

TEA WORDS

Early Chan Lectures in America (1980-1997)

Volume Two

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. The mission of CMC is to be a Buddhist meditation and practice center for anyone whose good karma brings them to its front door. (As often is the case, adventitiously.)

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 sittings, talks on Chan and Buddhist Dharma, and a vegetarian luncheon. All are welcome.

Information about CMC is available at

<http://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 intensive Chan meditation retreats of varying lengths, from 3-day weekend retreats, to those of longer duration, typically 7 to 10 days. While the retreats are open to all without regard to affiliation, it is preferred that participants have at least some beginner-level meditation experience and/or have attended at least one intensive meditation retreat.

Information about DDRC is at:

<http://www.dharmadrumretreat.org>

Contents

Acknowledgments	1
Editor's Preface	4
Human Consciousness in the Chan Perspective	7
Buddhadharma in the Modern World	17
Transforming Suffering	32
Life in a Chan Monastery	39
Why I am a Chan Monk	52
Dreaming Asleep and Awake	64
Egoism and Altruism	69
Chan: a Gateway to Wisdom	81
The Spirit of Chan	86
Chan and Enlightenment	93
The Chan View of Life	106
The Life of a Chinese Monk	123
Enlightenment and Buddhahood	137
Chinese Buddhism and the Chan Tradition	151
Living and Dying with Dignity	165

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Editor's Preface

This book, *Tea Words Volume II*, is the second of two volumes comprising a selection of Dharma talks given by Chan Master Sheng Yen (1930-2009) at various venues, which were published in the *Chan Newsletter* between 1980 and 1997. During its tenure, Chan Newsletter served as a monthly chronicle of Master Sheng Yen's earlier Dharma teachings to his disciples and students, consisting of Westerners as well as ethnic Chinese from the US and Taiwan. Some of the talks were given at the Temple of Great Enlightenment in the Bronx borough of New York City, later at his newly founded Chan Meditation Center in the borough of Queens. Additionally, Master Sheng Yen's quickly spreading renown resulted in invitations to many universities and colleges throughout the USA. The two volumes of *Tea Words* include articles from all these venues.

Before Master Sheng Yen arrived in the United States in 1975, his prospects were few, but his hopes and aspirations were many. As a young monk still in his teens, he observed that "the Buddhadharma is so wonderful, it's a pity so few people know of it and so many misunderstand it." With that insight, he vowed to dedicate his life towards spreading Buddhadharma to those who were open to learning and

practicing it. It turned out that his path towards that achievement took some unexpected turns, including emigrating from China to Taiwan with the Nationalist Army, spending 10 years as a soldier there, taking up the robes of a monk again afterwards, and editing the Buddhist monthly *Humanity* for two years before entering solitary retreat in the mountains of Taiwan for six years. Coming out of retreat, during which time he wrote scholarly books on Buddhism, he then went abroad to Rissho University in Tokyo, where he earned a master's degree and a doctorate in Buddhist literature.

Back in Taiwan, he was a 45-year-old monk with an uncertain future. He could have stayed in Taiwan to serve under Master Dongchu, but at that time karmic affinity with someone he had never met came into the picture. A prominent Taiwanese businessman and lay Buddhist, Mr. C.T. Shen, was at that time president of the Chinese Buddhist Association of America, and also a founder of the Temple of Great Enlightenment in the Bronx. Through intermediaries and correspondence, Mr. Shen offered to bring Master Sheng Yen to America to live and teach at the Temple. As Master Sheng Yen recalls in *A Journey of Learning and Thought*: "It was really ridiculous. Seven years ago I went to Japan without being able to understand Japanese; now I am in America without being able to understand English."

As it turned out, it did not matter much that Master

Sheng Yen spoke little English, since from the beginning, among his students he found very skilled translators. As the talks in the two volumes of *Tea Words* and all his other books in English demonstrate, Master Sheng Yen's teachings of the Buddha and of Chan transcend the limitations of language, and as the title of this two-volume series implies, at some point one stops talking and just enjoys some tea.

I would just like to remind the reader that this volume is intended in part to commemorate the fourth anniversary of Master Sheng Yen's passing. We are forever grateful for his wisdom, and for gracing our world with his compassion.

Human Consciousness in the Chan Perspective

From Chan Newsletter No. 84, March, 1991

Brooklyn College, November 8, 1990

Buddhism speaks of human consciousness in terms of false mind or true mind. False mind is the state of ordinary sentient beings; it is the mind that suffers vexations arising from a self-centered view of the world. True mind is the mind free of vexations, a mind of wisdom. If false mind includes all levels of human consciousness and its activities, then what distinguishes true mind? The answer is that true mind arises when the mind is totally free from self-centeredness; at this point it is no longer subject to the vexations of ordinary human consciousness. At this time consciousness is no longer subjective; only perfect, completely objective activity remains.

It is important to understand that false mind is really what we call ordinary human consciousness. Consciousness itself has two aspects: discriminating consciousness and fundamental consciousness. Discriminating consciousness includes cognition, apprehension, and discrimination (commonly, what we take to be memory, judgment, and reasoning). However, there is an aspect of consciousness

which does not make discriminations; for the sake of discussion we will call this fundamental consciousness. According to the Yogachara school, fundamental consciousness makes a person what he or she is; it is tempting to say that this fundamental consciousness is the core, essence, or true entity of someone, but these terms are misleading, since they make one think of substance, of something material, and this is not the understanding of Buddhism. These terms are sometimes used to define that which transmigrates from life to life when a being is reborn, but it is definitely nothing like the Christian understanding of the soul.

We speak of consciousness in human beings but do we recognize such a faculty in animals? In Western thought this question is usually answered in terms of the species in question. Most Western science recognizes consciousness in so-called “higher animals” such as elephants, monkeys, or cats but it does not recognize consciousness in “lower animals” such as earthworms or insects. In the Buddhist view, lower life forms may lack discriminating consciousness but they still have fundamental consciousness. In other words, all living beings have consciousness. For this reason Buddhist compassion is directed to all living beings—human or otherwise, that all can evolve to buddhahood.

The goal of Buddhist practice is to free living beings from the vexations that arise out of the habit of making

discriminations. To attain true mind we must also be freed from fundamental consciousness because our karma is centered there; in other words, the seeds of our previous actions and the forces that they exert upon us are “stored” there. [This is the reason why fundamental consciousness is sometimes called “the storehouse consciousness.”] Put another way, to attain the true mind of wisdom, sentient beings must liberate themselves from discriminating consciousness, and they must defuse the karmic force of fundamental consciousness. This is the ultimate direction of Buddhist practice. But how can we truly tell when we have overcome vexation and reached wisdom? Vexation and wisdom are both mental activities, but the crucial difference is that vexation is centered on the self; it is this centering on the self that causes suffering. However, with wisdom one sees things as they are, unconcerned with the self, untainted by personal subjectivity.

The Chan Point of View

How does Chan differ from this Buddhist view of consciousness [that I have just described]? The answer is that Chan is a tradition within Buddhism and its understanding and perspective fall entirely within the basic tenets of Buddhism. However, in Chan we often speak of buddha-mind, another name for true mind; in other words, buddha-mind is the mind of wisdom. Chan also speaks of the mind

of sentient beings as the false mind of vexation. One important phrase used in Chan can be translated as "to illuminate the mind and perceive buddha-nature." Why does the mind need illumination? It is because the mind of sentient beings is clouded in darkness, and this darkness must be lifted to see the true nature of reality. Thus, to illuminate the mind and perceive buddha-nature means leaving behind the mind of vexation in order to attain wisdom. So the goal of Chan practice is identical to the goal of Buddhism.

Chan practice then, revolves around this idea of attaining true mind, which is to say, buddha-mind. For the beginner the foundation is to start with the mind of vexation, i.e., false mind, and the goal is the Buddha's wisdom, or true mind. By now we can see that the Western understanding of consciousness does not cover all of the meanings of consciousness in Buddhism. In Western science, mental activities are researched, analyzed, and recorded, but is true mind, the mind of wisdom, a mental activity that can be scrutinized?

If we attempt to use the concept of consciousness to explain true mind, there will be quite a bit of confusion. It might be possible to say that true mind represents a kind of pure, undefiled mental activity while false mind represents impure mental activity, but this would still lack clarity. To avoid confusion Chan masters simply refer to "mind." Thus, when speaking of Chan practice, we can see that buddha-

mind and the mind of sentient beings are not fundamentally different; we can look at false mind as the process of practice and true mind as the goal of practice.

When you first start to practice, it is likely that you will notice that your mind is not at ease, not calm and peaceful. To change that you can use shamatha, a method of meditation for calming, or stilling, the mind. The goal is to bring the mind to a standstill. This process can also be thought of as clarifying and settling the mind. One can use the analogy of a glass of muddy water that becomes clear once the water is still and the dirt sinks to the bottom.

The Chan Approach to the Problems that Arise from Human Consciousness

The Chan approach to resolving one's problems is quite different from the psychological approach where the person's problems are the centerpiece of analysis. In psychotherapy one's problems are analyzed, themes and motifs are suggested, and the patient is urged to recognize patterns from early childhood, and to break the hold they have upon him. The approach of Chan is different: practitioners learn to simply put down their vexations and leave them behind. This does not mean that you should ignore what you have to do in life; it simply means that you abandon the idea that what confronts you constitutes a problem. You continue to deal with situations but you no longer see them as problems. In this way the problems cease

to exist.

How do you go about putting aside your problems? One solution is to develop compassion for other beings. When you see the vexation and suffering that torments others, you can try to help them resolve their problems and end their suffering. In this process it will be easier to put your own problems aside for the sake of others. This is compassion. Where does this compassion come from? It comes from bodhi-mind, the mind of realizing Chan.

The flier that announced this lecture contained two Chinese characters which can be translated as “beginner’s mind.” What does this mean? This is the mind of an ordinary sentient being that has taken the first steps in turning his or her mind toward illumination. This step is sometimes called, “the first arising of bodhi-mind.” But what is bodhi? In Sanskrit, “bodhi” means awakening, or enlightenment.

To develop bodhi-mind, you begin to engage in activities that are not centered on yourself, dealing with all problems in an objective way. Ironically, this can be the way that you will resolve your own problems. With this attitude, you clear away the mind of vexation and attain the mind of wisdom.

Last week I traveled to the West Coast where I gave a talk to an audience including psychiatrists and neuroscientists. At the end of the talk someone asked, “You say that your methods are simpler than ours. How can that be?” I replied, “In psychotherapy you have to find out a great

deal the patient's personal history; you must ask a great many questions. The patient often must come back again and again, and this process can last for years. When I address someone's problems I don't spend too much time finding out about their background. I speak a few sentences and that will begin to provide them with help."

I added that among my students—or my patients if you prefer—are psychologists and psychiatrists. Some come to me because they developed problems after listening to so many of their patients' problems. Others come to learn the way of Chan so that they can help themselves or their patients. At first it may not be very easy to use Chan methods with psychotherapy—the basic concepts are quite different. In general, psychotherapy is more analytical while Chan is more direct. It is also important to add that unless the Chan master is very expert, it will be difficult for him or her to effectively help people. By contrast some types of therapy can be learned in a reasonable amount of time, so that a therapist can provide his or her patients with some relief. But in the beginning it is not easy to combine the two approaches.

Let us now look at the ways Chan can help people deal with psychological problems. Chan recognizes that suffering, vexation, and confusion are mostly created within the mind rather than from the external world. This inner mind is the state of consciousness that Chan methods

address. As such, methods of cultivation fall under two general classifications. The first is called, “contemplating mind”; the second, “transcending thoughts.” Each method serves a special purpose; which one is better depends on the person, although it may happen that one person can employ methods in both categories.

The procedure in contemplating mind is to keep your attention on the present moment and focus on some external object, a feeling or part of the body, or simply a thought or an idea. If you are concentrating on a thought, since concentrating is itself a thought, this can be described as using a later thought to observe an earlier one. This method helps to overcome the mind’s disorganization—the usual state where thoughts come and go in a disorderly, random manner. This method will help you stabilize your mind. Gradually thoughts become simpler and less disorganized.

There are many methods of contemplating the mind. For example, you can concentrate on the rise and fall of your lower abdomen while you breathe, or you can concentrate on your breathing. Or, as mentioned earlier, you can watch your thoughts as they arise and disappear. You can also try to keep your mind free of thoughts; if any thoughts arise, you ignore them and bring your mind back to the thought-free state. These methods may seem simple but they are not that easy to do, and take a lot of practice. We have an eight-hour class at our Center just to teach the very simple method

of counting the breath; this is because there are many subtle aspects to this method and many principles behind it. Improperly understood and executed, the method will leave your mind running wild no matter how hard you try to contain it.

The second category, transcending thoughts, consists of having the attitude of non-attachment to yourself or others. The goal is roughly described by the Chan phrase, "the mind free from thoughts and free from discrimination." To be free from all this is to be enlightened.

Whichever Chan method you use please refrain from relying on words or speech. Words represent ideas, concepts, and images, and only by leaving these things behind can you begin to understand true mind. Two Chan maxims convey this idea. The first says, "Whatever you think is off the mark." In other words, whatever you are thinking is erroneous, no matter how clear or accurate you believe it to be. The second maxim is, "Whatever you say is off the mark." No matter how well chosen or clearly spoken, words rely on thoughts and ideas, and are thus fundamentally wrong. Nonetheless, you will notice that Chan masters talk a lot; they also sometimes write a lot. But the point of what we talk or write about is to convey that whatever you think or say is erroneous. That is the content of all of my talks. No words or description will suffice to describe a state of realization. Therefore, talking about realization is not Chan; anyone trying to describe such a state would be considered

by a Chan master to be a clever devil, not an awakened being.

Therefore, many Chan masters use no words when interacting with disciples; instead they use movements or gestures, even shouts. Or sometimes when they do use words, it is in an unconventional way. If a student asks a question about A, the master may give an answer that refers to B, something totally unrelated. These methods are designed to help students to drop the habit of reasoning themselves to true mind. Reasoning will not free you from mind, thought, or consciousness.

A story from the Tang dynasty tells of a disciple who asked his master, "How can I calm my mind?" The master said, "I'm too busy right now, why not consult your first Dharma brother?" The disciple did as he was told. The first Dharma brother said, "I have a headache, I can't talk now. Why not talk to second Dharma brother?" But the second Dharma brother said, "I have a stomach ache, why don't you talk to Master?" So the disciple went back to his master and complained, "Nobody told me how to calm my mind; nobody told me anything." The master said, "You really are a stupid fool. Everybody has been telling you how to calm your mind." Upon hearing this, the disciple realized enlightenment. Does this make sense to you?

Buddhadharma in the Modern World

From Chan Newsletter No. 89, November, 1991

The world today has a genuine need for Buddhadharma. There are many fine things in the modern world but also, much that is less than desirable. As the world becomes smaller and more crowded, people are getting busier and busier. As a child I read a Chinese novel called *Journey to the West*. It is the story of a monkey with mystical, supernatural powers who accompanies his master to India to seek special teachings from the Buddha. Despite the monkey's power, the journey is very difficult. The monkey could leap over 100,000 miles but because his master lacked that power, the journey was arduous.

Today they could take a jet, just six hours from China to India, only about 16 hours to the United States. We may feel that the world is getting smaller and smaller, but at the same time the distance between individuals seems to be getting greater and greater. In ancient times, even when I was a child, people living in the country knew their neighbors for miles around; you would know most of the families in your neighborhood. This is no longer true; you may know your next door neighbor by sight but you may not know his name.

When people married in times past, they would rarely consider the option or even the possibility of divorce. These days, people often marry with an attitude of "What's the big deal? The worst that can happen is that we divorce." There was a time when people were not so busy, and they had more time to know themselves and understand what their lives were about. Now, we are sometimes even unfamiliar to ourselves. We may be confused by such questions, "What are you doing with your life?" or "Where do you think you are going and what will you be doing in the future?"

Things move very fast in the world today. So much seems to have happened in the three months I have been gone from the Chan Meditation Center [in New York]. I can hardly recall what the situation was like before I left. Even yesterday, Guo Yuan Shi had to remind me that I was scheduled to give today's talk. This just shows how busy I've been. At lunch Ming Yee [the translator] observed that if we didn't have a telephone and a fax machine, I would be able to get a little rest when I come to the States. But as it happens, no sooner do I arrive than I find a fax and more responsibilities waiting for me. The same thing happens when I return to Taiwan. Whatever needs my attention follows me around. There is no place for me to run to. I imagine that many people find themselves in this situation.

