had been one-hundred percent accurate but lately he had been off the mark. Before he accepted the Dharma, he used to get up every day and chart his fortune. But now he cannot see the future very clearly. I asked him if he could look into my future but he declined.

One of my students has a friend who is remarkably talented in reading a crystal ball; she can see into past lives. But when I asked her to look into my past, she saw nothing. It is a pity that I do not even have a past life. How many of you would like to know about your previous lives? The sutras say that if you want to know about your past, just look at yourself now. Look at what is happening, what you are encountering now. This tells you all you need to know about your previous lives. And if you want to know what is in store for you in your future lives, just watch yourself now. What you are

doing in the present moment will produce your future.

Anyone having severe problems in this life is experiencing these difficulties as a result of what they did in a previous life or lives. If you really knew what you did in the past to deserve what is happening to you now, you might not feel that happy about it. The knowledge would be complicated, upsetting, and of little use. For example, if you knew that your son had been your grandfather in a previous lifetime, how would you treat him—as a son or a grandfather? If you knew that your wife had been your grandmother, how would you feel?

According to the sutras, in a period of anywhere from a few hundred to a thousand years, we usually have intimate relationships with only a small number of the same people. In each succeeding lifetime, the people in this small group interchange roles. Through a long span of time, the circle of people that we interact with grows larger and larger—family, cousins, and friends. We continue to establish innumerable relationships, such that ninety-nine percent of the people we meet in this lifetime, we meet because of our previous karma.

Human beings are strange—some are born with good looks and substantial intelligence but are reckless and driven by emotions, and consequently they turn favorable conditions into disaster. It might seem a simple matter for such people to control themselves and, indeed, they might agree, but somehow they are incapable of mastering their emotions. They bring disorder and confusion to their lives and the lives of the people around them. It is like someone walking into a river aware that he is going to drown [if he continues], and even though his mind tells him to turn back, he

continues on and drowns anyway.

You must learn to control yourself; you must have power over your mind, and you must meditate. If there is someone you hate, consider him or her to be a buddha or a bodhisattva. Realize that buddhas and bodhisattvas can appear in two different forms—one to help us and another to oppose us. Being helped is the better way for people who lack strength and courage, but being opposed is the better way for people with strong personalities. If you understand Buddhadharma and karmic consequences, then you will be able to turn an unfavorable situation into a favorable one.

How can you change your fate? Understand that when there is a cause there is an effect—actions have consequences. However, before we suffer or benefit from these consequences, other conditions may arise to change the particular nature of the consequences. If we act and speak according to Buddhadharma in this lifetime, we continuously add meritorious and favorable conditions to our karma. So, when our karma manifests, what actually happens to us will be modified by the new conditions that arise from our meritorious behavior. On the other hand, if we act as we please, solely out of self-interest, and do not accord with the Dharma, we will be just like a boat tossed about on the ocean's waves, powerless to determine our own course.

A Buddhist must have great will power to change his fate. But if we look at things positively and we act toward good ends, we can strengthen our will power. If we think, speak, and act according to Dharma, we can gradually bring about a change in our lives. In Taiwan I have some left-home disciples who are almost impossible to deal with, and I have some lay practitioners who hardly listen to

a word I say. You might think that I should kick them out of the temple but because I am a monk, I cannot make them leave. I would be depriving them of the opportunity to come in contact with the Dharma. This is something I could never do. I spoke about some of these people with a friend of mine. He listened and said, "No problem." I asked him to elaborate on why such difficult people were so easy to deal with. He said, "If these people are really so disruptive, they are either complete rascals or they are bodhisattvas. I cannot imagine such malcontents becoming monks and nuns, so if they are unruly even as practicing Buddhists, the only conclusion to draw is that they are bodhisattvas. And they must be here for a very special reason, indeed. So, there is no need to be concerned."

Another monk in Taiwan who is also my disciple is a very peculiar person. I bought him a dozen pairs of socks. He wears one pair for a long time and when they start to smell bad he takes them off, throws them in a corner and grabs a new pair. When he goes through the whole dozen, he turns them inside out and starts the cycle again. He never washes any of his socks. I found this very annoying. Again, my friend said, "No problem. This monk must be a great arhat; why else would he do it?" Do you know anyone quite as fortunate as I am — surrounded by great arhats and bodhisattvas?

Once a couple came to see me; each complained of the other's bad habits. I asked if they considered themselves to be good people. They both said yes, so I told them that it was more than likely that they each had chosen a good person to live with. If they had chosen a bad person, it would reflect poorly on them. So, each is a good and virtuous person living with another good and virtuous person. There is no problem; they can live together.

With a single thought we can change the way we look at things; with the right point of view you can turn a situation around completely. If you are imprisoned by a narrow perspective you will always be at the mercy of fate. If you act in this way, you will never be free from vexations; you will relate badly with the people you always relate badly with.

Unless we change our minds and the way we look at things, we will never escape an endless succession of predestined situations. If we change how we perceive we will not be overcome by what befalls us, and we will not be oppressed by those around us. The world will seem like a Pure Land.

A man told me that he had been sentenced to jail. He asked how he could contend with his punishment. I said, "As a Buddhist, you should try to stay out of jail, but since you must go, you must try to live through it with happiness and joy." He looked at me and asked, "How am I supposed to be happy in jail?" I told him that I was once in jail and I loved it. This was from 1961 to 1967 when I was in solitary retreat in the mountains. I was confined to an area of sixty square feet; prison inmates have more space than that. I know also of a man who wrote a great deal during the time he spent in prison. He was prolific, and he even wrote some books of literary merit. Obviously, he made the best of his time in confinement.

We must understand that what happens in this life is the consequence of things we did in our past lives. Therefore, we must act according to Buddhadharma to break out of the cast set by our previous karma. In this fashion we can make progress. If we were not able to change our fate, then ordinary sentient beings could never become buddhas. We produce the future from our own

minds. If there is evil in our thoughts, then our future will be filled with misfortune. If the Buddha is in our minds, then one day we will become buddhas.