Yesterday five people vacationing from Taiwan came to visit me. They stayed one night, and this morning they took a plane to Canada. They will be back in Taiwan in two days.

I asked them what they were doing on vacation. “Rest,” they said. One consequence of the advances in communication and transportation is that people continue to get busier and busier. In addition, I have to adjust from a time zone that’s half way around the world. It can be quite tiring.

How can Buddhadharma help us in this busy world? What can it do for the distance between people and the alienation people feel within themselves? Buddhadharma teaches that the world we live in is only a very small portion of the universe, like a grain of sand in the Ganges River, or a grain of sand in countless Ganges Rivers. Even if we feel that the world is as small as an egg, we can take heart in the vastness of the universe. We may not be able to roam through it in its entirety at this point, but we need not feel any claustrophobia or oppression because the Earth feels small to us now. With a method of practice, we can discover a great world inside of us that is limitless, like the world around us. There is no measure of the space within and without.

Buddhadharma tells us that innumerable living beings in our world and throughout the universe have suffered through rebirth upon rebirth in numberless worlds from time without beginning. Through countless lifetimes each of these sentient beings has played the role of relative, friend, brother, sister, parent, child, and so on, to each other. All the matter in the universe at one time or another has been part of our bodies in previous lifetimes; [after we die] that which

comprised our bodies will become the matter which now fills the universe. The sutras say that the dust particles in 3,000 trichiliocosms—an unimaginably enormous expanse of space—have combined to form the many bodies we have inhabited through time, and it is this enormity of matter which has been discarded with the disintegration of these bodies. This should give you an idea of the intimate relationship you share with other living beings, animals, plant and even minerals. They all have been part of you [and you have been part of them]; you are not a single isolated existence.

If we use the methods and concepts of Buddhadharma as a guide in daily life, not only will we feel the vastness of the universe, but we will also see our close connection to everything within it. The gulf between others and ourselves will be bridged. I have spoken about how busy so many people are. What does this mean for Buddhist practitioners? Should they be as busy as others? How should they perceive their lives? Let's look at Shakyamuni Buddha. He lived about 25 centuries ago in India at a time when many Indians lived relatively unhurried lives. There was a limit upon what had to be done and what could be done. But Shakyamuni Buddha was different. For eighty years from childhood until his death, he led a very, very busy life. As a child he learned the worldly knowledge of his day: the arts, literature, philosophy, religion, martial arts, to name a few. Eventually [upon witnessing various kinds of suffering] he decided to

renounce the world and leave home. But he was still quite busy learning how to practice; he practiced very hard for six years using many different methods. Ultimately he attained buddhahood, but that did not mean he had nothing to do afterwards. No, he just got busier. From the Tripitaka, the collection of the Dharma sermons given us by the Buddha, especially the sutras and the vinaya (rules of discipline), it is evident that after his enlightenment, Shakyamuni Buddha spent most of his life traveling all over India helping whomever he met. He had precious little time to rest; there was hardly a day when he had nothing to do.

Being busy is not itself a problem. The Dalai Lama, a very important master, is very busy day in and day out attending to his people, trying to free his country, ministering his religion, and pursuing his own practice. He has been as busy as the Buddha was in his time. But this only shows that being busy is not a problem for a Buddhist practitioner. The busy life of a Buddhist, especially the busy life of Buddha, is quite different from the busy life of an ordinary person. What is the difference between a Buddhist practitioner and an ordinary person? When ordinary people are busy they have a purpose, and that purpose is their own benefit. They busily seek fame, wealth, position, and power. For this reason their minds are always unsteady – they live in tension, apprehension, constantly trying to fulfill their desires.

A Buddhist practitioner, especially someone with some

attainment, may be busy but it will not be for his or her own sake, for fame or fortune, for power or position. They will not be concerned about gain or loss, not live in tension, apprehension, or confusion. There is nothing wrong with being busy but if it makes you restless or unstable, you will be filled with vexations. Being busy simply means that you have many things to deal with, one after the other. If your mind is not concerned with getting or losing then there will be no vexation. When dealing with many things leads to restlessness, instability, and tension, then that is vexation.

Two people I know who occupy very high cabinet posts in the government in Taiwan have two very different attitudes towards their positions. One is quite concerned about his career, in constant fear that he will lose his post. He also worries that even if he keeps his position, there will be nowhere for him to advance. This attitude causes him to be tense and nervous and consequently, apt to falter. As a result, he is often criticized and attacked. The other person, whose position is equally high, has a completely different view. He says, "I only try to do my best. If the government thinks that I am doing well in this position, then I'll continue to work here. If the government wishes me to step down, then I'll gladly do it. I am concerned with what I do, not my position." He happens to be a Buddhist practitioner and a student of mine. Here then are two people who share positions at the same high level, but whose perceptions of those positions are completely different.

Many people find the world a very difficult place to live in. The quality of the air and the quality of our food leave much to be desired. Many people feel that we live in a garbage dump or a room slowly filling with poison gas. It is no wonder that there is great concern for the environment. But this problem must be approached correctly. Recently in Taiwan there was an ironic turn of events involving some members of an environmental protection group. In their zeal to protect the water and air, some of the members ended up unleashing greater pollution into the environment. Their actions actually resulted in a number of deaths.

I gave a talk in Boston three years ago which happened to coincide with Earth Day. The Earth Day organizers and participants passed out a great number of posters and fliers filled with advice on how to save the environment. All that paper wound up creating a huge mound of garbage. Were these people part of the solution or were they part of the problem? Again, a couple of years ago, there were two opposing demonstrations in Central Park. One group was pro nuclear power the other anti. Which group was right? Whatever the answer, at least in that situation, it seemed both groups contributed more to the disharmony of the environment than to any real solution. These difficulties arise from the way people respond to the problems in the world. People want things to change. But the question is who should do the changing?

From the Buddhist point of view, it is a mistake to simply

turn your attention outward in order to speak of others' problems, the world's problems, and problems of the environment. If all you can do is criticize others and demand that others change, that will not solve anything.

What does Buddhadharma say on these issues? Buddhadharma counsels each of us to maintain purity of mind and heart. In other words, we must each try to have less greed, hatred, ignorance, arrogance, and doubt in our minds. This will naturally lead the world in a better direction. It will become a purer, healthier, and safer place in which to live. How do we achieve this goal? We must depend on the teachings, concepts, and methods of practice of Buddhadharma. Only with these can we reach the goal of purity of mind. Only when the mind is pure can the external environment become pure. Only when you attain purity of mind can you see the purity of the external world. Without this inner peace and purity, the world will always be troubled by problems. Few people are mindful of their own problems or their own inadequacies. Most of us fervently believe that the root of our problems lies in what others have done to us. After all, we use the phrase "ordinary people" because such people have the ordinary problems basic to human nature such as greed, hatred, arrogance, and doubt. Very few people reflect on the fact that they themselves are ordinary people with ordinary problems. It is because of their own problems that they are so acutely aware of the problems of others. If I were a sage or a saint

however, I would not be troubled by the faults and shortcomings of those around me. We see the faults in others principally because we are ordinary, vulnerable beings ourselves.

Buddhadharma does not aim to control or subdue others. It is the goal of Buddhadharma to help us understand and tolerate others even as we learn to master our own bodies and minds. In Buddhadharma, when we understand the problems of ordinary people, that is called compassion. We see that they have the weaknesses of ordinary people; it is only appropriate that ordinary people have ordinary problems. Mindful of this, our vexations will lessen. This will lead to tolerance and a muting of our criticism of such people. We will not harbor resentment or hatred toward them. At the same time, we will reflect on our own faults and try to improve ourselves. As long as there is awareness on one side, it can affect both sides. This means that understanding your own ordinariness and faults will engender in others, an understanding of their own ordinariness and faults. You will be aware of where you are vulnerable to making mistakes, and you will see where others are vulnerable, also. This will naturally bring about understanding and sympathy for sufferings others undergo. This understanding will translate into a peaceful attitude towards yourself, and therefore towards others.

Today I encouraged those members who have been with the Center for a long time to take the bodhisattva precepts.

This involves vowing to observe and keep quite a number of rules. At lunch someone approached me: "Shifu, do you think that someone like me can take these bodhisattva precepts?" I asked, "Why not?" He replied, "Because if I take the precepts, I'm sure to break them." I said, "It's only by taking the precepts, that you will have precepts to break. If you didn't have them you couldn't break them." Shakyamuni Buddha said that when you have precepts to break, that is the way of a bodhisattva; when you have no precepts to break, that is the mark of an outer path—it should not be followed. The idea is that if you take no precepts, you may think that you can get away with anything without breaking any rules. But you may in fact be doing much that is bad and harmful, no matter what you think.

On the other hand, if you have made the effort to take precepts, perhaps you'll break a precept today, but you'll know it. You may break another precept tomorrow, but you'll know that too. Eventually, this awareness will encourage you to break precepts less and less often. This process will help you to become a bodhisattva.

Simply because ordinary sentient beings are ordinary, it is impossible for them to maintain absolute purity of body, speech, and mind. After all, their bodies and their minds are not really under their control. In addition, they have many vexations, what we call karmic obstructions, that have been brought over to this lifetime from previous lifetimes. These

bother and constrain us. It is difficult for an ordinary sentient being not to break a precept. But Buddhadharmā lays down a clear path so that you will know which actions to engage in and which to refrain from. You establish these criteria for yourself and you vow to adhere to them. But it may happen that you will continue to break the precepts for a long, long time. In fact, a bodhisattva continues to break precepts until the day he or she attains buddhahood. An analogy often given is this: Precepts are like a robe; when you break a precept, it is as if you made a hole in the robe. Now you have to patch it; later there will be more holes and more patches. But eventually you reach a point where the robe needs no patching. This is the process that you must go through. Without the precepts, it is as if you had no robe; it is as if you were naked.

It is important for us to recognize that we are ordinary people with weaknesses, inadequacies, and vexations. Self-knowledge is the beginning of wisdom and it also leads to the growth of compassion for others. Compassion will eventually affect even the environment, leading to its improvement and purification. How does this work? If we are somewhat less greedy, we will seek somewhat fewer material objects. What material objects we do have, we will use more economically and less wastefully. We will create less garbage and consequently, we will pollute the environment less. With more understanding and sympathy for others, there will be less conflict and more peace. This

will certainly improve the world we live in. We will share more and thus put less strain on our resources. This, too, will enhance the environment.

For each new person practicing Buddhadharma, there is a gain in force for the peace, purity, and stability of the world. If we wish to stop the destruction of the world and stem the tide of insanity that seems so prevalent, then we should dedicate our efforts to understanding and practicing Buddhadharma. Buddhadharma emphasizes working on one's own character, on one's own mind. If we can establish wholesome character, maintain the purity of our minds, and influence each other in a benevolent way, then we will be able to establish a pure land in this world. It is not an issue whether everybody in the world is converted to Buddhism. The important thing is to turn away from trying to subdue others and to help others see that they must work on their own minds. This is the emphasis of the practice of Buddhadharma. Buddhadharma does not advise against a reasonable accumulation of material things. It is simply that we should not take this to extremes, nor should we squander our resources.

It would be wrong to conclude that Buddhists concentrate only on themselves to the exclusion of others. The idea is that we first work on our own minds. Then, once we have benefited, we try to help others benefit also. For the last few years I have been helping to establish a major Buddhist complex in Taiwan. It will include an academy,

library, practice halls, and will have a variety of facilities. It is called Dharma Drum Mountain. We are now planning its development. Two phrases summarize the goal of Dharma Drum Mountain, and show the responsibility Buddhism recognizes it has towards the modern world: "To uplift the character of humanity and build a pure land on earth." All of what I have said today is expressed by these two ideas.

Are there any questions? Don't worry about saying the wrong thing. Even bodhisattvas begin by making mistakes.

Question: Did you say that we should wait until we benefit from the practice before we can help others to benefit?

Sheng Yen: It is true that there is a sequence, but it is not a hard and fast rule. It is not that you must achieve a particularly lofty level of practice before you can go on to help others. It is true that you begin with yourself first. But as you work on yourself, you will be able to begin to help and influence others.

Question: The world is neither moral nor immoral, is that right? There is nothing right or wrong. Could Shifu comment on that?

Sheng Yen: You cannot say the world is moral or immoral. The world is like a sheet of white paper [that you can write anything on]. Ideas of morality or immorality are human concepts. These have been set up by various people at various times, and accordingly we judge certain things to be moral or immoral. Because of differences in location,

culture, and history, what constitutes morality today may change tomorrow.

Question: Isn't it possible that there are some forces in the modern world that are so powerful and so evil that they need to be subdued? Isn't there a limit to the tolerance of others?

Sheng Yen: There is a distinction between going to war to subjugate a country, and acting in such a way that aggression is prevented. For example, in Shakyamuni's time there were situations where one country or another was bent on acting in an unreasonable way. He said that it was important for what he called righteous forces to maintain the kind of power that would discourage rash actions. This type of power would instill the idea in potential adversaries that if they did something unreasonable, they would be, in effect, harming themselves. The idea of going to war to conquer was not condoned. It is as if you saw a child about to do something mischievous, so you would hold both his arms to prevent him from getting into trouble. The child is both restrained and frightened. It is for this reason that in the Tantric Buddhist tradition, there are many deities that take wrathful forms in order to tame evil forces.

When this Chan Center was across the street and we were in the middle of a Chan retreat, a drunk came in and started to harass us. Nancy, who was on the retreat, went to talk to him to convince him to leave. He would not move. I told Stuart, who is a very big, powerful guy, to talk to him.

Stuart walked over to him, spoke a few words and the drunk turned and left. This is not in contradiction to the compassion of Buddhadharmā.

Question: You spoke quite a bit about ordinary sentient beings. If every sentient being is innately a buddha, how can they be ordinary?

Sheng Yen: An analogy used in the sutras is that of gold ore. Before it has been refined, the ore is still not in a form we would call gold, even though the essential content of gold is inside. By analogy, all of us here may have gold content but it has yet to be refined. What is vexation? Vexation is analogous to the impurities mixed with gold in the ore.

Transforming Suffering

From Chan Newsletter No. 90, January, 1992

From the moment we are born, the threat of illness hovers over us. The person who has not suffered illness has yet to be born, and only after death does illness cease. But the lives of sentient beings are also marked by mental affliction. Indeed, a healthy person with a sick mind may suffer more than someone with a sick body and a healthy mind. Two thousand five hundred years ago the Buddha discovered a way to help people alleviate mental suffering. So the Dharma he gave us is not an anesthetic for physical pain but a path to alleviate mental suffering. When all our mental problems are cured, that is called liberation.

The Judeo-Christian religions talk about Genesis as a time when everything began, but Buddhism sees time as without beginning or end, and sentient beings have known suffering since time without beginning. Buddhism further teaches that our experiences are influenced by our previous actions, and in turn, our present acts become the causes for future effects. This is karma. Vexations arise from our environment, our relationships, and from our own inner turmoil. Relationships in particular cause a great deal of suffering: people point to their enemies as the source of

misery, but more often the “culprit” is a family member or an acquaintance. However, we are vexed most by the enemy within, our own mind. Our thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and perceptions change constantly. We can move from arrogance to regret, from joy to sorrow, from hate to love, in a matter of seconds. As time passes, our view changes, so that we look at something old in an entirely new way. When in turmoil, we feel powerless to make decisions. We worry about gain or loss, right or wrong. So much indecision throws us into a tumult.

Though everyone suffers in this way, many insist that they have no problems. I once asked someone why he had so many vexations. “It’s not me,” he cried, “it is other rotten people who are making me so miserable.”

Vexation can come in the form of greed, anger, ignorance, arrogance, or doubt. Whenever you are distressed, look into the nature of your vexation. As soon as you identify your vexation, its intensity will diminish. When you are distressed by greed, for instance, collect yourself by reflecting, “I’m giving in to desire again!” If you can be objective and non-judgmental about yourself, the greed will diminish. Similarly, when you are aware of your own arrogance, your suffering will diminish. When you are foolish, see that for what it is. Simply accepting your weaknesses will lighten your vexation and suffering. When you have doubts about getting something done, say to yourself: “This is the right thing to do and I can do it.” I have

yet to meet someone who never has any doubts.