## **Chan Buddhism and its Relevance in North America** **(Part 1 of 2)**

From Chan Newsletter No. 66, June, 1988

*Spoken at the University of Toronto*

I am not a native of North America, but after being in the United States for several years, I have made certain observations. People always talk about the tension and the hectic pace of life in North America, and they sometimes blame it on the high level of development of industry, commerce, science and technology. These things have influenced our lives in ways that make it difficult not to be tense. North America is also unique as a melting pot of cultures, customs and nationalities. Modern people are bombarded with conceptual, intellectual knowledge. All the latest ideas and technology seem to pour into North America. The incessant input of new things creates confusion in our minds. It is difficult to know what to choose, what to follow. North American life is materially rich but spiritually deprived; people feel insecure and alienated. The Chinese say, "Married people sleep on the same bed but they dream different dreams." Even in tightly-knit families, many people lack a

feeling of security. How much more alienated do we feel among all the cultures that make up North America?

I'm sorry if I seem to emphasize the negative side of North American life, but there is a positive side. If there weren't, then why would people from virtually every place on earth long to come here to find happiness and fulfill their dreams? To millions of people in the world North America is an ideal place, a heaven of sorts, a place with endless opportunity. Is North America the heaven many think it is? In the material sense perhaps it is so, when compared to most other countries.

But for those who already live here, how do you feel? I sense by your presence that many of you are not so sure that this place is heaven. In fact, many people think life in North America is a sort of cruel punishment from God. Although they have many diversions and luxuries, people feel God has lifted them only half way to heaven, and they are stuck in mid-air, where they are blown this way and that by a constant wind of insecurity. They feel like homeless spirits roaming aimlessly with no roots. Because they are so busy, many do not even notice the sorry state that they're in, and they live in a spiritual vacuum. They work and play at a frenetic pace day and night but they have no real purpose. They are not masters of their own lives.

Whether or not this is an accurate picture of North American life depends on your point of view. If the way I've depicted life here has an element of truth, then I think we can say Chan is needed in North America. It is often only when people realize they have problems that they need Chan; if they do not have problems, Chan is not relevant to them. And if there aren't any problems worth solving, it

would be meaningless to consider the relevance of Chan in North America.

### **What is Chan?**

Chan is at least three things: Chan is a spiritual practice, Chan is an ineffable type of wisdom, Chan is all phenomena – there is nothing which it is not, no place where it is not.

As for spiritual practice, methods of meditation exist in Buddhism and Hinduism, as well as in other religious traditions. Although Indian gurus and Chan masters teach methods of meditation, the two traditions have different emphases. Chan Buddhism derives from dhyana Buddhism, which began in India long before Buddhism ever entered China. Once introduced, the advanced meditation techniques of dhyana (meditative concentration) were studied and practiced avidly by the Chinese.

Dhyana applies to, and is an important part of the spiritual training of indigenous Indian religions, including Hinduism, the predominant religion before [and after] the rise of Buddhism, and Buddhism itself. The formal methods of dhyana can be thought of as yoga, and an important part of yoga is mental discipline. Chan uses concrete methods to concentrate the mind, including counting the breaths, contemplating the breath, meditating on parts of the body, focusing the mind on specific sounds, etc. The purpose is to take the mind from a scattered state – one filled with vexation and constraint, to a focused one-mindedness, and then further to where the external and internal environments become one.

Vexation is caused by scattered thoughts arising from our inability to focus and concentrate the mind. Indian traditions have

taught ways to emancipate people from this unsatisfactory condition through the practice of dhyana. The highest teachings of Chan do not depend on the Indian techniques of yoga and mental concentration and indeed, go beyond them. However, for the beginning Chan practitioner, these basic methods of mental discipline are often necessary.

We find instructions for such fundamental methods in the teachings of the patriarchs. In *The Essential Practical Methods for Purifying the Mind*, Fourth Patriarch Daoxin (580-651 A.D.) recommended that you begin Chan practice by examining the mind: sit by yourself in a quiet place, straighten your body, loosen your clothing so you are not restricted, let your body and nerves and mind relax, massage yourself several times, and allow your body and mind to come into harmony. He then describes the level of awareness you can reach using this method. First, there is the experience of inner and outer environments becoming empty and pure. You move through deepening levels of concentration to a point where even the thought of concentrating is absent. Eventually you transcend all mental realms of experience to total unification of inner and outer environments, where all distinctions dissolve. This level is called nirvana.

Another example of dhyana comes from Fifth Patriarch Hongren (602-675). In an essay called *Discussing the Spiritual Practice of Cultivating the Mind*, his words are similar to those of Daoxin. He says that a beginner should practice according to the *Sutra of the Meditation on Amitabha Buddha*. It is a Pure Land sutra which discusses eternal life. The teachings say to sit up straight, close your mouth and focus your eyes in front of you. You can imagine the sun

bathing you with its rays. You must learn to hold firmly to True Mind, that is to say, the unmoving mind. Do not let your thoughts dwell or stagnate on any one thing. Hongren also talks about the harmonious regulation of breathing – do not let your breathing be irregular, sometimes coarse sometimes fine and slow, because that can cause illness. Other basic meditation methods come from a Song Dynasty (960-1279) monk named Chang-lu Tsung-tsi, as well as from Zen Master Dogen (1200-1252), founder of the Japanese Soto Zen sect.

The techniques of dhyana – the Indian meditation methods that lead to samadhi – were certainly accepted and used in China. [“Chan” is a transliteration of “dhyana.”] But they were used primarily by beginners. If a person is experienced and has a long history of meditation, he or she can dispense with such techniques. Chan itself is not limited to concentration; it can be realized through special methods that have nothing to do with concentration.

### **Chan is Inexplicable Wisdom**

Chan is ineffable wisdom. Chan cannot be expressed or described in words, nor can it be imagined or grasped by the conceptual mind. Anything that can be expressed in language, no matter how wonderful, is not Chan. The limitations of language are illustrated in an anecdote involving Master Baizhang Huaihai (720-814). One day he ascended the lecture platform in the temple, and asked the monks to say something to him without using their mouths. One forward monk named Guishan replied, “Rather than have us speak the truth, why don’t you speak it instead.”

Another example of ineffable wisdom is found in the *Platform*

*Sutra*, which recounts the life and teachings of Huineng. The Fifth Patriarch Hongren had given his symbolic robe and bowl to Huineng, signifying that he was to succeed him. Other monks vied for the robe and bowl because they viewed it as a symbol of power and prestige, rather than as a spiritual affirmation bestowed by the teacher. Master Hongren ordered Huineng to flee to the mountains to escape the wrath of those who wanted to take his robe and bowl. One of his Dharma brothers from the temple, a former army general of considerable power and will, eventually caught up with Huineng, who put the robe and bowl on a rock and said, "Take them, they are just symbols. What is the use of fighting?"

The Dharma brother answered, "I did not come for the robe and bowl. I came for the Dharma." So Huineng gave his first teaching as the Sixth Patriarch. When he finished, Huineng said, "Not thinking of good and not thinking of evil, at this instant, what is your true nature?" [Upon hearing this, the Dharma brother became enlightened.]

A third example comes from Master Baizhang. He said that the true wisdom of Buddha is attained only when you free yourself from all restrictions: all conceptions of good and evil, or purity and impurity, any meditative technique or other worldly method, any idea of spiritual blessings or merit. If you transcend this, you will achieve the wisdom of the Buddha.

### **Chan is all Phenomena**

There is nothing that it is not Chan, and there is nowhere Chan cannot be found. I said that Chan transcends all concepts, that it cannot be grasped or defined. However, Chan excludes nothing, so

perhaps there are ways of suggesting Chan in speech. This example comes from Master Zhaozhou (778-897). One day a monk studying in the temple came to Zhaozhou and said, "I am confused. I would like the master to give me some direction."

Master Zhaozhou answered, "Have you eaten your porridge?"

"Yes, I have."

"Well then, go and wash your bowl." After that statement, the monk had an enlightenment experience. Now if after you drank milk, I told you to wash your glass, would you be enlightened? But we must remember the background of such stories. This monk had a long period of intense practice. Because the monk's mind was straightforward and fresh, Zhaozhou's words were enough to trigger an experience. Thus, anything we say or do can be considered to be Chan. Nothing we do is outside of Chan.

In another famous story, a monk asked Zhaozhou, "What is Chan?"

Zhaozhou replied, "When you're hungry, eat; when you're tired, sleep; when you have to shit, shit."

The monk said, "Everyone knows that; does that mean everyone has entered Chan?"

Zhaozhou asked, "When you're eating, are you doing so with a one-pointed mind? When you are sleeping, aren't you elsewhere, off in a dream?"

Another monk said to Zhaozhou, "All the multitudes of dharmas return to one; where does the one return to?" Returning the multitudes of dharmas to one refers to concentrating the scattered mind until the inner is one with the outer. It is similar to the religious concept of everything returning to God, or the question of how multiplicity and unity are related.

Zhaozhou answered, "When I was in the village, I had a cloth robe made for me that weighs seven pounds."

Zhaozhou was asked an abstract question and he answered with a prosaic reply, one that seemingly bore no relationship to the question. Actually, his answer was simple and direct. He had just returned from the village with a new robe and he was happy. No matter what anyone had asked him, he would have answered, "I just had this beautiful robe made for me."

You do not have to use philosophical concepts to inquire into truth. The question, "If all things return to one, where does the one return to?" is not really an important matter. Actually, even the most brilliant philosopher has to eat, sleep and shit, as does the simplest of unskilled laborers. Why must the ultimate truths be limited only to the brilliant? It's not that Chan is opposed to philosophical inquiry, it's just that we don't have to use sophisticated and profound thoughts in order to seek and achieve ultimate truth. The ultimate truth is right before us and all around us all the time in every moment of our life.

Another monk asked Zhaozhou, "What is the meaning of Bodhidharma coming from the West?"

In the courtyard outside the temple seeds were falling from a cypress tree. Zhaozhou pointed to the tree and said, "The seeds of the cypress tree in the garden." The monk asked about the essential teachings of Chan, and he was answered with a simple, seemingly non-related reply about a tree that stood right before him. Not satisfied with the answer, the monk said, "Don't answer my serious questions by talking about the landscape!"

Zhaozhou answered, "I'm not talking about the landscape."

The monk then asked the same question. Zhaozhou gave him the same answer. This is a well-known *gong'an* in Chan. The meaning is simple. At that moment, Zhaozhou looked out the window and saw the seeds falling from the cypress tree, so he said, "That is the real meaning of what Bodhidharma brought from the West." If Zhaozhou had been watching an old flea-bitten dog shitting, he would have given that answer.

Yet another monk asked Zhaozhou, "What is the Buddha?"

Zhaozhou replied, "He's in the Buddha hall."

The monk answered, "No, that's a clay statue."

Zhaozhou admitted, "You're right."

So the monk asked again, "Then what is the Buddha?"

Zhaozhou said, "He's in the Buddha hall." If a dog had walked in front of him, he probably would have said, "The dog is the Buddha." Essentially, whatever you see, hear, sense, or do is Chan. But nothing in itself represents the whole of Chan. If you see something at a certain time, you can say that is Chan, but it will never be ultimate, permanent reality.

(To be continued in Chan Newsletter, Issue No. 67)

## **Chinese Chan and Its Relevance in North America Today (Part 2 of 2)**

From Chan Newsletter - No. 67, August, 1988

*Spoken at the University of Toronto*

### **Transmission from India**

Chinese Buddhism derived its roots from the Indian Buddhist traditions that were transmitted to China from India [even before the arrival of Bodhidharma around the 6<sup>th</sup> century]. The early Chan Master Sengzhao-ch'ou (480-560) based his teachings on the Theravada school. One of these methods is The Four Foundations of Mindfulness, in which one meditates on the impurity of the body, the nature of suffering, the absence of true self as the center of your being, and the impermanence of phenomena (dharmas). Another method Master Sengzhao-ch'ou taught was to maintain constant awareness of the inevitability and reality of one's own death. He also taught Mahayana methods in which one pacified the mind by not dwelling on any particular place or thing. This [non-dwelling] on anything is truly pacifying the mind. Fourth Patriarch Daoxin, Fifth Patriarch Hongren, Master Tsung-tsi and the Japanese Zen

Master Dogen all taught basic Indian meditation methods as well.

### **Flexible and Adaptable**

Chan methods are flexible and adaptable; a Chan master will not restrict himself to any one method or technique. This flexibility is called *chan-chi*. According to situations and conditions and depending on the individuals, a master will use a variety of methods in order to guide disciples to enlightenment.