Buddhism describes five general causes of mental vexation:

- *Pursuing objectives without considering your strengths and weaknesses.* Perhaps you are not aware of the resources you possess and so are never satisfied with your efforts. Or, in a situation beyond your control, you torment yourself by resisting the inevitable. Many people, especially the young, believe they can accomplish anything, but under adversity, rather than understand their situation, they feel personally wronged.
- *Having an insatiable desire to expand and conquer.* People who suffer from this disturbance feel a need to magnify their abilities, successes, or possessions; they want to extend their influence beyond all limits. Some strive for fame; others want to dominate those who oppose them. Such power struggles can occur between individuals, families, and nations. At whatever level, it is a mental disturbance.
- *Arrogance over achieving a particular objective or station.* Pride and self-esteem can lead to callous disregard for others. An arrogant person believes he has the right to hurt others according to his whim.
- *Despair over failing to achieve a goal.* When you are discouraged, lose self-confidence, and blame others for your failures, you give rise to despair.

- *Insecurity due to doubt.* There is a deep sense of insecurity. Confidence quickly evaporates.

These five types of disturbances in turn can generate a myriad of other mental problems. People often go into denial about their afflictions. “I don’t have any vexations.” A second approach is to try to heal oneself with endless reviews of one’s faults, and what one believes to be remedies. Both approaches tend to make matters worse. And then, there are those who seek professional help. From the Buddhist perspective, analytic therapies can discover only the superficial part of the problem, so the patient never sees the complete picture of their illness. After extensive counseling, problems can still resurface and patients can languish for years in therapy. Unlike analytic therapy, Buddhism does not address the specific causes of mental distress, but deals directly with the recognition and alleviation of mental suffering. The Buddhist approach is to change our understanding of the very nature of our existence, and to engage a method of practice.

Changing our understanding involves believing in karma, understanding the law of cause and conditions, and cultivating compassion.

- *The law of karma, or cause and effect:* Buddhists believe that there was a life before this life, and one before that, and so on through innumerable past lives. Much of what we experience now may seem unfair,

but it is simply a consequence of actions we have performed in the past. Our willingness to accept what befalls us, good or bad, depends on our willingness to accept our karma. This concept extends beyond religious belief into a well-known fact of everyday life: our actions have consequences.

- *The law of causes and conditions:* All phenomena arise and pass away because of the coming together of different conditions. The cause of a flower is a seed, but soil, water, and sun must be present for the plant to come into existence. Time, uprooting, or lack of water or sun will cause the plant to wither and die. Thus, when we succeed at something there is no need to be proud or arrogant when we realize that our success was due to the direct and indirect help of many people. And since we know that what comes into being will pass, there is no need for despair when we encounter adversity. As the proverb says, "It is always darkest before the dawn."
- *Compassion:* People usually wish others to be compassionate towards them, but seldom remember that they should also be compassionate. There are those who, when they make a mistake, demand that they be forgiven. "Don't measure me against the standards of a saint!" But if someone else errs, they are quick to say, "Why can't you do it right the first time?" You can develop and nurture a spirit of

compassion by actively observing the following ideas:

Understand your own conflicts and cultivate inner harmony

Feel sympathy for others people's shortcomings

Forgive other people's mistakes

Concern yourself with other people's suffering.

Understanding one's own inner conflicts is especially important; to be at peace with oneself requires a calm mind. If you are aware that your actions have consequences, and that trying situations arise out of conditions created by your own karma, you will experience compassion, sympathy, forgiveness, and caring towards others. Armed with an understanding of karma and causes and conditions, one should engage in the practices of mindfulness and meditation.

- Mindfulness can be achieved by reciting the Buddha's name. First, reciting the Buddha's name in order to be reborn in the Pure Land of Amitabha Buddha gives you hope for the future and, consequently, makes it easier for you to let go of the present. Second, reciting the Buddha's name can alleviate your mental problems. When you find yourself psychologically off-balance, you can remove anger, doubt, or other mental disturbances by concentrating on the Buddha's name. I often tell people, "When you feel like yelling at someone,

recite Amitabha's name." Send your anger to Amitabha. Let it be his problem!

- Sitting meditation can collect a scattered mind and stabilize affliction. There are many methods of meditation and many levels of attainment; at this point, let me simply give you an idea of the more profound stages you might experience from meditation, namely, samadhi and no-mind. Samadhi is when you reach the point where no wandering thoughts exist in your mind. In samadhi, there is neither a person nor a problem that can vex you. From samadhi, you can develop the wisdom of no-mind. This is Chan enlightenment. To reach enlightenment is to see into your self-nature and be free of mental affliction and illness. When you are always in this state and do not regress, you have realized "great enlightenment." Short of that is "small enlightenment," where old vexations may arise but you will at least be able to deal with them. Finally, even without enlightenment, meditating is an important step towards your transforming your vexations into liberation.

Life in a Chan Monastery

From Chan Newsletter No. 92, May, 1992

University of Toronto on October 18, 1991

There really are no authentic Chan monasteries in America. You can't visit one here. To find an authentic monastery you must go back to the China of the past. In ancient Chinese monasteries a practitioner's time was divided between meditation, attending Dharma talks, and daily work. Morning and evening were spent in meditation; daytime was for working. We are somewhat ignorant of the daily schedule in early Chan monasteries before Master Baizhang (720-814). But from the Song Dynasty (960-1279) onward, we know that there was chanting and reading of the sutras as well as meditation in the morning. Likewise, in the evening there would be some chanting or reading before meditation.

In his Platform Sutra, the Sixth Patriarch Huineng (638-713) emphasizes the importance of daily life rather than meditation. His disciple Huairang (677-744) continued this emphasis on daily life. But before Huineng, both Fourth Patriarch Daoxin (580-651) and Fifth Patriarch Hongren (602-675) specifically mention sitting as an important method of practice, and after Huineng, Master Baizhang in his Pure Rules, mention sitting as important practice. Thus sitting

meditation became one of the major methods of practice in the Chan tradition. Again, in the Pure Rules of Master Baizhang there is no mention of a Buddha hall for performing prostrations, but a Dharma hall for listening to lectures is detailed. At that time chanting sutras and performing prostrations were considered less important than listening to the Dharma.

From records and stories we know that Huangbo (d. 850), a disciple of Baizhang, taught prostration. There is, for example, a gong'an (Japanese, koan) of a Tang dynasty (618-906) emperor who, before becoming emperor, spent some time as a novice monk at Huangbo's Chan monastery. His curiosity about prostration when he encountered the master performing this practice is duly recorded.

Once we reach the Song Dynasty there seem to have been both Buddha halls and Dharma halls. The Buddha hall was used for chanting sutras and liturgies both in the morning and in the evening. Were Dharma talks given regularly? That does not seem to be the case. Within any given month, Dharma talks were scheduled rather infrequently. We don't know which days were specifically designated for them.

There was also an important practice called "universal invitation." This was a time when everyone was invited to do work at the monasteries. This was sometimes called *ch'u p'o*, literally "going to the mountains," but it did not necessarily entail field work. It might include various chores

around the monastery. Under certain circumstances, attendance at Dharma talks might be excused. Attendance at universal invitation was mandatory for monks and nuns.

Huatous and gong'ans became the principal means of practice in the Song Dynasty. However, in the Yuan Dynasty (1264-1368), many practitioners adopted the method of reciting Buddha's name. Since Chan was transmitted to Japan mainly during the Song period, this method was not adopted by the Japanese. Often people do not realize the influence of Chinese Chan on the development of Japanese Zen. For example Master Dogen's *The Rules of Zazen* (*Zazengi*) is really taken from a work by a Song dynasty Chan master, Changlu Zongze (d. 12th century) with only a few words changed here and there. Master Dogen never explicitly said that this was his own work, but many people take it as such. Fortunately, much of the Song tradition can be seen in modern Japanese temples, both Rinzai (Chinese, Linji) and Soto (Chinese, Caodong), especially Myoshin-ji and Eihei-ji. Temples such as these no longer exist in China.

Establishing a monastery was never easy; land and buildings had to be donated by wealthy individuals or officials or the government itself. Typically the monastery grounds would include a field cultivated by the monks. Some temples had fields quite far off which were donated by people who attended the temple but who lived at some distance from it. These fields were often leased because there were not enough monks to work them. Working the land

was simple in the early monasteries. Later on, with the increase of donated land, leasing became common and some monks took on bureaucratic functions and had to work in the temple office or see to the management of the land.

When I left home, the monastery in which I was a disciple owned much land, so I first learned to work in the fields, those near the monastery and also those in the mountains. Since most of us who left home were quite young, we had to learn traditional household tasks such as those learned by a young housewife. I had to make, mend, and wash my own clothes. I had to learn to plant rice and vegetables, and I had to learn how to cook them. This is the way life is to this day in my own temple in Taiwan, which is called Nung Chan Ssu. “Nung” stands for agriculture. Thus it is a place where farming and Chan are practiced together.

A novice first entering my temple is sent to the kitchen to learn to cook. We also ask a professional tailor to come and teach people how to sew. But most of my disciples know only how to mend; few can really make clothes—they don’t really have the patience. However, everyone must learn how to shave his or her own head. Now we have razors, but in the past we only had knives and we left lots of scars on our skulls.

When I first left home, I was given no formal instructions in meditation or Chan. When I asked my master if he would teach me how to practice, he would say, “Aren’t you already practicing? Isn’t eating practice? Isn’t sleeping practice,

working practice, walking practice?" Once you leave home, you come to see that everything you do is practice. Most people who begin practice have the idea that there is a specific mode of cultivation, a specific form, a specific method. Most people usually see a physical and a mental aspect to the practice, a need to train the body as well as the mind. But when I was a young monk, there was no such idea. People saw living as practice. They did not delve into the deep philosophy of Buddhism.

When I was first at the temple we simply practiced. We worked and prostrated. Every day we chanted and read sutras. We were not told their meaning. It didn't matter. We simply went through the process. We cut down on our attachment to the things around us, cut down on the things in our heads, cut down on our discriminations. This was a good method for us. However, for modern lay people such training would be inadequate. Many of my disciples have questioned these methods. With no emphasis on what they think practice is—meditation, prostrations, chanting, they feel that life in the monastery is not particularly different from home life.

"What's the point?" they ask. "At home we work; here we work. At home we cook; we cook here, too. Why did we bother to leave home? Where is the practice?" What would you say to such disciples? Is life at home and life at the monastery the same? Someone just mentioned that it is a matter of attitude, and that is entirely correct. The way we

approach life at the monastery is not quite the same as the way most lay people approach their own life. We practice not for personal gain but simply as a way of life. Once practitioners train themselves to where their mind is very stable and non-discriminating, they must still rely on Buddhadharma for guidance. Otherwise, they may develop a nihilistic attitude and conclude that nothing is worth doing. This would be a mistake and very much miss the point of practice. Relying on the Buddhadharma, practitioners will live selflessly and yet be engaged in the world. Such people have a genuine concern for all living beings and work diligently to benefit others.

According to the Platform Sutra when Huineng first met Hongren, the Fifth Patriarch sent him to the kitchen to mill rice, and it was not until at least six months later that Hongren finally explained the Diamond Sutra to him. Guided by the same principles, I continue to send novice monks to work in the fields or in the kitchen when they first leave home. At first there really is no opportunity to listen to Dharma talks. Many complain about this. Usually I tell them that if they want to learn they must do what the Huineng did—work in the kitchen and in the fields. To simply begin by listening to Dharma talks will make enlightenment that much more difficult to attain. Life in a Chan monastery brings the body and mind into a gentle and harmonious state. In this way you become receptive to the teachings of the Buddhadharma. Then you can genuinely

practice Chan Dharma.

Establishing a good foundation for Buddhadharma in Taiwan has been a slow process. Buddhism there did not have the historical base that it had on the mainland. It is only in the last forty years that we've had real progress. We still have much to do.

However, we are working very hard to build a new monastic environment in Taiwan. We have close to 100 acres where we will build a complex inspired by the discipline and the way of life of the great monasteries of the Tang dynasty. Of course I have benefited greatly from the time I spent in Chan monasteries but this was not my exclusive practice. It is because I have continued to work diligently on my own that I have reached my present attainment. In fact, two modern Chan masters, Xuyun (1840-1959) and Laiguo (1881-1953), practiced in Chan temples for many years but attained enlightenment outside of the monastery. This in itself would provide enough material for a Dharma talk. Let me stop here and take some questions.

Question: What do you mean by an authentic, genuine Chan monastery?

Sheng Yen: By this I mean a place where people live a monastic life in the Chan tradition throughout the year. In many of the famous monasteries in China today, monks do nothing more than sweep the floor and sell tickets to tourists. In Taiwan there are three or four places that have arrangements for people to spend time and practice, but for

a limited time only. Practice does not continue throughout the year. People usually go for five days or seven days, after which a new group arrives. The Chan Meditation Center in New York is similar. We have morning and evening services and sitting, so it looks something like a Chan monastery, but we have only four week-long retreats throughout the whole year. In traditional Chinese monasteries there are long summer and winter retreats which last either 49 or 120 days. At the present time there are very few temples in China or Taiwan that provide such extended opportunities to practice.

Question: I have two questions. First, what method do you teach your students, gong'an or reciting Buddha's name? And second, what do you think of the prospects for the flourishing of Buddhhadharma in the West?

Sheng Yen: First, I do not use one particular method. To some I give a gong'an, to others a huatou. Some beginners simply use the counting-breath method. I rarely recommend reciting Buddha's name, but some people began with this and are resistant to other methods. To such people I teach a method whereby they recite Buddha's name and follow it by counting a number. It is quite similar to the counting-breath method. When reciting Buddha' name leads them to the point where there are few wandering thoughts and their minds are very clear, I have them ask this question: "Who is reciting Buddha's name?" This is asked continuously without interruption. That is really the huatou method.

As to your second question, I see the Chan practice that

has evolved in the West as a stable, continuing process. It is not a fad about to fade away. The practice of Chan does not seek what is exotic or exciting. Rather it follows a rational, reasonable and useful way of life. I have been traveling to the United States for about fifteen years. I have not really had that many students compared to the number I have in Taiwan. But those that I do have, even those who have participated in only a few retreats, are strong in the practice. Even if they don't come for a retreat for ten years, they still remember the benefit they first received.

Question: Do the attitudes of the Western and Asian students differ? Do you have a different relationship with each group?

Sheng Yen: Yes, in fact it seems that I have something of a closer relationship with my Western students. The Western perspective is direct, whereas Asian students are often less decisive and more prone to ambiguous thinking. Westerners are more receptive to the teaching. At the very least they are no worse than the Asian students. I'm not trying to make Western students feel good; this is simply the way I see the situation.

Question: It seems to me that the Chan approach really celebrates personal insight. It seems very narcissistic and practitioners seem uninterested in anyone else's benefit but their own. I notice a tendency to boast about spiritual achievement. This really seems to isolate the individual.

Sheng Yen: It is correct to say that Chan practice is a

pursuit of personal wisdom. But how can you judge what wisdom is? Within, it manifests as freedom from vexation; without, it manifests in the way we interact with what is around us. True wisdom is without discrimination and is always at one with the environment. It is in this external manifestation that you see that the practice is not simply the pursuit of personal spiritual gratification. If you are only interested in your own freedom from vexation and your own benefit, then you are not practicing Chan. If you practice only for yourself, you may achieve some level of samadhi, a very concentrated mental state, but genuine Chan is always turned outward as well as inward.

Question: Then Chan seeks to change the world by changing the individual?

Sheng Yen: Yes, Chan begins at the logical point of changing yourself. Once your mental state has calmed and changed, there is a natural tendency to help others. This will effect change in the world around us.

Question: Chan practice seems quite different from that of Pure Land, but Chan practitioners still chant Amitabha Buddha's name. Why is this?

Sheng Yen: First, there is a historical reason. Toward the end of the Tang Dynasty, Pure Land practice was very popular. Yongming (904-975) was a master of the Fayen School but he was also a great proponent of Pure Land. His influence was so great that after his time there were few monks who did not recite Buddha's name. It is also

important to note that there is no intrinsic antagonism between the recitation of Buddha's name and Chan practice. For example, in the *Sutra of Immeasurable Light (Sukhavativyuha Sutra)*, many methods of contemplating the Buddha are described, including that of reciting his name. Recitation of the Buddha's name may be considered Pure Land practice, but as it is described in the sutra there is no emphasis on seeking rebirth in the Pure Land. Likewise in the *Amitabha Sutra*, one passage describes reciting the Buddha's name with a single-pointed mind. This can be a method of practicing samadhi. Likewise, the *Sutra of Manjusri Inquiring on Prajna*, speaks of reciting the Buddha's name and similar methods. In fact, in that sutra, the name of any Buddha will do. It doesn't have to be Amitabha. Even though all of these methods involve the recitation of Buddha's name, they do not imply an aspiration to be reborn in the Pure Land. Thus a Chan practitioner and a Pure Land practitioner may both recite the Buddha's name, but they do so with different attitudes.