A layman asked Huineng, "Is it true that outside of meditation and samadhi, there is no way to attain enlightenment?"

Huineng answered, "The Path is realized from the mind, by the mind. How could it be created by sitting in meditation?"

A number of Tang dynasty masters were famous for the unconventional methods they used. Deshan hit people with the incense board; Linji shouted at his disciples; Zhaozhou just told people to go drink tea. Hui-Ts'ang used archery; if someone asked him about Chan he would say, "Watch me shoot this arrow." These masters became famous for their methods but they did not mechanically use the same method for everybody. For example, Deshan would not hit a disciple who was not ready for it. No true master would use the same method for everyone.

### **Sudden Enlightenment**

While the Indian-based schools used methods for progressing gradually from shallower to deeper levels of insight, Chan, which became the most widespread sect in China, encouraged sudden enlightenment. Chan does teach gradual methods to beginning practitioners, but if a person has a solid foundation in meditation

practice, a Chan master will try to guide them towards sudden enlightenment. A person with no formal Buddhist practice would sometimes meet a master who would immediately test him with a sudden enlightenment approach. The master would do this to assess the would-be student's sincerity, understanding, and capability. If the results were favorable the student would be accepted; if the beginner did not understand what lay behind the seemingly irrational technique, he would usually be sent away to practice gradual techniques.

When it is deep, sudden enlightenment brings about thorough insight which removes conceptualizing, discriminating, and ideas of self. Ninth century Master Huangbo Xiyun said, "To eat all day without biting a grain of rice; to walk all day without treading on ground—in so doing one sees no distinction between self and others. Do not detach from what you must do, yet do not be confused by circumstances or conditions. Only in this way can one be at ease; such a person has achieved liberation." The goal is to be completely involved in our daily lives, but not to be led astray by what goes on around us.

### **Chan is Everyday Life**

Chan is practiced in daily life. According to Indian Buddhism we leave society in order to practice, meditate, and gradually attain enlightenment and emancipation. In Chan, spiritual practice is carried out in any environment; there is no need to leave society. If we achieve what Huangbo described—a state completely free from entanglement and confusion—then we reach the point of true enlightenment.

You might ask: “After enlightenment will I still have problems? Do I still need to practice?” Enlightenment enables us to see that we live in a world of baseless anxiety and vexation. However, even after enlightenment if we do not continue to practice, we may still be attached to suffering. For this reason we continue to practice. People express interest in sudden enlightenment and come for advice, thinking that “sudden” means “quick and easy,” that some simple trick will end their problems. It’s not that simple. When someone exhibits this attitude, I tell them, “If there were such a quick and easy method, I would practice it myself instead of teaching it to you.”

### **Does North America Need Chan?**

Do we need Chan in North America? I think people East and West are fundamentally the same. During the time of the Sixth Patriarch, people in the Northern China looked upon people in the south as barbarians. But Huineng himself came from the south. When he first approached Hongren, after paying his respects, Huineng said, “I want to realize buddhahood.”

Hongren responded, “How can a barbarian from the south realize buddhahood?”

Huineng answered, “There may be different people in the north and south, but how can there be a distinction between north and south in buddha-nature?” [After hearing this answer, Hongren told Huineng to go work in the kitchen, thus signaling that he had accepted Huineng as a disciple.]

During the Tang dynasty a monk asked Master Yaoshan Weiyang (745-828), “Before Bodhidharma came was there Chan in China?”

The master replied that yes, it was. The monk responded, “If

Chan was already here why did Bodhidharma have to come?"

Yaoshan answered, "It is precisely because Chan was already here that Bodhidharma came."

North America is no different. It's only because Chan has always been here that I have any reason to come and talk about it. How can North Americans study and practice Chan? Here are some suggestions: First, you have already come to hear about Chan. Second, adopt a method of Chan practice. You can decide whether you prefer traditional meditation techniques or sudden enlightenment techniques. If you want to use traditional techniques, there are many methods to choose from, such as counting breath, concentrating on the breath, or meditating on the impurity of the body. If you want to use sudden enlightenment techniques, that's even simpler.

These techniques were systematized during the Song dynasty. The most common sudden enlightenment method was to meditate upon a *gong'an*. The most popular *gong'an* is simply, "Wu." Another common and effective technique is to ask yourself the *huatou* (question), "Who am I?" If you try to answer this question using concepts, you will become frustrated and confused: "Who am I? That's too simple. Maybe I'm not me. Then who am I?" And so on. However, with the proper guidance this *huatou* can really be an effective method. Ultimately, the best method is no method, that which cannot be conceived. If it cannot be conceived or expressed in words, then I cannot teach it to you with words. It transcends language.

In closing, let me answer a question I was asked earlier. Do I alter the way I teach Buddhadharma to accommodate the culture

and the mind-set of North Americans? Since I am a Chinese Dharma Master, I bring the teachings of Chan to you as they were passed down to me. When you as Westerners become Dharma Masters, then you will shape the teachings and techniques according to your background and experience. Thank you.

## **Pilgrimage to India**

From Chan Newsletter No. 76, February, 1990

Today I will share with you some of my thoughts and reflections about our recent pilgrimage to India, where the Buddha was born and where Buddhism began. Why did I want to go to India, what was the need? After all, Buddha's presence is everywhere. Why go somewhere else to find him? Besides, the Buddha passed into nirvana 2,500 years ago. There are those who think that there is a special, intense spiritual presence in the holy places associated with the Buddha – where he was born, where he attained buddhahood, where he taught, and where he passed into nirvana. Some such people hope that some of this spiritual power will brush off on them and help them reach enlightenment that much sooner.

When we arrived in India we found little evidence of the Buddha. Buddhists no longer live in the holy places where the Buddha lived, practiced, and taught. Many of these sites have been barren and unpopulated for hundreds of years. There are only caretakers there now; they are not Buddhists nor are they practitioners. Thus, anyone who thought that a pilgrimage to India

would increase their knowledge of Buddhadharma might be disappointed.

I was aware of the state of Buddhism in India before the trip. For me it was a little like my trip to Mainland China last year. I knew that Buddhism had been virtually destroyed by the Communists. Nevertheless, I went and the trip was still very rewarding. We stopped first in Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal. Our real destination was Lumbini, Nepal, the birthplace of the Buddha, but the tourist agency arranged a tour of Kathmandu so that we would have some idea of the religion and culture of the country.