Question: I am curious about what you said about the difference between left-home and lay practice. You said that monks practice purposelessly. They just practice. But how can that be possible for lay people who must continually set and achieve goals in their daily lives?

Sheng Yen: In the beginning there is always a purpose whether you are a householder or a monk. You are always seeking something. Eventually one can go from seeking

something to not seeking something. It is also possible that a person may be seeking something, yet not be seeking it. In other words, what is purposeful and what is purposeless can coexist. A genuine practitioner knows very well that the result of practice is non-attainment, but to be truly in a state of non-seeking, he must reach at least the eighth bhumi, or stage, on the bodhisattva path, which is a very high level of attainment. Even when a person reaches the first bhumi, his vow to deliver sentient beings is still in force, which is to say that there is still a sense of seeking something.

Question: Is there any program in your temple in Taiwan that does work for the community and the environment? Do you plan to build another large monastery like the one in Taiwan here in America?

Sheng Yen: As to the first question: This is the Year of Environmental Protection in Taiwan. Before I left Taiwan ten days ago, I appeared on TV with the head of the Environmental Protection Administration to discuss the Buddhist perspective on protecting the environment. In fact, my temple has been working to improve the environment for the last three years by advocating and practicing recycling of products and conservation of resources. For the second question, I can tell you that new complex in Taiwan demands so much of my time that it is pointless for me to think anything like it in America. But if the causes and conditions in the future seem to be ripe, we will start to think about it.

Thank you very much for your questions, which were very good and helpful in explaining the Dharma.

Why I am a Chan Monk

From Chan Newsletter No. 93, July, 1992

Tibet Center, New York City, May 16, 1992

Some of you are curious about how I became a Chan monk. The province where I lived in China was once prosperous, but it underwent a slow decline. By the time I was born the region was impoverished. The land was fertile, and rice and wheat could be readily grown but conditions were such that food was scarce. What I remember most was eating sweet potatoes. They were not of the quality we are used to here. We sliced them and dried them in the sun. Corn, too, was something I remember eating frequently. It was of the quality that was usually fed to pigs.

I was the youngest of six children. My mother was already 42 years old when I was born. She had no milk to nurse me with and cow's milk was rare in China at that time. Even female dogs were unable to produce milk to feed their young. Animals were all emaciated. People, too, were malnourished. It was not until I was three that I learned to walk, and it was not until I was nine that I could speak with any fluency. I then started school. I completed fourth grade by age 13.

While attending school I helped my father with his work.

At this time, a local Chan master looking for two novice monks to live at his temple was in some quandary how to find his novices. He prayed to the Buddha for guidance and it was indicated to him that he should look south of the Yangzi River. The monastery was north of the river, so the master crossed to the side where I lived. A layman traveling in the vicinity happened to take shelter with us during a rainstorm. It so happened that he was a friend of this master who had told him to keep his eye out for boys he felt might be suitable to become novices. This neighbor asked my mother if she was willing to let me leave home [to become a monk].

She answered, "If he wants to become a monk, it is up to him. Our family is very poor. I'm afraid that if he stays with us, he won't have enough money to find himself a wife." She added that I had finished the fourth grade and she did not think that they could afford to let me continue my studies. The layman turned to me: "How would you like to become a monk, young man?" I didn't have the foggiest idea what a monk was or what a monk did. But somehow the idea appealed to me and I said, "Yes, I would like that." The layman wrote my name and birthday in a notebook. I soon forgot about this incident, but about six months later the layman reappeared and said to my mother, "I am going to take your son now. I will take him north of the river to become a monk."

During the intervening months, the master on the north

side of the river had taken the date of my birth and put it before the statue of Guanyin (Avalokiteshvara) and beseeched the bodhisattva to answer if I would be suitable for monkhood. He asked three times; three times the answer was yes. When the layman came to take me to the monastery, I had no strong feeling about going or not going. Nevertheless, I was ready to go. This took my mother by surprise. "Wait a minute," she said, "I thought you were joking about becoming a monk." But the next day I left with him for the monastery.

When I arrived at the mountain across the river where the temple was located, it seemed that the whole of the mountain was given over to monastery buildings. In the main Buddha hall I wondered who that big person was—that statue which I soon learned was of the Buddha sitting so serenely within. How could a human being be so large? The size of the main Buddha hall impressed me. It was so large that it would take at least 20 houses of the size I grew up in to fill it. To look at the Buddha statue you had to bend your head way back. I thought: "The Buddha really is different from ordinary human beings."

Just after arriving I saw another boy who already was a monk. His head was shaved not in the usual Buddhist style, but more like a medieval Christian monk with the crown shaved and tufts of hair on the side. I thought it looked funny but I liked it anyway. I asked my master if I could have the same thing done to me. I always hoped to have my

head shaved like that but it never happened. My master thought I was too tall and that I would look ridiculous tonsured like that. My master began to introduce me to the other monks. There were so many I could hardly remember their names. The monastic hierarchy was ordered such that each monk had one disciple under him until there were seven "generations." The most recent initiate would be introduced to the monk above him as "your master," and the monk above him as, "your grand master," and so on. I found memorizing this genealogy quite onerous.

The master had been expecting two new novices. I had arrived but my counterpart was late. This made me angry; after all, this boy was supposed to be my master and I was eager to begin training. He finally arrived three months later. I asked him, "What took you so long? You're very late!" He replied, "Why are you so early?" I was 13 then, and he was perhaps one year older. My master, this 14-year-old, had a 17-year-old brother who died in the meantime. Of course Chinese mothers want to have grandchildren, so his mother asked him to return home, marry his brother's widow and have children. When he left the monastery, my grand master became my immediate master. He said to me, "I always felt that you should be my direct disciple."

What was the training like at that time of a young monk in China? I had two teachers — one taught me sutra recitation and chanting; the other was responsible for teaching me non-Buddhist subjects. What did my master teach me? He taught

me how to mend and wash clothes, plant vegetables, and cook. A young monk had to rely on himself for almost everything.

At sixteen, I went from the countryside to a branch of my temple in Shanghai. This was a different experience. In Shanghai the monks supported themselves by being hired by lay people to perform sutra recitation and chanting for their dead relatives, so that they may obtain a favorable rebirth. Chanting and reciting kept us quite busy – it could go on all night and all day. We might chant in as many as four homes in one day and perform all the necessary funerary services as well. After doing this for more than a year, I had second thoughts: “Is this all being a monk means?”

One day I saw a copy of the Diamond Sutra and I asked another monk what it was all about. He said, “It talks about emptiness, nothingness; I’m afraid you might find it a little too deep right now.” I asked him when I would be able to understand it. He said, “Practice first, then you may be able to understand it.”

As I said I didn’t start school until I was nine years old. As you can imagine, my level of education was pretty low. I had a problem with the recitation of sutras, especially mantras. My master informed me that my karmic obstructions were heavy, that to remedy the situation I had better do 500 prostrations to Guanyin each day. At first this was exhausting, but after a short while I could do six or

seven hundred prostrations in two hours. In three or four months, I could memorize the sutras and, as well, my ability to learn in general had vastly improved. Soon I felt that reciting was not enough. I wanted to understand the sutras, so I found a monastery that offered lectures on the sutras, and I requested my master's permission to attend.

This other monastery required an entrance examination to attend the sutra lectures. My master helped me write an autobiography, which was what I thought they wanted. I even memorized it. As it turned out, they wanted a completely different topic. But they liked my essay and thought my literary skills were very good, so they accepted me. When I arrived I met monks from many parts of China. Some spoke with accents so strong that I could hardly understand them at first. Fortunately, the teachers wrote down the important points of the lectures on the blackboard. My memory served me well. I excelled on tests. In the first year I ranked third out of forty, and by the second year I was first. But if you asked me what I had learned, I would have had to admit that I couldn't really say. I didn't really know what I was talking about, but I knew that my answers were exactly what my teachers were looking for.

I started practicing meditation at this monastery, but there was really no one to instruct me how to do it. The best I could do at first was to memorize sutras and shastras and repeat them in my mind during the meditation periods. When I asked an older monk how to meditate, he said,

"What? You claim you don't know how to do it but your approach is very good. You certainly look like you know how to meditate."

I didn't feel that way at all. I was pretty naive. I pressed him further: "I've heard that meditation leads to enlightenment. Can you show me how to get enlightened?"

What do you think he said to that? At first he said nothing, and then: "Here, maybe this will enlighten you," and smacked me on the side of the head. "You want to get enlightened in one day? We have been sitting here for decades. What do you think we've been up to?"

From then on I started to take part in retreats. It seemed to me that everyone else was sitting rather well. Interestingly enough, they thought I was sitting well too. Some commented, "You will make a good Chan master someday."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because we twitch and move and complain of leg and back pain, but you sit there like a rock, deep in practice," they explained.

"That's what you think," I said. "I haven't got the faintest idea of what I'm doing. I just sit and repeat one sutra after the other in my mind. I repeat the Diamond Sutra, then the Shurangama Sutra and so forth. That's all I do." They got a good laugh out of that. They said, "It seems that you don't really have it, after all." That's when I first heard about gong'an (koan) and huatou. My practice began to improve.

At age 20, due to the Communist rebellion, I joined the

Nationalist Army and was sent to Taiwan to be stationed there. When I was 28, while on military leave, I stayed at a monastery. I had been meditating all day, and was at the point where sleep seemed inviting. I happened to be sitting next to an old monk, whose name I later learned, was Ling Yuan, who continued to meditate despite the lateness of the hour. I asked myself, "Why is this old monk still meditating? What keeps him going?" I wanted to sleep, but I was too embarrassed to stop sitting.

My mind was full of questions about the Dharma, and I thought this old monk could help me. So I tapped his shoulder and whispered, "I have questions, lots of questions. Can you help me?"

He nodded at me: "Alright, ask." I asked him a few questions in succession.

He said, "Is that it or do you have more questions?" I certainly did, so I asked him another.

He said, "Is that it, or do you have more?"

I continued talking and he continued asking if there was more. This went on for quite sometime. I thought he was going to listen to all of my questions, and then cut through them all with some marvelous insightful answer. I asked more and more questions. I began to become anxious and agitated.

Finally, Ling Yuan hit the mat he was sitting on with a very hard slap: "Now put all of this down and go to sleep!"

Suddenly, all of my questions vanished, or said in

another way, they were all resolved. To me, this corresponded to the Heart Sutra where it says, "Form is precisely emptiness and emptiness is precisely form." This was a seminal experience for me.

Many years passed. When I was 46, having lived in the United States for some years, I returned to Taiwan where I happened to encounter Master Ling Yuan, with whom I shared this experience. He remembered it, too. He asked me what I was doing in America. I told him there wasn't very much to it, all I was doing was teaching meditation. Master Ling Yuan said, "Even back then I knew you would be a teacher. But you must have a lineage." He then gave me a Dharma name in his lineage and certified me as his Dharma heir. It was officially written down and signed.

Another monk, the master's attendant, witnessed this interchange. He must have wondered what in the world was going on. Who was this person inheriting the master's lineage? It seemed to happen in a flash. I prostrated three times to the master, and started to leave when the attendant approached me: "So you're living in the U.S. teaching meditation. Will you teach me, too?"

I exclaimed, "I don't believe my ears. You're living right here with the master. Why don't you just ask him to teach you how to meditate?"

He said, "You don't know what's going on. This master lives in a total state of confusion. He walks around in a fog all day."

One of the lessons of this story is that karmic affinity is important. You may be in the company of a bodhisattva or a buddha, but without the proper affinity it could all pass right over your head. It just so happens that this master is rather well-known in Taiwan. He was a second-generation Dharma heir of Master Xuyun (Empty Cloud), who was perhaps the most famous Chinese monk of the 20th century. Master Xuyun had a disciple who transmitted the Dharma to Ling Yuan. In the Chinese tradition it is rare to be certified in this way. When Ling Yuan passed away, he had two Dharma heirs, another monk and me.

Question: When you did the prostrations, did the teacher give you anything else to do? Visualization, recitation, or prayer?

Sheng Yen: The master just told me to prostrate single-mindedly, wholeheartedly. He said nothing else.

Question: Do you recommend using *gong'ans* (koans)? From what you say, it sounds like enlightenment is a flash that completely empties your mind.

Sheng Yen: Few use *gong'ans* only. Most people use other methods such as counting the breath. You may try using a *gong'an* but if your mind is too scattered, there is no point. In such cases I often recommend prostrations. Enlightenment does not mean there is nothing in the mind. It means that we cut off our attachments to the world. This includes attachment to oneself. The *Heart Sutra* states that "form is not other than emptiness; emptiness not other than

form; form is precisely emptiness and emptiness precisely form." This is the enlightenment that is attained through practice.

Question: I wonder how to stay centered and calm. I have a number of children. I am always running around. I come here as often as I can. When I am here I am calm, but I easily lose it when I return home. I am always in a hurry.

Sheng Yen: One very good way to calm your mind in a busy life is to follow the advice given by Shantideva in *The Bodhisattva's Way of Life* (also known as *Entering the Path of Enlightenment*). Just practice mindfulness; be aware of what the body is doing at all times. As you practice mindfulness you are aware when your mind becomes unsettled, and you can do something about it immediately. Mindfulness will settle the mind. This practice is common to all forms of Buddhism, but I came to know of it through Shantideva's work.

Question: When you studied gong'an, were you asked to go off by yourself for a protracted period and then come up with an answer?

Sheng Yen: When working with the gong'an, you should be familiar with the story and with the circumstances connected with the story, but you do not contemplate its content. You want to know the outcome but you are not seeking a logical answer. You do not think. Sometimes you use a gong'an to attain non-discriminating mind.

Question: When we learn meditation, why do we start

with counting breaths? Why don't we begin with a more direct method that will focus on the void?

Sheng Yen: For most of us the mind is simply too scattered; there is no way for the average person to sit down and drop everything. The idea is to use a simple method [like counting the breath] to concentrate the mind. Later you can adopt methods that will be focused on what you are describing.

Question: I'm not sure I understood the story where you asked an endless number of questions and your teacher told you to put it all down. Does this mean you were your own teacher? Did you give yourself your own answers about the Dharma and the older monk told you nothing?

Sheng Yen: You cannot really say that my questions were resolved by myself or by Ling Yuan; the resolution was interdependent. Even though Master Ling Yuan gave me no answers, I would not have been able to resolve these questions had he not said, "Put everything down." And if I had not spent many years in practice, and I did not have a burning desire to resolve these questions, I would not have been ripe at the moment the master struck the mat. It would have been a different story. So it is hard to say where the resolution came from, me or my master.

Dreaming Asleep and Awake

From Chan Newsletter No. 101, June, 1994

The Buddha said that the consciousness of waking life is actually a dream. Especially if it offers contentment and happiness, perceiving life as just a dream may be difficult. No one wants to be awakened from a pleasant dream, let alone be told that life is an illusion. But how can we distinguish between dreaming and waking? According to the Buddha, sleep is made up of short dreams, whereas life is a long dream. You may awaken to the fact that you are living a dream, and then fall back into the dream once again. In Buddhism, awakening from the long dream of life means finally realizing your self-nature. A sentient being who does not experience this realization remains forever in a dream. We think of our dreams as unreal and believe our waking moments to be reality. But when we recognize the illusory nature of the body, of the world, of life and death, we then see that both sleeping and waking are equally dreamlike states.

A famous Chinese photographer, Lang Jing-shan, takes pictures of the areas around the Yellow and Yangtze Rivers, and makes them resemble Chinese “mountain and water” paintings. The whole image becomes an impression

built from fragments. This is how our minds work. Our experiences are stored as fragments in the subconscious mind. We never remember experiences in their entirety, but rather in bits and pieces. At a certain time or place, the fragments may reappear in our consciousness. And so it goes when we dream.

We all experience *déjà vu* and thoughts that trigger feelings and responses. But like impressionistic photographs, these responses are merely fragmentary, illusory reflections of our experiences, thoughts, and fantasies. Few people know when they are dreaming; fewer still want to wake up from a pleasant dream. Someone who has not yet seen their self-nature may think they are very much awake, that life is real and without suffering. When they recognize the illusory nature of the self, they realize they have only been dreaming a very long dream, one that is marked by suffering. But relatively few people appreciate that recognizing the illusory nature of everyday life requires serious daily practice. It is not enough to merely listen to my words, read a book, or reach an intellectual understanding of the concept. Many have heard about Buddhist practice, but few want to really commit to it. Rarer still is the person who practices, awakens from the dream, and, rather than falling back into the dream, comes to realize his self-nature.

A well-known Chinese folktale, *Dream of the Millet*, tells the story of a young man who traveled to a capitol city to take the civil examination to become a government official.

On the road he met an old man who was cooking millet. The old man saw that the young traveler was tired, gave him a pillow and told him to rest. The young man lied down and fell into a long dream in which he achieved the highest score in the examination. In the dream, he married a princess and became the prime minister at the imperial court. He kept many concubines, and by the time he reached his hundredth year, had too many children to count. He enjoyed his long life and even in old age he did not want to die. But when the time came for him to die two demons took him to the underworld because he had abused his bureaucratic power and embezzled court funds. He was punished by the judge of the dead and made to climb a mountain of knives, after which he was thrown into a vat of boiling oil. He felt a tremendous pain and screamed. Just then the old man woke him up and told him that the millet was ready.

It had only taken two hours to prepare the millet, but in the dream the young man experienced the passing of a hundred years. Time passing quickly is a common experience, not only in dreams, but in daily life. Sometimes we have dreams that seem very long but which really last only a few minutes of waking time. Differing perceptions of time also occur when we do sitting meditation. If your legs hurt and you can't concentrate, the time seems to crawl, but if your legs feel fine and concentration is not a problem, the time flies.

Dreams are by nature illusory and passing, and our consciousness of time and reality also passes like a dream. But it is a mistake to think that our actions in waking life are as inconsequential as those in dreams. We may not have to suffer the consequences of our actions in dreams, but we cannot avoid those consequences in waking life. Our actions and speech create strong and lasting effects that do not fade away as easily as dreams do. This is the principle of cause and effect, or karma.

Most people think that they are not responsible for their thoughts if they do not act on them. All of us have bad thoughts we never actually act on. Even the most devoted mothers sometimes think harmful thoughts about their difficult children. For the most part, we do not believe these thoughts break the Buddhist precepts, but for a bodhisattva, harboring evil thoughts is tantamount to breaking the precepts. Few people think about striking or killing someone when they sit in meditation. But in their sleeping dreams and the course of daily life, violent and murderous thoughts may arise quite often. Anyone who practices regularly, who adopts the attitude of a bodhisattva, needs to let go of such ideas both in sleep and in daily living.

In dreams people often think non-virtuous thoughts or do non-virtuous deeds because such thoughts already reside in their minds. But truly advanced practitioners do not dream of wrongdoing, just as they do not break the precepts while awake. This equivalence is called “correspondence of

thought and action.” Non-correspondence, on the other hand, implies that a person does not break the precepts while awake, but still has wrongful thoughts when dreaming. An anecdote offers a useful analogy. Several years ago, an electrical blackout plunged one of my classes into darkness. The students all began to shout and laugh, because in the darkness, their hidden minds emerged. They exhibited self-control in the light, but felt free in the darkness.

Although we may understand that our lives are vain, unreal, and dreamlike, we still bear responsibility for this sleeping and waking dream. Just as the activity of the body creates karma, so does the activity of the mind. For example, if you do not know someone is behind you, you might accidentally step on his foot and then apologize. In such a case you would not feel as though you had done anything particularly wrong. Likewise, according to a bodhisattva’s perspective, the acts of the body are not serious, but those of the mind are. For ordinary sentient beings, however, the karma of the body is more serious than that of the mind.

Because the bodhisattva way is based on mental realization, we should understand that karma caused by the body means little compared to karma created by the mind. So, we should pay attention to our mental behavior and take responsibility for it. We must make our minds simple, peaceful and tranquil. Sincere and rigorous practice lets us calm both body and mind, which in turn allows us, day by day, to reduce our karmic obstructions.

Egoism and Altruism

From Chan Newsletter No. 102, August, 1994

Chan Meditation Center, May 9, 1993

As rendered in Chinese, “egoism” means “self-concern.” It is not simply selfishness; in fact, to practice Buddhism a certain amount of self-concern is necessary, for only by taking care of ourself are we able to care for others. But if we do not know what the self is, how can we take care of it? If we don’t fully understand the nature of the self and how to care for it, we may unknowingly harm ourselves. Or we have difficulty helping others even if we are truly concerned about them; we may act with good intentions only to be dismayed by the outcome of our efforts. This is because we do not understand the fundamental principles and methods of helping ourselves. So, we should first ask, “What is the self?”

When they first encounter Buddhism, some people are especially unclear about ideas of the self. The first misunderstanding is to think that there is no self, that there should be no concern for the self at all. People like this refuse to recognize the existence of the self and the efforts it makes even in the phenomenal world. This results in a negative attitude towards life; they will see no value in doing

anything and will fail to take care of themselves or anyone else.

Another misunderstanding is to correctly think that one should not be selfish and should help others, but don't really know how to do it. Such a person may try to impress those around them with ideas of what is good or helpful, but end up trying to force their opinions and advice on others. This may start with family or friends and then eventually spread to everyone they associate with. As a result this person may cause more harm than good.

Neither of these views and their resulting behavior shows a correct understanding of Buddhadharma. Such people do not understand the nature of the self, are unable to take care of themselves, unable to help others, and often cause suffering. They may be good people with good intentions but their actions are often detrimental to others. This is not the way of the bodhisattva.

Many religious leaders, politicians, revolutionaries, and people with high ideals want to save the world but end up causing strife, discord, and hellish suffering. They lack true understanding of the self and fail to understand the differences and similarities between people. Realizing this we can follow the Buddha in his understanding that sentient beings have different dispositions, different levels of attainment, and different needs; therefore each sentient being requires an appropriate kind of help. The bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara is sometimes shown with a thousand eyes

and a thousand arms; the thousand eyes help him understand the infinite variety of sentient beings, and the thousand arms allow him to provide what is needed in different situations.

What then is the self? Buddhadharma speaks of seven views of the self. (1) The first view is that of the body, the fundamental form that gives us a sense of self. (2) Next is the mind—the consciousness of our own existence and of phenomena, including the body. The body taken together with the mind is what we commonly called the self. (3) Third, the environment in which the self exists is called the world, which exists within a certain physical dimension (space), and a historical context and continuity (time).

(4) In the fourth view of self, we have the whole of space and time, which, with the world and the universe taken together constitute ourselves. If we restrict our concept of self to the physical body, we have only a narrow view of thinking and identity. When we extend the concept to include the mind then the idea of self broadens, and if we expand it even further, we may include the universe, all space and time. But even at this level of conception, the idea of self is still limited to the material world.

(5) With concepts no deeper than the material world, we will be unable to enter the fifth level, the realm of the religious or spiritual idea of the self. According to Buddhism, sentient beings are not restricted to a single lifetime. Rather, all sentient beings pass through a series of lives before and

after this one. What engenders these succeeding lifetimes? It's what we called karma, or the causes and consequences of our thoughts and actions. This includes all actions of our body speech and thought. It is these actions and their consequences that continue through different lifetimes as karmic force. This is the Buddhist conception of the self, and it can give one a sense of an eternal self. If we restrict the self to a single lifetime, a sense of an eternal self would be impossible. To the understanding of successive lives, we must add an understanding of the essence of Dharma. Buddhadharma teaches us to liberate ourselves from our karma, and to help liberate others as well because self and other are not really separate. Therefore liberation of self and all others is really the same thing.

(6) We must make vows to apply ourselves to that end if we would realize true liberation. Such vows determine the value and meaning of our lives. Thus it is that we talk about a sixth level of self, where we vow to liberate ourselves and others. But this is still not the ultimate level of Buddhadharma.

(7) The final stage is selflessness or "formlessness." When we say that the ultimate stage of Buddhadharma is selfless, we do not mean that the individual self is completely gone. We mean that the person is free of vexations, liberated from karmic attachments. He or she is liberated from self-centeredness, but the function of wisdom and the results of compassion continue. For such people, Buddhas and

bodhisattvas, the self has no existence. Ordinary sentient beings may regard liberation in and of itself as the “self” associated with Buddhas and bodhisattvas. We can still pray to the buddhas and gain benefit from them, but in their perspectives, there is no self whatsoever.

The six previous levels cannot be regarded as having ultimate truth or existence, because in becoming liberated it is necessary to make vows to break through these levels. Buddhas no longer need to make vows. There is no such thing as karma for them, and so it’s not necessary to speak of the existence of self. For buddhas these terms are meaningless, but we sentient beings can still derive great benefit from the buddhas and bodhisattvas.

Returning once again to the first two views of self, those of body and mind, in the *Sutra of Complete Enlightenment*, we read, “When the four elements combine, the body appears, and the conditioning of the shadows of the six sense objects constitutes the appearance of the mind.” What does this mean? The four elements are earth, water, fire and wind. They are considered to constitute all matter. The first part of this statement, then, says that the body is formed when matter comes together in a certain way. But there is really nothing that originally constitutes the body. It is only a combination of the four material elements that we call “the body.”

The “conditioning” of the next line refers to attachment and discrimination in relation to sense objects, feeling,

seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, and thinking. Sense objects are not as substantial as material objects; they are merely the shadows of matter. Thus the mind arises through attachment to, and discrimination of the shadows of material things. This also indicates that originally there is no such thing as the mind. It is only the interactions of the six sense objects, which are themselves products of interactions, that we call "mind."

The next and third level of the self, what we call the world, is the immediate environment for the activities of the body and mind. We should not think of it simply as the planet Earth. Rather, we should understand that everyone has his or her own world. This not only applies to people living in different parts of the Earth, but even to members of the same family. A teenager with a room full of posters of movie stars and singers might live next to his sister whose walls are covered with pictures of Jesus and Mary; their brother down the hall might have posters of famous athletes or maybe even the picture of a Dharma master. There is a Chinese saying, "Even a couple sleeping in the same bed will have different dreams."

Thus under the same roof there may be people who feel like they are living in the Western Paradise while others feel like they're living in hell. This is what we find in my temple in Taiwan. Some people seem like they're living in the Pure Land, while others seem to suffer the vexations of hell. This shows the broadness of perspective and acceptance in

Buddhism. It is enormously encompassing because it recognizes that sentient beings are so different, with different characteristics and dispositions.

What we called the universe in the fourth level incorporates both space and time. In terms of space alone, all of us are connected. The Chinese used to say that when Mao Zedong coughed the world worried, because he had so much power. But it is really true that when anyone on the planet coughs, everyone else in the world is affected. It's only a matter of degree. If I cough you might only think, "I'd better be careful. I could catch something." We all live on the same planet and breathe the same atmosphere, so it is true to some extent that what happens to one of us affects us all. Just look at the problems that we have with the environment.

Like space, time connects us all. Life did not begin when your mother gave birth to you. Your parents also had their parents before them, and so on, all the way back to the first appearance of life on Earth. And many of you will have children and descendants for generations to come. I will not have children to come after me but I have my disciples. And all of our culture and civilization was passed down to us from previous generations and will continue after we are gone. Whether we are famous or not is irrelevant, our participation and impact on the world cannot be denied.

We see that our personal lives and the whole universe cannot be separated. If you understand this, then when you think about being selfish you should ask, "Selfish for what?"

and “Selfish for whom?” The self, body and mind, are inseparably linked to the entire universe, space and time. Selfish? Time and space are too wide. If you wish to be selfish include the entire world in your thoughts.

If we go on to the fifth level, the spiritual self, the Buddhist teachings make it clear that throughout all of our successive lifetimes there is an unbroken thread of self, known as karma. Karma dictates that if we do good things, then we will experience joy and peace in return. Bad actions we will bring suffering and vexation. By good things, we mean concern for and helpfulness toward others. Even from a selfish viewpoint, it makes sense to do more good than bad just for your own benefit. You may believe you gain at another’s expense, but the law of karma will ensure that you pay back what you owe. Taking advantage of or harming others is analogous to borrowing money. Not only will you have to pay back the amount borrowed, but there is high interest to pay as well. Thus even for purely selfish reasons, you don’t want to hurt others. You only want to do virtuous things. In Buddhism, the most important element of the self is the karma it has accumulated. With the logic of karma, then, the only way to be selfish is to care for others.

This understanding of karma brings us to the sixth level where concern broadens beyond simply the redemption of one’s own karma. At this point you adopt the bodhisattva spirit and make vows to dedicate your life to the benefit and salvation of all sentient beings. Your sole concern is others.

Through the power of these vows, you dwell among sentient beings offering them all of your wisdom and strength. This is truly “saving the world” and “helping sentient beings”; it is only possible for someone firmly grounded in and deeply committed to Dharma. Most people are not ready to work only for others with no thought of gain. But if you truly understood karma, you would act in this way. Then rather than be driven by karma, your own vows would be the motivation and driving force of your life. This is a much better and safer path. This is the difference between the power of karma and the power of vows—the power of karma derives from the previous level, the basic teachings of Buddha and the three lifetimes. Karma is self-centered, vows are others-centered. If you can truly perform compassionate acts without thought of your own benefit, you gain a much greater reward than if you had been thinking of yourself in the first place. But making vows and persisting with them is not so easy.

Many people make great vows when they first begin to study Dharma. Sometimes I’ll see one of these people a few years later and ask, “Are you working on your vows?” I often hear, “Maybe I’ll fulfill those vows next lifetime. There’s too much karmic obstruction now” Or I may hear, “The vow I made was unrealistic. I couldn’t live a normal life and keep such a vow. I feel like a hypocrite now.” Even if your vows are unrealistic or less than sincere, it is still important that you make them. It is important to continue

and persist in making vows even if you fail in them ninety percent of the time. That is still better than making no vows at all. When you make them, you can tell Buddha, "These vows I'm making are not sincere, but I'm saying the words anyway." It's better making phony vows than to be out committing crimes. Make no vows and you increase the chances that you will do wrong. By the same token, the simple act of making vows increases the chances that you will be virtuous. Without vows, our lives are like leaves floating aimlessly on a river. A person without vows drifts on the ocean of death and rebirth, which we called samsara. But once we make vows, we have direction. It might not be smooth sailing at first, but at least we know where we are going.

When babies begin to walk, they may begin slowly, but little by little they get stronger, until the time when they leap and run. Nobody is born a marathon runner. Likewise first vows are difficult to keep. That may seem obvious, but it's important to remember. You should not worry that breaking the vows and precepts might add to your bad karma. It is still important to make vows. If you break the vow later, acknowledge what you did was wrong, repent, and make sure you don't do it again. Then make the vow again.

We talk about making vows but what vows should we make? I'd like everyone to make vows to help others, including vows to come to the Chan Center to do volunteer work. Even if your vows are not genuine, that's fine.

Essentially, we should vow to let go of our self-centeredness and to assume responsibility for the welfare of other sentient beings. Only when you can truly put down self-centeredness through the power of your vows will you reach liberation, the seventh stage of self. Many people are unwilling to let go of their self-centeredness, yet they want to be liberated. That is impossible. So I do hope that you all will make vows.

Ten years ago there was a young woman who made a very great vow after sitting a few retreats. She vowed that lifetime after lifetime she would follow me to deliver sentient beings. That is a wonderful vow. I was quite pleased and thought, "Here is somebody to succeed me." A few years later she married and never came to the temple again. One day I saw her. When she saw me she tried to run away, but I cornered her and said, "What happened to your vow to help me deliver all sentient beings?" She said, "Well I've already delivered one. Isn't my husband a sentient being? I tried to deliver him, and that's why I got married." "What are you doing now?" I said. "You never come to the temple." She answered that, "I'm not done helping my husband yet. When he is ready and willing, I'll bring him to the temple." It's already many years since I saw her and I have no idea how well she is doing delivering sentient beings. But if I see her again, I'll tell her not to give up and to keep making vows. The fact that you are married in this lifetime is irrelevant. You must continue making vows lifetime after lifetime to help all sentient beings. Married or not, male or

female—it's not important. What is important is to make
VOWS.