The Nepalese government allows the practice of three religions: Hinduism, Islam, and Buddhism. Other religions are not allowed. The majority of the people are Hindus. Next are the Muslims, and Buddhists are last in number, representing about 15% of the population. Buddhists in Nepal generally belong to two traditions: the Tibetan tradition, which was first introduced to Nepal, and the Theravada tradition, which was introduced more recently. A Buddhist in Nepal told me that the government in Nepal does not give a great deal of consideration to Buddhists because the high government officials and the King of Nepal are all Hindu practitioners. In fact, the Buddhist temples in Nepal, which belong to the Tibetan tradition, are so much like those of the Hindu tradition that it is hard to distinguish one from the other. We found this disappointing.

But the situation in mainland China is much the same. There are many people who cannot distinguish Taoism, one of China's native religions, from Buddhism. So, when you think about it, the situation in Nepal is not so extraordinary. And there have been changes in

Nepal. Monks and lamas came to Nepal after the takeover of Tibet by the Communists, and they have created new sects of Tibetan Buddhism, whose temples represent an authentic tradition, which is quite different from the ancient Tibetan temples that confused Hinduism and Buddhism. Some people in our group mistook the ancient Tibetan temples for holy places, and they made considerable donations. Since this was a pilgrimage, they reasoned that every spot we visited must be Buddhist. But I finally made it clear that these were not really holy Buddhist sites.

Next we went to Patna, India. The Tang dynasty Tripitaka Master Hsuan Tsang collected a number of sutras from this area, and Patna was his first stop in India. From Patna we went to the site of Nalanda University where Hsuan Tsang studied for many years. We made the trip by bus and we noticed that white lotuses lined both sides of the road wherever there was water. I was quite pleased, and I remarked that it is no wonder that this is the land of the lotus. But we saw no more lotuses on our trip, at least until the very end when we arrived at Sravasti.

In its day, Nalanda was renowned as a place of learning. Hundreds of professors and thousands of students taught and learned there. Now there is no one to teach and no one to learn. The university buildings and dormitories are all in ruins. The best kept building was a stupa built for Shariputra, [one of the Buddha's main disciples] and there we made prostrations. There was little else to see or do. Some of the people who maintain the area sold us some paper flowers to offer at the stupa when we made our prostrations.

From Nalanda we went to Rajgir, where Sakyamuni Buddha spoke the *Diamond Sutra* at the Bamboo Vihara. When we arrived,

we found no vihara, which is a residence for monks, but we did see some bamboo growing, although it probably dates from a later time. Somewhere nearby there was supposed to be a pond and a gazebo where an ancient Indian king asked the Buddha to preach. I said that because the Buddha spoke there, there ought to be a spiritual presence that we could feel. I asked the tour guide if he knew exactly where the Buddha spoke, but neither he nor anybody else knew the exact location, so we were unable to find the right place to make our prostrations.

I thought perhaps we might visit the pond and make prostrations there. We did not find the pond, but eventually we found the place where the king was supposed to have asked the Buddha to give a sermon. A statue of the Buddha was erected there to commemorate the event. There we made our prostrations. But I felt somewhat sad. This is supposed to be a holy place but it seemed to possess no trace of the Buddha's presence and no spiritual quality at all. Could it really be a holy place? Later another tour guide said that even the authenticity of this location was in doubt. There was another place, he said, where the Bamboo Vihara might be. Nobody really knows where it is. At first I was disappointed, but I realized it does not matter where we make prostrations. The Buddha's presence is everywhere. What was truly important is that we had the mind to make the pilgrimage and that we made our prostrations with that attitude.

We journeyed from Rajgir to nearby Mount Gridhrakuta (Vulture Peak). My own teacher, Master Dongchu, visited there fifteen years ago. He was then too old to climb to the top, but I was in good health, so I climbed to the summit. Gridhrakuta does not

look very high from a distance. It is, in fact, one of the lower peaks among the surrounding mountains. I was surprised to find that the Buddha spoke here and not at a higher point. But when we reached the top, we saw that, yes, this is truly a wonderful spot. This is Gridhrakuta, where the Buddha presented the *Lotus Sutra* as well as other sutras. The *Lotus Sutra* describes as many as 90,000 humans and deities attending the Buddha's discourse. But there were 80 of us and we seemed to take up all the room there was on the peak. On the other hand, there is an open expanse all around the peak, so it is not hard to see how 80,000 people could sit in attendance. A tour guide told me that he had seen Shakyamuni Buddha speaking. I asked him how that could be. He said that all the surrounding trees looked like people, and he could imagine the Buddha speaking to them. I don't think that the Buddha was just speaking to trees.

The afternoon was sunny at Gridhrakuta. It was an important occasion, so I shaved my head clean and dared not wear a hat. The sun hung high overhead and burned down. I felt like my skin would burn and peel away. Despite the heat, I felt energetic and by the day's end, I felt that I had truly seen the Buddha.

We then went to Bodh Gaya, where the Buddha attained enlightenment. At present there are some twenty monasteries at Bodh Gaya. They were built by monks from China, Burma, Sri Lanka, Japan and Tibet, but the Tibetan monasteries predominate. At Bodh Gaya there is a stupa and next to it a Bodhi Tree. Beneath the tree is the Diamond Seat where the Buddha actually sat in meditation and attained buddhahood. I had seen pictures of these things before the trip. When I was actually there, I sat under the Bodhi Tree for more than half an hour. Knowing that this is the place

where the Buddha was enlightened made me feel quite good. Nothing really happened, but two leaves from the Bodhi Tree fell on me, for which I was very grateful. Guo Yuan Shih did much better than I. Someone offered him a Bodhi Tree when he left Bodh Gaya. I got two leaves and he got a whole tree. Actually, the tree was for sale but when Guo Yuan Shih was unable to pay they gave it to him anyway.

The next stop was Sarnath, also known as Deer Park, where Buddha gave his first sermon before five bhikshus (monks). We saw some deer, but once again, these are recent additions. There is a stupa to commemorate the Buddha's first sermon to the five bhikshus and a museum with recently uncovered artifacts. I was asked by my students to give a Dharma talk, but I refrained. I thought, "How would I dare give a talk at the place where the Buddha first preached? When the Buddha gave the sermon, the five bhikshus became arhats, right then and there. I am not even an arhat. I simply had no right to give a lecture here."