Chan: a Gateway to Wisdom

From Chan Newsletter No. 103, September, 1994

You may have heard that Buddhism is not truly a religion but a philosophy. However, religion requires faith and Buddhism cannot be practiced without faith. So Buddhism is indeed a religion. We should understand, however, that faith in Buddhism is different from the faith that emphasizes belief in a God distinct from oneself. The faith that Buddhism stresses is faith in the teachings of the Buddha. These teachings, called Dharma [or Buddhadharma], tell us that everyone inherently has the nature of a buddha and that everyone can attain buddhahood. One who truly believes in the teachings of the Buddha and follows the principles and methods of practice can indeed become a buddha.

When we talk about the origin of Chan Buddhism, we need to distinguish the specific ideas that shaped Chan from those of Buddhism in general. But the fact remains that the highest attainment in Buddhism, to become a buddha, is also found in Chan. Buddhism emphasizes the cultivation of wisdom, which resolves internal struggles and suffering. But how do we cultivate wisdom? We rely on the guidance of Chan methods which have their foundation in the teachings of the Buddha.

Buddhism was first brought to China about one thousand years after Shakyamuni Buddha attained enlightenment and introduced the Dharma to the world. During Buddhism's early period, meditation, or dhyana, was set forth as the primary method of practice. Dhyana is a method for clearing the mind of its illusions, which, in turn, leads to understanding the true nature of the self. This realization is Buddhist wisdom. The teaching of dhyana as a path to wisdom was important to the transmission of Buddhism to China. In fact, the name "Chan" comes from the word dhyana (pronounced JA-na), just as "Zen" comes from "Chan."

There are many stories in Chan lore about disciples asking their master such questions as, "What did Bodhidharma bring to China?" As you may know, Bodhidharma was a Caucasian monk who is considered the first patriarch of the Chan lineage. The answers all the masters gave appear to agree on one essential point: Bodhidharma brought to China the message that everyone had buddha-nature. When a disciple asked his master why Bodhidharma came to China, the master replied, "Because the Dharma already existed in China." The disciple continued, "If that is so, why did Bodhidharma need to come?" The master answered, "If he did not come, people in China would not know that every one had buddha-nature." Bodhidharma brought to China nothing but himself, to spread the message that everyone should believe

in one's own buddha-nature.

The Sixth Patriarch, Huineng (638-713), probably contributed the most to the development of Chan. His teachings, recorded in his Platform Sutra, can be summarized in the phrase: "No abiding, no-thought, no-form." This phrase refers to a state of mind in which one perceives one's own buddha-nature, but even though we speak of a buddha-nature we can point to no concrete form that is buddha-nature. The phrase says that buddha-nature is the essence of emptiness, or "shunyata" in Sanskrit. This teaching of "no abiding, no-thought, no-form" is consistent with the central teaching on emptiness in the Diamond Sutra. So, we see that the ideas of Chan are rooted in the Buddhist scriptures. The *Diamond Sutra* says that we should not mistake buddha-nature for something concrete or unchangeable, for then Chan would be indistinguishable from a formal religion based on belief in something external, monolithic, and unchanging.

A disciple of Master Zhaozhou (778-897) asked him, "Does a dog have buddha-nature?" The master answered, "Wu," which means "no," or "without." On the surface, this answer seems to contradict the teaching that all beings have buddha-nature. But we need to understand that buddha-nature is not concrete or unchanging, and Zhaozhou may have wanted to dispel any such notion this monk may have had. This kind of dialogue, which seems paradoxical, contradictory, even nonsensical, became a method of

practice called *gong'an* (*koan in Zen*).

Chan Buddhism encompasses the four key concepts of faith, understanding, practice, and realization. Faith belongs to the realm of religion; understanding is philosophical; practice is belief put into action; and realization is enlightenment. Without faith, we cannot understand; without understanding, we cannot practice; and without practice, we cannot realize enlightenment. Together, these four concepts create the gateway we can enter to realize wisdom.

We must then begin Chan practice with faith that all beings have buddha-nature. However, we should not think of it as an entity that can be grasped or attained. If we cling to that kind of idea, we will also cling to the idea that a true self exists within us, and in so doing, obstruct our liberation. We accept the existence of buddha-nature and then let it go, lest it become an obstacle to practice.

Some early Chan masters like Huineng and Nanyue (677-744) did not encourage prolonged meditation. One day, Nanyue observed a disciple named Mazu (709-788) diligently meditating.

He asked Mazu, "What are you doing?"

Mazu replied, "I am meditating."

"Why?"

Mazu responded, "To become a buddha."

Saying nothing, Nanyue, picked up a brick and started polishing it with the sleeve of his robe.

Mazu asked, "What are you doing?"

"I'm making a mirror."

Mazu said, "You can't make a mirror by polishing a brick."

Nanyue replied, "If I cannot make a mirror from a brick, how can you become a buddha by sitting?"

On hearing this Mazu had realization. Later, he became a great master himself. Does this famous gong'an mean that we need not meditate in order to become enlightened? I have been teaching meditation for many years and have come across quite a few practitioners who do not want meditation to take too much of their time, or cause a too much discomfort. To them, I would say, "Unless you are Huineng or Nanyue, you need to meditate." We may say that enlightenment does not come from meditation, but meditating is nonetheless a necessary step toward liberation. The best way to calm the mind is through meditation. Once the mind is calm, we can reduce the subjective and habitual patterns of self-based notions that cause so much vexation. When we achieve a tranquil or unified state of awareness, it is possible to see just what the self really is.

Chan teaching should work in conjunction with meditation. With the guidance of a good teacher, strong practice, and Chan teachings, enlightenment need not be far away.

The Spirit of Chan

From Chan Newsletter No. 104, November, 1994

Seton Hall University, November 17, 1989

The Caucasian monk Bodhidharma brought his version of Buddhism to China more than a thousand years after the Buddha's death, but aside from legends and stories, history says little about the Indian origins of Chinese Chan. The most famous story tells of the Buddha who stood before a large assembly of monks, holding up a flower but otherwise remaining silent. None of the monks understood this gesture except Mahakashyapa, a senior disciple, who simply smiled at the Buddha. Seeing this, the Buddha said: "I have the true Dharma eye, the marvelous mind of nirvana, the true form of the formless, the subtle Dharma gate that does not rely on words or letters; it is a special transmission outside the scriptures. This I entrust to Mahakashyapa." In Chan tradition, this "special transmission outside the scriptures" marked the beginning of master-to-disciple transmission that continues to this day.

Two other stories also illustrate the spirit of Chan present in early Indian Buddhism. The first concerns Ananda, a favorite disciple of the Buddha, who had committed to memory all the Buddha's teachings. Despite this, he never

attained enlightenment during the Buddha's lifetime. After Buddha's death, Mahakashyapa gathered an assembly of enlightened disciples to collect and memorize the Buddha's teachings. Mahakashyapa refused to invite Ananda on the grounds that Ananda was not enlightened. Ananda begged Mahakashyapa to admit him to the assembly, saying, "Lord Buddha has entered nirvana. Now only you can help me reach enlightenment!" Mahakashyapa finally said, "I cannot help you; only you can help yourself." Finally realizing he had only himself to rely on, Ananda went on solitary retreat where he dropped all his attachments and attained enlightenment.

Another disciple of the Buddha was named Suddhipanthaka, or Small Path, who was dull-witted. Among the Buddha's disciples, Small Path was the only one who could not remember the Buddha's teachings. He was given the job of grounds-keeper since he didn't seem fit to do anything else. After doing this for many years, one day Small Path asked, "The ground is clean, but is my mind-ground as pure?" At that moment all delusions dropped from his mind. The Buddha was pleased at this and affirmed that Small Path had become an enlightened arhat.

The Ananda story illustrates that knowledge and intelligence do not necessarily guarantee enlightenment, while the Small Path story shows that even a dull person can attain sudden enlightenment. Chan has less to do with great learning than with freeing the mind from its attachments.

This does not mean that Chan bars intelligent people from enlightenment, or that it encourages stupidity. Shakyamuni Buddha, Mahakashyapa, and Shariputra were people of great learning. Rather, Chan has to do with freeing the mind of its attachments.

According to Chan history, the Indian lineage shows twenty-eight generations of transmission from Mahakashyapa to Bodhidharma. It is unlikely that there was only a single line of transmission from the time of Shakyamuni to Bodhidharma going to China. In the Chinese Chan lineage, it is also believed that from Bodhidharma to Huineng, only five people received transmission, but the records indicate that Bodhidharma had several enlightened disciples, as did the Second and Third Patriarchs. It appears that belief in single-person, linear transmission stems from the fact that we only recognize the patriarchs as having received the direct transmission. Indeed, some of Huineng's disciples established their own lineages, but only two survive today, the Linji (Jap. Rinzai) and the Caodong (Jap. Soto).

I am the sixty-second lineage holder of Chan from Huineng and the fifty-seventh generation in the Linji tradition. In the Caodong lineage, I am the fiftieth generation descendant of the co-founder, Master Dongshan (807-869). All the masters before me in this lineage had more than one disciple, but when one traces back one's lineage, it makes it seem that there were no other disciples.

We should turn to a description of the main styles that characterize Chan practice. The Fifth Patriarch, Hongren (d. 674), had two prominent disciples, Shenxiu (ca. 605?-706) and Huineng. The Shenxiu style was based on gradual but diligent practice. Shenxiu used the analogy of keeping the mirror-mind free from the dust of vexation through the practice of virtue; we examine and rectify our behavior, until the self-nature/mirror is clean. This process continues until purity of mind is achieved.

Huineng saw Shenxiu's view as attributing form and characteristics to the mind. Taking a different stance, Huineng emphasized "giving rise to mind while not abiding in forms." In other words, there really is no mirror-mind to keep free of dust. Self-nature is originally pure; in fact, it is that of a buddha, so there is nothing to take away and nothing to add. There is a Chan saying, "As long as there is nothing in your mind, any direction north, east, south, or west is fine."

Each lineage has its own rules, style and method of practice, but the goal is the same: a mind free from attachments. There are no definitive standards in Chan, so long as your mind is at peace. If Chan cultivation is to bear fruit, we must understand the four components that shape the entrance through practice [as taught by Bodhidharma]:

- *Accept the law of cause and effect, or karma:* Difficulties in this life are the result of past deeds. The consequences of causes we have laid down in the

past should cause us no sadness or anger today.

- *Accord with conditions*: Good fortune and pleasant circumstances are due to meritorious deeds in past lives. When the causes and conditions dissipate, the favorable events will also end. Therefore do not be overly happy or proud when faced with favorable conditions.
- *Practice without seeking*: seeking inevitably results in suffering: Do not seek and you will depart from self-centeredness and gain complete freedom of mind.
- *Practice in accordance with Dharma*: realize that the self and all phenomena are inherently empty and pure. This practice is the highest of the four and includes the three mentioned above. It is the practice of directly contemplating emptiness, whereby we help others without clinging to notions of self. We recognize the emptiness of dharmas without rejecting their manifold appearances. Even though our minds are free of attachments, we still work diligently at whatever needs to be done. Before we begin practice, enlightenment may be our motivation, but once on the path, we drop attachment to the idea of enlightenment.

The *Platform Sutra* of Huineng emphasized a stage-less practice in which, regardless of time and place, the mind makes no distinction between virtue and evil, good and bad,

right and wrong. It is thus utterly free from discrimination. This in itself is practice. The mind usually referred to in the Platform Sutra is pure mind, or no-thought, the equivalent of enlightenment. No-thought means that one does not attach to or abide in thoughts. Thoughts and memories do occur, but one does not give rise to other thoughts attached to them. The *Platform Sutra* begins with no-thought and the result is no-form. No-form is the phenomenal aspect of no-thought, in which all dharmas are without characteristics, that is to say, are empty. No-form is one and the same with pure mind and thought, the same as wisdom and enlightenment. Thus, in Huineng's approach, with no method other than to maintain a mind totally free of discrimination, enlightenment can be attained.

The aim of Chan is to lessen vexation and open the gate of wisdom. This can be approached through daily and periodic practice. Without regular daily meditation, it would be difficult to reduce vexation and cut off attachments. Your mind will not be peaceful. When not meditating, deal with people and situations with a concentrated, content, humble, and grateful mind. I tell my students to pay attention wherever they are and focus on whatever they are doing at the moment. Live in the present. This too is daily practice. Meditation and daily life are not separate; they go hand in hand.

However, daily practice is not enough. You need periodic, intensive practice as well. Every so often, you

should set aside an extended, fixed period of time for the sole purpose of practice, whether alone, or in a retreat context. The benefit of group practice is that practitioners help each other. It is also safer to practice within the group. If you only practice daily without periodic, intensive practice, your practice may be weak. Going on retreat is the best way to strengthen your practice.

Chan and Enlightenment

From Chan Newsletter No. 105, December, 1994

Case Western Reserve University, October 25, 1992

Perhaps you have heard the sayings, "Chan is not established on words and language," and "Chan is a transmission outside conventional teachings." But if Chan does not rely on words, isn't it contradictory to talk about Chan? In fact, among the many sects of Buddhism in China, Chan has left behind the most writings. However, the primary goal of these writings is to teach that the experience of Chan itself does not depend on words, and that Chan is transmitted differently than in conventional teachings. The word "Chan" can mean enlightenment, and the Chinese term for enlightenment, *kaiwu*, can be translated as "first meaning," "ultimate meaning," or "primary truth." In Chan there are secondary meanings which can be expressed in words and concepts, but the primary or ultimate meaning of Chan must be experienced directly, without words.

Chan tradition illustrates the difference between primary and secondary truth through the analogy of one person pointing to the moon, but the other person fixing his gaze on the pointing finger instead of the moon. Just as one should not mistake the pointing finger for the moon, we

should not look on the teachings of Chan as the real Chan. So, in this analogy, words, language, ideas, and concepts are like the pointing finger, which can only express secondary truths. But they do serve the function of pointing to the primary truth, which can be called “mind,” “original nature,” or “buddha-nature.” The true Chan can not be perfectly described and must be experienced by oneself.

With this understanding, I will talk about the methods of practice that have been developed to help people experience the primary truth of Chan. But not only methods are required; it is also necessary to be guided by the concepts. Without this guidance, even if some kind of experience or insight results from your meditation, it will not be enlightenment. Also, the same methods of practice are not necessarily suitable for everyone. But for all, the first principle of Chan is to depart from self-centeredness, self-attachment, and any opposition between self and environment. We may experience the self in the narrow, limited form of everyday self interest, or in the more objective and inclusive form of universal oneness. But as long as there is any kind of self and attachment to self, there can be no enlightenment in the Chan sense.

To talk about the methods of Chan, we have to first understand its origin in Indian Buddhism and its first principle that what we called the self does not truly exist. This can be explained by three key concepts: first, all phenomena are impermanent; second, phenomena do not

have intrinsic selfhood; and third, nirvana is the state of ultimate quiescence. The quiescence of nirvana is the experience of no-self, emptiness, buddha-nature; it can also be called enlightenment. The understanding that all activities are impermanent is the recognition that everything is constantly changing; this leads to the understanding that phenomena have no independent, external, substantial essence or self. These three concepts are fundamental in Buddhist belief—that everything is impermanent, that everything is without self, and that nirvana is the experience of emptiness, no-self, buddha-nature; it can also be called enlightenment. Buddhism can never be separated from these three concepts, or from the principle of no-self. Since Chan emerged from Buddhism, it, too, is not separate from the principle of selflessness.

Bodhidharma, the First Patriarch of Chan, arrived in China from India in about 475 C.E. and brought the message that everyone has buddha-nature. We should have faith in this. There is an important work attributed to Bodhidharma called *The Two Entries and Four Practices*. The four practices refer to four stages on the Path. The fourth and most advanced of these is to be in accord with the Dharma. As we said earlier, it is a basic tenet of Buddhism that all phenomena are impermanent and do not have an intrinsic self.

In accordance with the Dharma, we try to personally experience impermanence and selflessness through direct

contemplation on emptiness. This is the highest practice of Chan, and leads to the highest attainment. But it is not easy and can be discouraging. Unless we can practice according to the Dharma without becoming discouraged or tense, we should step back and start with more basic practices.

The two entries are the entry through principle and the entry through practice. To enter through principle means directly seeing the first principle, or original nature, without relying on words, descriptions, concepts, experience, or any thinking process. If we do not use any thinking process, what is our state of mind? Is it like being unconscious or in a coma? If that were the case, enlightenment would be a joke, and no one would be interested in practicing Chan.