The Deer Park at Sarnath is a very important location in Buddhism because it is the site of the first completion of the Three Jewels. At Bodh Gaya, the Buddha attained enlightenment, but it was at Sarnath where he gave his first sermon to the five bhikshus. With his first sermon, he taught the Dharma, and the five bhikshus became the Sangha. Sarnath thus witnessed the first coming together of the Three Jewels—the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. So I was very moved at Sarnath; the Buddha only spent one summer there but during that time, he completed the Three Jewels. I lingered there for a great while. I did not really want to leave. We made prostrations to where Buddha gave the sermon, where he

meditated, and also to the stupa for Ananda. We made prostrations to Ananda's stupa because he was responsible for the collection of the Sutras after the Buddha passed into nirvana. At Sarnath I really felt that I had seen the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.

The people who maintain Sarnath are appointed by the government, but they are not Buddhists. They watched us constantly and would not let us take pictures, especially videos, unless we paid them. We would pay one person and then another would come over looking for money. Eventually, I decided that it was only fair that we pay these people because after all, they are taking care of a very holy place, and we owe them our gratitude.

We next visited Kushinagara, where the Buddha passed over into parinirvana. Kushinagara is not very far from Sarnath, so we went there on the same day. By the time we got there, the sun was setting. We made prostrations to a stupa and I felt very sad, almost as if the Buddha had truly left us. According to the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, the Buddha passed into parinirvana in the evening, and it was in the evening that we arrived. Buddha's parinirvana took place between two trees, but we could not find the original trees when we got there. Two trees we did see were planted much later. We had to leave Kushinagara quickly because our tour guides warned us that bandits menace the area at night.

The next day we went back to Nepal to visit Lumbini, the Buddha's birthplace. What we saw was barren land — there were no flowers and only a few trees. When the Buddha was born, there was a beautiful garden with flowers blossoming everywhere. The flowers are gone now, but there is still a pond. This is perhaps where the Buddha's mother took a bath before she gave birth to the

Buddha. We only saw a few geese and nothing more. As the birthplace of the Buddha, Lumbini is very important to Buddhism. Without Shakyamuni's appearance in the world, Buddhism, as we know it, would not exist. When I was there, I was filled with the wish that Lumbini could be rebuilt and show some of its former glory. Indeed, some of the local people told me that the Nepalese government is trying to raise money from Buddhists all over the world to restore Lumbini.

Our last destination was Sravasti, where the Buddha spent 23 summers and gave many sermons. Sravasti is where the Buddha spent the most time, and where he spoke most of the sutras. Many of his disciples attained arhatship here. But now, Sravasti is a barren piece of land in ruins. At one time there were many houses and viharas, but most of them were destroyed when the Muslims got to India. It is only recently that some of the original foundations were unearthed. Basically, what we saw were ruins.

Buddhism is no longer an important religion in India. Many Hindus have respect for the Buddha, but they do not respect holy Buddhist places. They certainly have put little effort into restoring these areas. Only lately have Buddhists from all over the world come to make pilgrimages to India. The Japanese have been especially active in this respect. Because of the new pilgrims, the Indian government has begun to pay more attention to these holy places. But as far as we know, there is no plan for rebuilding them. I certainly hope that many more Buddhists come from all over the world to make these pilgrimages. If more people go and are willing to help financially, the Indian government will be induced to give better protection or even rebuild these holy places.

Why should these holy places be protected and rebuilt? It is because we hope that Buddhism can be revived, or at least have its presence felt in India. Right now Buddhism is practically non-existent in India. In the last half century, Tibetan Buddhism has made much progress in India, and in certain areas there are as many as 200,000 Tibetans living in communities organized or inspired by the Dalai Lama. So far these Tibetan Buddhists have had no significant impact on the Indian population.

There are Buddhists in India, but they mostly follow the Theravada tradition. It is estimated that one-half of one percent of the population in India is Buddhist, but I believe that this figure may be too high. I have not really given any thought to the prospect of transmitting Chinese Buddhism back to India. It is true that every one of the eight places holy to Buddhism in India has a Chinese temple, but only two of the temples are cared for by Chinese monks. The others are maintained by either Burmese or Sri Lankan monks. I am disappointed that few Chinese Buddhists are willing to go to India. Perhaps it is the poverty that keeps them away. Conditions were probably much the same in Shakyamuni's time, and they should pose no problem for Buddhists today.

When I first arrived in India, I told the immigration officer that India is the mother country of Buddhism. The officer looked at me and said, "No, it's not." I felt that I myself was a spiritual descendant of India, but the officer seemed to disallow what I felt. It must be that he simply did not believe that there was any connection between Buddhism and India.

I began this talk by saying that the pilgrimage to India had been very rewarding. I knew that Buddhism had disappeared from India,

but going there gave me the opportunity to see and feel the places in which the Buddha moved and to sense the environment in which the Buddha gave us his teaching. I got a deeper sense of what the Buddha aspired to and what he achieved. What the Buddha accomplished was something wonderful and rare. No ordinary person could have done what he did. Thus, our pilgrimage served to enhance our faith in the Dharma and to strengthen our resolve to spread the Dharma for the benefit of others.

## Chan and Daily Life

From Chan Newsletter - No. 78, May, 1990

*Spoken at Washington University, St. Louis, Missouri*

I would like to thank Professor Grant and the University for inviting me here today. From the introduction given me, you may have the impression that having written numerous books on Buddhism, I must know a great deal about it. But throughout my study and practice of Buddhism, one important lesson has been drilled into me—if you have written a book, forget it; it's done and gone. Another important lesson is that you should have money in the bank and in your pocket, but not on your mind. Similarly, a Chan practitioner should maintain an empty mind.

It wasn't until yesterday that Professor Grant informed me of today's topic—Chan in daily life. Thirty years ago I would have needed time to prepare, but if the topic is about practicing Chan, there's no need for preparation because Chan avoids words. What do we mean when we say Chan avoids words? Most importantly, it means not relying on what has been spoken or written in the past. There is no need for us to believe even the words of Shakyamuni

Buddha. Thus we approach Chan unencumbered by what we have heard and what we have read, heard and experienced. We leave the past behind.

At Webster University this morning, I spoke about this principle of letting go and leaving behind. Someone said, "That sounds scary, to throw away your whole past, to totally discard everything you know." I am not really advocating returning to some vegetative state where your head is as empty as a dried pumpkin. We must learn, but we don't want to cling to what we have learned. We don't want it in our head. Is this possible? It certainly is not easy. I slept at Professor Harris' house last night. In the morning when we gathered for breakfast his wife asked me, "Did you sleep well? Did anything bother you?" I said, "I slept quite well." I told them that there is nowhere in the world that is free from noise and disturbance. Professor Harris added that no matter where we are or what we do, our minds are always buzzing with self-created problems. It is true: we are most disturbed not by what goes on around us, but what goes on in our heads. And just what is going on in our heads? It's our thoughts entangled with the past, present, and future. And it's not being able to get what we want when we want it, and not being able to get rid of what displeases us when we are displeased.

It might seem that some people can always get what they want. Imagine a campus heartthrob; perhaps he's got three girlfriends he can call on any given night. It looks like he can have whomever he wants but he still has to choose one of the three. Can he have all three at the same time? Eventually you reach a limit. You might think that it's very easy to get rid of what you don't want but this is not necessarily so. Many people get married only to find later that

it is not easy to dissolve a marriage.

In making decisions we usually connect the past, present, and future, and the process is fraught with contradictions. I don't bother to go through all of this. I'm involved in a long list of activities and I have many disciples in Taiwan and here in the United States. I am always busy. Nevertheless, I am not disturbed by the number of obligations I have and the amount of work I must do. People ask me how I manage to deal with all of this. It is simply that I don't put myself in the way of what I do. There is nothing that I wish to do or not do for personal gain or preservation. I do what I have to do with all my heart. I do not do what is not permitted me, what is unnecessary, and what I am unable to do.

Does this mean that I constantly change direction, try one thing, abandon it, and then try something else? No, because there is a central purpose that underlies everything that I do. I try to maintain the attitude of a bodhisattva, and accordingly I try to benefit others as much as possible. It's fine if what I do for others is also of benefit, or at least of no harm, to myself. Even sacrifice of oneself is sometimes necessary. Viewing the world this way and maintaining this attitude, I have no vexation.

Be sure to understand that the willingness to sacrifice oneself is really the mark of a saint. It is not something that most of us can do. Do not become overwhelmed with unrealistic demands on yourself; do what you can with the abilities you have now. Don't think you have to be a saint and perform miraculous deeds. Confucianism advocates striving after sagehood or sainthood, whereas Buddhism advocates the bodhisattva ideal. But this is for those who are ready, otherwise everything in its due time. To be taken for a bodhisattva

when you have not truly attained this state is to have problems indeed.

I sometimes come across people who treat me as if I were a great master. To such people I say, "I'm sorry to disappoint you, but please don't take me for a saint. Otherwise you will end up by causing me harm." Why would anyone want to add to his or her suffering by posing as someone else's ideal, as someone else's illusion? Most often our suffering derives from unrealistic demands that we make on ourselves, or that others make on us.

Many people feel that Chan is an exotic product of the East that is of no use to the West. A similar attitude arose in China when Buddhism was first introduced there. Many Chinese thought that this was a foreign imposition that was unsuited and not adaptable to China—something that is only useful to one nationality, culture, or group is useless and valueless indeed.

There was a monk who asked his master, "What did Bodhidharma bring to China?" The master replied, "He didn't bring anything." The monk insisted, "Didn't he bring the teachings of Buddha?" The master replied, "No, the Dharma has always been in China." The monk was puzzled: "If the Dharma was already here, why did Bodhidharma bother coming?" The master's reply was interesting: "Because the Dharma was already here." Doesn't everybody get that?

What did Bodhidharma tell us? He said that everyone can become a buddha. Everyone has buddha-nature but people don't realize that. How can we attain this realization? Bodhidharma gave us two methods: the first is the method of principle—there is no need for discourse and no need to practice; that there is nothing to

talk about and nothing to do; you simply make your mind like a transparent wall which does not move. You can hang things on it and you can write on it but the wall itself does not change. Just so, [in this state of realization] your mind may contain knowledge and experience but it is unaffected by them. In reality, it is empty of everything just as the substance of the wall is neither increased nor reduced by what is hung upon it.

When your mind is confused, you believe that what is in your mind *is* who you are. Then you continually try to get rid of some things and put other things in. The motion and confusion in the mind increase. The mind is strange—when you have no use for something in your mind it comes out and gets in your way, but when you need something from your mind, you can't find it anywhere.

This afternoon someone came up to me but forgot what it was he wanted to say—it hid from him. Why was that? If your mind is calm and cool, there's no need to anxiously search it for information. With a calm mind what you need is available. When you are at a loss, it is because your mind is spinning with craving, misgiving, and distress. When your mind is like a wall, then it is like the mind of the Buddha. Can you make your mind like a wall? Can you take all your past knowledge and experience and lock them in a storehouse? Can you prevent their escape? Who among you thinks that they can do that?

We often meet people who talk constantly. Sometimes there is nothing left but to tell them to shut up. That may be easy, but what happens when it is your own mind that you are trying to quiet? Are

you able to tell your mind to silence your wandering thoughts? Probably not.

It is for this reason that Bodhidharma also gave us the second method, that of practice. He divided the method of practice into four stages. The first stage has to do with suffering. You recognize that your problems and the difficulties that befall you stem from your previous karma. Everything that now exists has its origin in some other place and some other time. We may not be able to know this origin. What has brought us and all around us to this present moment has its roots in innumerable past lives. But most of us cannot look deep into the past and there is no way to prove the existence of our past lives. Even in this life there are many things we are unable to remember. When we are confronted by unpleasantness and unhappiness in the present, we should know that they are rooted in what we have done in the past. We may be unable to perceive exactly what that cause was, nevertheless we should understand that the origin is in ourselves, and accept the consequences that we now confront.