Entry through principle is similar to being in accord with the Dharma. “Principle,” like “dharma” means all phenomena. People often think of phenomena—events, objects, beings, time, etc.—as separate from some sort of underlying essence or substance. But phenomena and the substance of phenomena are not separate; principle is not separate from all phenomena or dharmas. When a person has no more self-centeredness or self-attachment, and sees his or her original nature, everything in the phenomenal world continues to exist except self-centeredness and self-attachment. This is called entry through principle. This state is not entered with a blank mind, nor can it be entered through thinking.

According to legend, Bodhidharma sat in meditation for

nine years, facing a wall in a cave on Mount Sung. In *The Two Entries and Four Practices*, Bodhidharma describes the mind as being like a wall. The method of practice used to accomplish entry through principle is precisely this phrase “Make your mind the same as a wall.” What does this mean? We see walls everywhere, hang all sorts of things on them, paint them, use them for privacy; we even put windows in them. We can do all sorts of things to a wall, but the wall itself remains unmoving. If your mind is like a wall, it also doesn’t move. People around you may exhibit their personalities, emotions, behaviors, and so on, but these do not give rise to self-centered responses in your mind. You are alert and respond to the environment in a non-egocentric way, providing help for the people around you. This is the ideal, and it is the state of mind referred to in entry through the principle. Such a person is not an idiot or a fool.

The second entry is through practice. “Practice” refers to the gradual training of the mind, and Bodhidharma discusses four specific methods: accepting karmic retribution, adapting to conditions, no seeking, and according with the Dharma. Each practice is progressively more advanced, and therefore should be followed in order.

Accepting karmic retribution involves recognizing the effects of karma and of causes and consequence. When we face adversity, we should understand that we are receiving the karmic retribution from countless previous actions in countless previous lives. When we pay back some of our

debt, we should feel happy that we have the capacity to do so. If we have this perspective, when misfortunes arise we will be tranquil and without resentment. We will not suffer from disturbing emotions or be discouraged or depressed. This is an important practice.

A few minutes ago I felt warm and took off my sweater. Would you like to ask why I didn't take the attitude that feeling warm and uncomfortable is retribution for my previous karma? Karma, or "causes and consequence," has to be understood and applied in conjunction with another Buddhist concept, "causes and conditions." The law of causes and conditions describes the fact that things happen because of many conditions coming together. We cannot and should not run away from our responsibilities and the retribution caused by our karma. But we should try to improve our conditions and karma. If things can be improved, we must make them better. If they can't be changed, then we should accept them with equanimity as karmic retribution.

For example, if I owe you my head from a previous life and now you want to claim it, I should pay you back. Nevertheless, I can discuss the situation with you, and maybe instead of taking my head, you will let me help you in some other way. Perhaps taking my head doesn't do you any good. You may be willing to accept something which will benefit both of us instead. The possibility of these benefits is included in "causes and conditions." The

Buddhist concept of karmic retribution must always be joined with the principle of cause and conditions because any result will have many causes.

The second practice recommended by Bodhidharma is adapting to conditions, both favorable and unfavorable. It also requires an understanding of cause and conditions. According with conditions means we should do our best within the constraints of our environment. If our circumstances are fortunate or something good happens to us, we should not be overly excited. Good fortune, like bad, is a result of karmic retribution. Why should we feel excited when we are only enjoying the fruit of our own labor? It is like withdrawing money from your own bank account. In the account of karma, when you enjoy good fortune, you use up some of the retribution from previous good karma. You should be mindful of the benefits of accumulating such good karma. The practice of adapting to favorable conditions means that you accept your karma or “cause and consequence” without being overly joyful or self-satisfied.

Accepting karmic retribution and adapting to conditions are very helpful practices in daily life. They allow us to improve our conditions and karma and maintain a positive attitude toward life. They help us to enjoy equanimity in the face of changing circumstances, improve our behavior, and help us keep our relationships harmonious. These teachings of Bodhidharma are not hard to understand, and any ordinary person can make use of them. If we can apply them

in daily circumstances, we will not avoid our responsibilities and we will make the best of our opportunities. In this way life will be more meaningful.

The third of Bodhidharma's four practices is not seeking. There is a Chinese saying that people "raise children to help them in old age, and accumulate food in case of famine." Today people in the West may not raise children just to support them in old age, but people probably still accumulate food or wealth in case of hardship. People certainly save money in order to use it later. This attitude is not the attitude of no seeking. In the practice of no seeking, you continually, diligently engage in useful activity, yet have no thought that this activity is for your personal gain now or in the future. You do not look for personal benefits. This is not easy, and it is a higher level of practice than the second practice.

In Buddhist practice we have to leave behind our selves and our personal experiences and experience selflessness before we can be enlightened. If your sense of self is strong, solid and formidable, then there is no way you can experience enlightenment. If you are attached to the idea of attaining enlightenment or buddhahood, there is no way you can succeed. Attachment to your own self or attainment is in complete contradiction to the fundamental spirit of Chan Buddhism. Remember that two of the fundamental principles of Buddhism are that all phenomena are impermanent and have no self. A person attached to his own

attainment, cannot possibly be in accord with impermanence and therefore cannot be enlightened. If he has some kind of experience during meditation or experiences some kind of enlightenment, it is not Chan enlightenment.

Now you may feel a little disappointed. You may think, "If I should not desire enlightenment, what am I doing here learning about Buddhism?" In Buddhism it is important to make vows, a practice which is sometimes called "arousing bodhi-mind." Vows are discussed in *The Platform Sutra* of the Sixth Patriarch of the Chan School, Huineng. There are four great vows; to help all sentient beings; to terminate all vexations, to learn all of Buddhadharma, and to ultimately attain buddhahood. The goal of enlightenment is included in our most important vows. How can we understand this in relationship to the practice of no seeking?

When we practice accepting karmic retribution and adapting to conditions, the rule of cause and consequence for our own selves is very important to us. It is normal for people to begin to learn and practice Buddhism for their own benefit. They would like to attain buddhahood. Eventually, through practice, their self-centeredness and selfishness begin to fall away and they no longer think so much about themselves. They find themselves busy because people need their help, and they provide what is needed, just like the wall we talked about before. Such a person is very much in demand and is constantly busy responding to the needs of other living beings. He or she no longer thinks about

attaining enlightenment. These questions will not arise anymore.

When you have ceased to be concerned about your own attainment, then that is already a kind of enlightenment. Otherwise there will always be subtle wandering thoughts and attachments to the desire to do something about your situation. If you want to free yourself from all worldly vexation or suffering, and you desire liberation, you are still attached to self. It is only when you have no concern about your own enlightenment that you can truly be enlightened. The practice of no seeking is the practice of this enlightened state.

The *Platform Sutra* says that even after enlightenment, one should continue to make the four great vows. The difference is that after enlightenment, one does not perceive anything as separate from one's self-nature. There are no sentient beings other than one's self-nature, no vexations other than one's self-nature, no Dharma other than one's self-nature, and no buddhahood other than one's self-nature. You continue to do many things, helping sentient beings, terminating vexations, and learning the Dharma with an unmoving, natural, spontaneous mind. There will be no specific thoughts or goal to seek. With this state of mind, one will attain buddhahood.

The fourth of Bodhidharma's practices is according with the Dharma. It is the practice which allows us to reach the point of entry through principle, which we talked about

earlier. Not seeking and according with the Dharma are both difficult, so where does a practitioner begin? Buddhist sects employ methods of practice which can be used by beginners, including reading the scriptures, making vows, prostration, being mindful of the Buddha, counting the breath, etc. These methods all help us go from scattered mind, which is confused, emotional, and unstable, to a mental state that is tranquil and in harmony with our environment. Once our minds are tranquil we can use more advanced methods, such as gong'an, huatou, or Silent Illumination.

The very first thing we should do is relax body and mind. If we can relax, we will be healthier, more stable and relate to others more harmoniously. There is a Buddhist householder who comes to the Center who is very nervous. This causes other people to be nervous. When he talks to you his body is tense, as if he is about to attack you or defend himself. People react to this kind of behavior. It disturbs them. I told him to relax his body and he responded in a tense, forced voice, "I am already relaxed!" He is constantly fearful or insecure, and because of the problems this causes him to come to the Chan Center to seek help. He wanted to learn meditation so I taught him to gradually relax his body and then his mind. If we can't relax there is no way we can meditate and if we can not meditate the practice of no seeking is completely impossible. This man was impatient, and thought that if he got enlightened all his problems would disappear. He said to me, "Master, I do not want

anything; I just want the method to get enlightened quickly. Give me the method as soon as possible." I answered, "Such a method has not been invented. If I could invent a guaranteed, speedy method of enlightenment, I could probably sell it for quite a lot of money." (*Laughter*)

Now I have invented the following method, and offer it free to whomever wishes to learn. The method is to relax your body and mind. It is easy and simple. Do not ask whether it can lead you to enlightenment. First you should be able to relax and later we can talk about enlightenment. Close your eyes, lean back in your chair, and relax your muscles. Completely relax your eyes. It is very important that your eyelids be relaxed and do not move. There should not be any tension around your eyeballs. Do not apply any force or tension anywhere. Relax your facial muscles, shoulders and arms. Relax your abdomen and put your hands in your lap. If you feel the weight of your body, it should be at your seat. Do not think of anything. If thoughts come, ignore them and pay attention to the feeling of inhaling and exhaling your breath at your nostrils. Ignore what other people are doing. Concentrate on your own practice, forget about your body, and relax. Do not entertain doubts about whether what you are doing is useful.

This method of relaxation should be used for three to ten minutes. If you do it for longer you will probably feel restless or fall asleep. You can use this method a few times a day and it will refresh your body and mind and eliminate some of

the confusion in your daily life. Gradually you will gain the stability of body and mind that makes it possible to use the methods of Chan meditation. If your body and mind are not stable, it will be quite impossible for you to do Chan practice, so relaxing can be considered the first step. The next step is to learn meditation from a teacher.

Now you have tried this simple method for relaxing the mind and body. You should use it regularly at home. You can even share it with other people in order to help other living beings.

The Chan View of Life

From Chan Newsletter No. 107, October, 1993

Today I will talk about the Chan view of human life. Buddhism does not have a single approach to life; it recognizes that each individual's view of life depends on his or her understanding. If you see deeply into things, then that's your understanding; if you see only what is shallow, that is your understanding. For example, Shakyamuni Buddha, the historical Buddha, said that all dharmas are Buddhadharma. (Here, "dharmas" refers to phenomena, whether people, things, thoughts, time, space, and so on.) We can also say that all dharmas (phenomena) are the Dharma (teaching) of Chan. In other words, all things great and small are in accord with the teaching of Chan. This is a deep view of life though few of us can grasp it.

The phrase "view of human life" implies that human beings are different from animals, plants, and inanimate objects. The Chinese sometimes say that we have the face of a human but the heart of an animal. This is a serious criticism, but are animals more violent, cruel, unfriendly, or evil than human beings? Not necessarily. The aspects of human nature which we can describe as terrifying or even evil may be worse than what we observe in animals. On the

other hand, the aspects of human nature which we can describe as virtuous, kind, and loving are better than what we find in other animals.

The Chinese term which we have translated as “human life” connotes three ways in which humans are different from other animals. First, we differ in our activities in space; second, we differ in the living process; and third, we differ in what is called “human existence.”

Like animals, our activities and relationships occur in the realm of space. But unlike animals, from morning to night we stay home, go to school or to the office, work, clean, cook, or whatever, acting in the environment around us. So what we do in space can be quite different from what is done by animals. In addition to food and clothing, we enjoy such things as entertainment, religious and spiritual pursuits, and the appreciation of art.

Our process of living is also different from that of animals, in that we are conscious of time. We perceive ourselves moving from yesterday to today, to tomorrow, from last year to next year, and from the time we are born until we die. We have memories that go beyond the memories that animals have, and from our memory we have constructed history. We also have worries, regrets, concerns, and anticipation, which animals do not have.

Another way we differ from animals lies in how our existence in time and space influences those around us. This is what we call the “existence” of humans. Our influence on

the world results from both physical and non-physical actions. For example, presumably no one here has met Karl Marx, but his ideas have had a tremendous impact on our age. Such is the impact that one person can have on people of a different place and time. This influence of our mental and physical actions is again very different from that of the animal realm.

To answer the question, "What is human life?" we must pose three sub-questions. What is the purpose of human activity? What is the meaning of the process of human life? What is the worth of the human existence?

The Animalistic View

If you feel that human life has no goal or purpose, you will probably feel that life is empty and without substance. If your life has no meaning, you may wonder, "Why do I bother to live?" You may feel that you are a drain on the earth's resources and that life is not worth living. Once in China a child heard his mother say, "Living in this world is meaningless. I'm an uneducated country bumpkin. What good do I do?" This upset the child, who countered, "Do not talk like that. You are very important to me!" The woman said, "Oh, really? Am I important to you?" and the boy said, "Of course! Without you, how would I survive?" The mother said, "Well, at least somebody thinks I'm useful."

This is pessimistic view of human life—all activity is purposeless. As it would be for an animal, life is just a search

for food and shelter and the need for procreation. Is this your attitude?

Confucius said, "Food and sex, these are the human instincts." That is, the desire to continue to exist and the urge to procreate comprise the animal side of human nature. A variation in this view of life is the simple hope that you and your children will continue to live on. To wish to live and to fear death is an animal as well as a human instinct. People, dogs, rats, and even fish have this instinct. Yet another variation is to believe that your existence is spontaneous, without cause, so you drift and let situations determine what happens. Do you recognize that some people live according to these animalistic views of human life?

People often ask, "Why am I alive? Why do I have to live like this? Why do I suffer like this?" I say, "It is because you lack wisdom that you live and suffer as you do." They often protest: "Well, somehow I was born. I don't know any better, so I'll just continue to live as I have always done." Far too many people do not know why they live as they do, and resign themselves to their fate. Just yesterday someone asked, "Shifu, how much karmic debt do I have? Can I be so indebted that I must suffer so much for so long? When will I finish repaying my debt to other beings?" I said, "It is not to me that you owe the karmic debt. I cannot tell you when it will be repaid" We are often unaware that we have such views.

The Deluded View

We might term a second view of life the deluded or foolish perspective. This is a slight step above the animalistic view. Here people believe what is important is to fight and struggle for protection, safety, and security. Such people buy houses, land, or accumulate wealth to protect their security and that of their children and descendants. There is a Chinese story about an important official who paid a visit to a monk. Unlike most monks, this monk lived in a tree. The official saw the monk sitting there in the branches of this tall tree, and said, "Master, you are in a very dangerous situation" The monk answered, "I am not in any danger, but you, however, are in a dangerous situation." The official asked, "How can I be in a dangerous situation? I am head of the local government. I am protected by many people. How can my situation be dangerous?" The master said, "The four elements constantly vex you. Birth, sickness, old age, and death can affect you at any time. The vexations of greed, anger, ignorance and arrogance are your constant company. And you say you're not in a dangerous situation?" The official was intelligent and had karmic roots for wisdom. He understood immediately: "Master, indeed, I am in a position far worse than yours."

Human beings are deluded to think that in this world, there could be a truly safe place. Try to find perfect safety and security, and you only place yourself in greater danger and insecurity. A variation of this deluded view is that the

goal of life is fame, fortune, and position. Accumulate wealth, and you may then wish to be well-known; fame may not be enough, and you will next seek power and authority. Many people have the view that if they do not work hard and achieve, life holds no purpose. Do you have this attitude?

Acting on one's pretensions is a variation of the deluded view of life. By pretensions, I mean a self-image or reputation lacking in substance. For instance, your means are modest, yet you dress so that people will think you're wealthy. Perhaps you are not particularly learned, but you carry scholarly books around to impress people. This is pretentious, and some people will do whatever is necessary to create a self-image.

Another delusion is the belief that life's purpose is to triumph over others. Some cannot accept the fact that there are others who have achieved more than they. They work and strive with all their heart, just to outdo everyone else. Then they are proud and arrogant. If they fall behind, they grow discouraged and lose all faith in themselves. They compete with others their whole lives until they finally die.

A person with a deluded view of life is like a dog chasing its own tail. "Just let me get that dirty dog!" He will never catch his own tail, in the same sense that chasing wealth, power, success, or prestige will not guarantee permanent security. Eventually the dog dies, as do we. At that moment the dog dies, he does not know what he was about, or why

he dies. He is unaware that he has been chasing his own tail. Such is the deluded view of life, and many, many of us live this way.