Is this unconditional acceptance a sign that the Chan approach is passive or negative? Not at all. By understanding that we have laid the groundwork for our suffering in the past, we can see that the here and now is the groundwork for the future. We can lay down a new cause right now to counteract our present suffering and immediately put ourselves on a course that will be more positive. By doing this we pay back debts that we have accrued in previous incarnations. It is important to understand that this paying back consists of acting properly in the moment with what we have at hand. It does not mean surrendering. If this building burst into

flames there would be a cause for it. What would we do? Would we attempt to douse the flames? Or would we sit down and try to figure out how the fire started? There's no need to concern ourselves with the reason. What we must do is to put out the fire now. When we have done everything that is humanly possible, only then do we unequivocally accept the consequences without complaint.

In the second stage, we develop the awareness that what we find good or pleasant is also the result of causes in the past, and we don't get caught up in the feelings of happiness. We don't take good fortune as a sign of our being special or great. We don't let such things add to a sense of self. After all when something good happens to us, we are simply experiencing the consequences of the hard work we have done in the past. It is as if we are withdrawing money from the bank. And what is so wonderful about withdrawing money from our own account?

We must realize that happy events are not all that they seem. Some people still find ways to be unhappy in pleasant circumstances. Many of those with wealth, power, and position are not necessarily happy. Even a simple, common event such as boy meeting girl may not create happiness for the parties involved. Not that they will necessarily be unhappy, but good fortune and happy occurrences should not lead us to pride or self-satisfaction. A lot of people forget themselves when they meet with success.

There is a Chinese story about a beggar who won a lottery. He had the winning ticket secreted in a bamboo walking stick. When he found out that he had won the prize, he was so overjoyed that he resolved then and there to never again have anything to do with begging. In a burst of exultation he threw his old clothes and all of

his meager possessions into a nearby river. Unfortunately, the walking stick was one of the things he threw away. Too late, he watched it and his new life float downstream. A Chan practitioner should maintain an attitude of equanimity. If the money comes, it comes; if it goes, it goes. Neither circumstance should create wild fluctuations in the mind.

By the third stage, the practitioner has come to maintain an attitude of not seeking. Of course, whether you are in the East or West, it would seem that nothing could be accomplished if you didn't set out to do it. Normally, we have desires and goals which we are striving towards. This is what motivates us and this is very natural, but it often happens that we are unable to attain what we seek. There is a Chinese saying: If you have the intention of planting a flower, the flower will not blossom. But a willow will flourish even if no one plants it. Most of you in the audience are fairly young, but you are already old enough to have had lots of ideas of what you wanted to do with your lives. You may have had some career in mind even in your lower-school years. When you reached junior high school did your goals change? And in high school? Your first year in college?

Professor Harris has a Ph.D. in philosophy and teaches it; he also has a master's degree in music, and he's now studying massage and physical therapy. I wondered what his real goal was, his central purpose. But even though he has applied himself to a number of diverse subjects, I don't think that this has been a problem for him at all. He is embarking on his own path. It is like a house with many entrances. You may enter from the east or the west side. You can take a helicopter and enter the house from above. You may go in

one way, dislike what you see, and then try another entrance. Whichever door you came in, what you see inside the house is the same. But if you stubbornly stick to one entrance and can't get past the door that is a problem. Other people are going in through that door but if you can't, you have to find another way in. It doesn't matter what others think of you.

Not seeking anything, there is no single goal to attain. Nonetheless we must work hard. Without hard work life is meaningless. We need motivation to finish everyday tasks but in spiritual cultivation, fixing on a specific goal is itself an obstacle to attaining the goal. Ordinary aims can be achieved by desire and direct effort, but the highest spiritual goal cannot be approached in this way. If, for example, you practice to achieve enlightenment, you will find your goal moving further and further away from you. What does enlightenment mean? It means liberation, both from constraints imposed by the self and those imposed by the external world. Seeking, even for enlightenment, is just another constraint.

Now we arrive at the fourth and last stage of practice. Each method reaches a progressively higher level. The first one is fairly easy to carry out. So, too, is the second one, but the third poses more of a problem. Few can put it into practice. At the fourth level of practice one simply does whatever should be done. Whatever you need of me, I do. One who has only reached the third level may do a task well, but there may be some negativity in his attitude. But by the fourth level of practice the practitioner manifests positive, forthright action.

I once met a young man who wanted to become a lawyer from the time he graduated high school. As it turned out he was unable

to pass the entrance exam, so he eventually studied library science instead. At first he was quite disappointed. After he graduated he went to France to do research on the French library system. Eventually he received his Ph.D. in library science. Then he was invited back to Taiwan because there are very few Ph.D.'s in library science there, and they needed somebody for the central library. He came to me for advice and I quoted a Chinese saying to him: "Once you are captured by pirates, you may as well become a pirate." I told him to go all the way with library science. He came back from France and thanked me. Things turned out quite well for him, and he was probably better off than if he had become a lawyer.

In whatever situation you find yourself, strive to be your best, not striving in some illusion you fear or crave. When things change, change with them. With this attitude, your life should run smoothly and your vexations and troubles will be few.

**Other Books in English by Master Sheng Yen**  
(A partial listing)

**Things Pertaining to Bodhi**

*The Thirty-Seven Aids to Enlightenment*  
Shambhala Publications 2010

**Shattering the Great Doubt**

*The Chan Practice of Huatou*  
Shambhala Publications 2009

**The Method of No-Method**

*The Chan Practice of Silent Illumination*  
Shambhala Publications 2008

**Footprints in the Snow**

*The Autobiography of a Chinese Buddhist Monk*  
Doubleday 2008

**Orthodox Chinese Buddhism**

*A Contemporary Chan Master's Answers to Common Questions*  
North Atlantic Books 2007

**Attaining the Way**

*A Guide to the Practice of Chan Buddhism*  
Shambhala Publications 2006

**Song of Mind**

*Wisdom from the Zen Classic Xin Ming*  
Shambhala Publications 2004

**Hoofprint of the Ox**

*Principles of the Chan Buddhist Path*  
Oxford University Press 2001

**There Is No Suffering**

*Commentary on the Heart Sutra*  
North Atlantic Books 2001

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*Local organizations affiliated with the Chan Meditation Center and the Dharma Drum Mountain Buddhist Association all provide a way to practice with and learn from other Chan practitioners. Affiliates also provide information about Chan Center schedules and activities, and Dharma Drum publications. If you have questions about Chan practice or Chan retreats, you may find useful information at an affiliate near you.*

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