The View of Worldly Wisdom

If these are deluded views, what view does a wise person hold? Here we are speaking about worldly wisdom, and we mean someone who lives according to principled ideals and goals. Most of us like to believe we fall into this category, rather than among the deluded. A wise worldly outlook is typified by an artist devoted to beauty and its rendering. In the process, the artist himself or herself may become beautified and so also will the world. An internal experience of beauty may transform the environment. Inside and outside are not experienced as separate. Such a person recognizes that the whole universe is really one creative work of art.

The process of creating a work of art can be a painful process, but when the work is finished, seeing or hearing the finished product can be a beautiful experience, both for the creator and the audience. Often the world seems beautiful to the artist while he or she is involved in the work. But once the artist must deal with the ordinary world, life may not seem so wonderful. I know a painter whose work is truly beautiful. He is happy when he talks about paintings and art with other people. But when the conversation shifts away from art, he becomes irritable and bad-tempered. He makes

life difficult for his wife and friends.

In China we consider the martial arts to be a form of art like painting or poetry. In Taiwan there was a well-known tai qi master, who no doubt found life beautiful and peaceful when he was involved with tai qi, but whose personal life was a mess. He drank a great deal, and finally died of alcoholism. Artists may experience beautiful moments of oneness between self and universe, but these are transitory. Life is not always beautiful. More often than not, it is the not-so-beautiful aspects of ordinary life that we experience.

Some scientists who spend their lives analyzing and observing the physical world exhibit a wise view of life. They behold the enormous universe and they investigate minute atomic particles. They experience the limitlessness of nature, and from that derive the limitlessness of what is within them. They may observe only matter, but with their keen understanding they extrapolate unlimited totality. Can they posit the meaning of life [from scientific facts]? That is unlikely.

A scientist once said to me, "Shifu, science and Buddhism reach the same conclusions, so if I pursue science, there is no need to study Buddhism." I said, "What kind of conclusion is that?" "Buddhism" he said, "says that there is no limit to phenomena. Science has also come to the same conclusion. Buddhism says all phenomena are empty, and science, in its analysis of matter at the most minute level, also finds no real substance. The conclusions are identical" I

responded, "No, they are completely different. Can science tell you why you were born into this world?" He said, "Oh, that's simple. My mother gave birth to me." I asked, "Why did your mother give birth to you and not to someone else?" He answered, "My mother gave birth to me, and that's enough. It was not necessary that she have a different child." Again I asked, "Then why were you born to this mother and not another?" He had no answer for that, so I said, "This shows that you are unclear about such fundamental questions." Finally, I asked, "Why have you come into this world and this life? Where will you go from here?"

Science may show you that phenomena are limitless and empty, but it cannot answer questions about the purpose of human life, and what will happen to you after death. That is why many scientists come to adopt a religious faith of some kind or another, and believe in God or another deity. Even Einstein was religious. In Taiwan, scientists often become Buddhists, because science cannot answer the fundamental questions about human existence.

Philosophers may be wise; they live according to examined ideas, and they consciously strive to incorporate their ideals and principles into daily living. Through logic, they conclude that certain ideas are reasonable and should be held. Idealism, materialism, humanism, existentialism and phenomenology are examples of such philosophies. Philosophers can live according to what they believe to be true. Ideas inform their lives. Some philosophers may

believe that they will be outlived by their ideas. Many such people face death contentedly as long as they believe their ideas, creations and contributions will endure. However, we know that for thousands of years one philosophy has been refuted by another. Think of the recent reevaluation of Marxism.

The religious constitute another group who seek wisdom. A religious person lives his life according to principles and recognized goals, and governs his life according to his faith in God. The meaning of his life is based on obeying God's law and on the anticipation of joining God in his heavenly kingdom after death. The individual and God are, on one hand, connected together; on the other hand, they are independent. This remedies a weakness of the artist, the scientist, and the philosopher. These people run the risk of losing their identity in merging with their art, science or philosophy. However, a person who believes in God sees himself as having an independent eternal identity, or soul. For many people it is important to have this sense of independent, eternal identity. Otherwise they feel empty.

The Chan View

There is a fourth view that is higher still than these other perspectives, and it is the foundation of the Chan view of life. It is the view that life's purpose is enlightenment, the dissolving of the self. We must pass through three stages to arrive at enlightenment. First, we must affirm ourselves,

second, mature ourselves and third, dissolve ourselves. This is called the realistic view of human life because it is grounded in ultimate reality.

To affirm oneself is to affirm the purpose, goal, meaning and worth of one's life and to be willing to look at oneself honestly and clearly. People ask, "Why were we born into this world and this life?" We are here to receive our karmic retribution, and to fulfill our aspirations or vows. We must understand that in one lifetime, our actions (which create karmic retribution), and the results of those actions (retribution), are relatively limited compared to the countless lives we have lived through. What we do and what we receive often do not correspond. Some people seem not to have done much good, and yet are born with wealth or find easy success. Others work hard their whole lifetime, yet can barely feed themselves. They achieve nothing, have unfulfilling relationships, and seem to have lives filled with vexation and suffering.

Why are there such disparities? To answer this, we must understand karmic retribution. This lifetime was preceded by innumerable previous lifetimes, during which we acted in many different ways. The consequences of these actions reach into this lifetime and future lifetimes until we have received the full karmic retribution for what we have done. One reason why we were born this time around is to pay back karmic debt from previous lifetimes.

This answers the question I posed to the scientist, "Why

are we born into this world?" I, myself, was born with many physical problems and was often sick. I asked myself, "Why is my health so poor? Was my mother unfair, bringing a healthy brother and sister into the world, and me so sickly?" Now I understand that this was not my mother's doing. She had no choice. Our body at birth is the result of all our previous lifetimes. But many of us feel that where and when we were born and our whole lot in life is unfair.

A few years ago I went back to mainland China and met with my elder brother. He said, "You have the most merit and best karma among our brothers and sisters." In childhood I envied his health; now he envies what he sees as my achievement in life. I said, "Brother, how many hours a night do you sleep?" He answered, "From six to eight." I said, "I don't have your good luck or good karma. I only get four and five hours of sleep a night." Then I asked him, "What kind of food do you eat?" and he said, "Vegetables, bean curd, carrots, etc., and sometimes meat and fish." I said, "I'm not so fortunate. I only eat bean curd and vegetables, never meat and seafood." Then I asked, "Brother, how many people do you have to meet each day?" He said, "Not too many. My family is small, and I'm retired. I don't have that much to do." I said, "Every day I have to meet many, many people. Again, I don't have your good karma. It shows that I have come into this world to repay my debt." After I said these things, my brother felt much better.

Sunday is a day off, but what a pity: I have to give a talk

here. I have indeed come into this world to accept my karmic retribution. We have also come into this world to fulfill our aspirations and vows. A vow in Buddhism is the strongest promise or pledge that one can make. Every one of us has aspirations and has made pledges and vows. Isn't that true? I believe that every one here has made promises and pledges to themselves and to others in this lifetime, as well as in previous lifetimes. When I was in the army, many years ago, I liked to read, but I did not have money to buy books. A sympathetic friend said, "When I have enough money, I'll open a bookstore so you'll have all the books you want." I was grateful and prayed to Avalokiteshvara in the hope that my friend would succeed in opening his bookstore. We both made promises. My friend promised to open a bookstore so that I could have books, and I pledged my help through my faith in Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva.

He still hasn't opened the bookstore. I'm still waiting. Perhaps even in the next lifetime, I will find myself asking, "When are you going to open your bookstore?" Maybe he'll say, "You said that you were going to pray to Avalokiteshvara for my bookstore. It hasn't happened and it's your fault." Hasn't every one of us made many promises that we didn't keep? People in love promise all sorts of things, but they conveniently forget them when they are married. Any promise not fulfilled will eventually have to be repaid. We enter the world to fulfill our obligations and repay our debts. Promises or vows even to someone we're

not indebted to must still be fulfilled.

When people take advantage of you or make you unhappy, you need not think, “I’m indebted to these people and must pay them back in this lifetime.” Consider it this way: “I promised some thing in a past life, so what I suffer now fulfills that promise.

Thus far, I have spoken about affirming the self, one’s goals, and seeing the self as it is. We must then bring ourselves to maturity, transcend ourselves, and transform ourselves from ordinary sentient beings to bodhisattvas. The process of maturing involves both leaving behind concern for your self, and reorienting yourself to the benefit of other sentient beings. Then you will be ready to bear inconvenience, trouble, suffering, and vexation on others’ behalf. Saving sentient beings from suffering as Buddhists vow to, requires that you give whatever is needed—time, money, or all your effort. When you give, it may seem that you lose something, but a bodhisattva pays no attention to loss. It is the responsibility to other sentient beings that is important.

To voluntarily abandon your own benefit, to actively help and when necessary suffer for the sake of sentient beings is the correct attitude. When our actions in the interest of others are voluntary, our own suffering diminishes. It is when suffering and vexation are involuntary, that they are difficult to bear. Those on the bodhisattva path must disregard their own benefit, despite the discomfort this may

bring. Even if the sentient beings we help do not express gratitude, we will have no regrets. This is wisdom and compassion, and the way of a bodhisattva.

The third and final stage of development according to Chan is complete freedom from the self. At this point one goes from being a bodhisattva to becoming a buddha. After we have completely let go of the self, we return the benefit of our achievement to society and the world. Personal benefit is of no concern. We offer everything, whatever we own and whatever we have achieved to all beings everywhere. Yet we have no feeling of having gained or lost anything. Sentient beings may benefit from our efforts, but we experience no loss or gain. This is no-self, the stage of deep enlightenment.

If you realize deep enlightenment, you will no longer need to listen to me talk about views of life, because you will no longer have a view of life. In Chan, the final, transcendent view of human life is no view of human life. What is there, then, to be said? To have a view of life is the condition of ordinary sentient beings. To transcend this idea is the condition of a deeply enlightened being. Such a person will rise to whatever task must be done.

There are many Chan gong'ans which illustrate this point. In one, a monk asks, "Where is it that not a single blade of grass grows?" The master answers, "When you step outdoors, every place is full of fragrant grass." And then he adds, "You can go all over the world, and you will see no

fragrant grass." I can rephrase the question as, "What is the one place where you cannot see a single blade of grass?" The answer is very special and seems quite strange. "Wherever one looks there is fragrant grass, but walk all over the world and you will not see a blade of grass." If every place is filled with fragrant grass, then you will not recognize it, nor give it a name. If every being in this world is a dog, then there will be no reason to call anything "dog." The reality of life is apparent everywhere. It is just a matter of realizing it. But if you purposefully look for reality, you will never find it.

Another gong'an tells about two Chan monks who were traveling, and passed by an isolated, deserted temple. One monk needed to urinate, so he urinated in the temple hall, in front of the Buddha statue. The other monk scolded him: "Look, the Buddha is here. How can you piss here?" The first monk said, "Tell me where Buddha is not, and I'll piss there." The other monk said, "Buddha is everywhere." The first monk happily said, "In that case, I can piss anywhere."

I have spoken about four levels of view or understanding of human life, and about transcending these views. I hope we are not at the first level, the animal level. Maybe you recognized yourself when I talked about the deluded level, or the third level, the level of the worldly wisdom of artists, philosophers, etc. We should all work towards the fourth level, the view of human life grounded in ultimate truth, and we should vow to eventually transcend the need for a view of human life. Let us strive to

fulfill that vow.

Question: Where does our ignorance come from?

Sheng Yen: In Buddhism we speak of ignorance without beginning. The concept of “without beginning” is something that is unique to Buddhism. In general, philosophies and religions speak of a first beginning, but Buddhism does not. Buddhism speaks in terms of there being no beginning. When people ask, “Where does this no beginning come from?” Shakyamuni Buddha remained silent. So how could I dare to try to answer that question?

The Life of a Chinese Monk

From Chan Newsletter No. 110, September, 1995

University of Michigan on November 10, 1989.

Before the Communist revolution, when I left home [to become a monk], there were many Buddhist monasteries in China, but few of them had a Chan hall and a regular program of Chan training. There were perhaps five or six well-known monasteries where a monk could receive training in Chan. They included Ching Shan, Yang Chou Gao-min Ssu, and Yu Fo Ssu in Shanghai. In Chang Chou there was Tian Ning Ssu, in Hunan there was Nan Yueh Ssu and in Kuang-tong, or Canton, there was Nan Hua Ssu, the training monastery established by the Sixth Patriarch, Huineng. Yun Chu Ssu was in Chiang Xi, and there were the two monasteries which were revived by Master Xuyun. My basic teacher and most important master was Dong Chu, of Ting Hui Ssu on Wu Tai Shan's Kuan Chi Mountain.

All Chan monasteries were governed by similar rules and the daily life of the monks was very much the same. The first kind of training related to daily life, in which greatest importance was placed upon monastic duties, but it also included rituals of worship or veneration at prescribed times of the day, as well as daily meditation.

The second kind of cultivation was intensive Chan meditation retreats. The shortest were a week, and there were also retreats of 21 days, 49 days, and 3 months. The shorter retreats might be held in any of the Chan monasteries around China, using the staff of that monastery. For longer retreats a local monastery would invite an eminent Chan master to preside. This would generally be an abbot or the head of the Chan hall from one of the great monasteries. The two most famous Chan Masters of that time were Master Xuyun and Master Lai Guo.

In the large monasteries where Chan training was available, there were generally two 3-month retreats each year, in summer and winter. Winters were too cold to travel or meditate in the mountains, so winter was a good time for group meditation. In summer it is too hot to work, so summer, too, was set aside for meditation. This summer and winter practice taught us not to be bothered by heat or cold.

There was a verse couplet inscribed at the entrance to every Chan hall which said that when you enter you should give up your body to the routine of the Chan hall and your life to the Dharma Protector deities. This meant that you should have no concern for your body or your life. You had to give yourself completely to the practice of Chan. The head of Chan Hall told monks who came for retreat that if they got sick no one would care for them, and if they died their bodies would be stuffed under the meditation platform and cremated after the retreat ended. By this he meant that the

monks had to let go of all of their expectations and drop all of their attachments. Only under these conditions could they practice well.

We ate and slept in the meditation hall during retreats. You might think that there would have been someone to give us instruction before the retreat. After all, we would live in the Chan hall for some time. You might think we monks would need to know the daily schedule and rules, as well as why and how to practice. However, there was no explanation whatsoever. We were simply expected to do what everybody else did. I just followed the routine—eating, sitting and walking meditation, sleeping, etc. No one even told us the rules of the meditation hall, and if you asked how to practice very often you were hit with the incense board (the stick used for rousing sleepy monks, relieving tension, giving signals, etc.).

Once I asked the retreat master, “How long do we have to go through this?” He replied, “Until the Year of the Deer.” Of course, there is no Year of the Deer in the Chinese calendar. In effect, he was saying that we had to follow the routine forever. We were not supposed to seek explanations. I was somewhat distressed by this. It seemed like blind practice. But it was typical of the training in the monasteries of that time. Monks continued this “blind” practice for years, and gradually their characters and dispositions changed as a result.

During retreats, there were short Dharma lectures in

which practice was discussed. Encounters with or questions to the Chan Master were not a regular feature of practice. If something unusual happened, if you had a meditative experience which seemed important or an enlightenment experience, you could approach the head of the meditation hall. He questioned and tested you, and at his discretion you might be sent to see the master.

A monk who was given permission to enter the master's quarters to ask a question was recognized as a "disciple who is allowed to enter the master's room." This signified that the monk had an initial awakening, or was very close to an awakening. Most monks didn't ever get to enter the master's quarters. I never entered the master's room while I was in mainland China.

These were the conditions I saw in Chan monasteries when I was young. In 1949, when I was 19, I moved to Taiwan [with the Nationalist Army]. I continued to ask myself, "Is this all there is to practice? Am I ever going to learn more? Am I ever going to meet a liberated Chan master and find the solution to my problems?" Once in Taiwan I asked an eminent master "How should I practice? What should I do?" The Master replied, "Practice! What are you talking about? What do you mean by practice? This is it. Just practice what you've been doing day after day." I felt that this was going to be the rest of my life.

I would think about Buddhist stories I had heard, such as the story of Huineng, who became the Sixth Patriarch of

Chan. Huineng was an ordinary wood cutter. One day he heard one line from the Diamond Sutra and grasped it completely. He immediately attained enlightenment without any previous Buddhist practice or study. I had also heard stories of people who attained arhatship or other levels of enlightenment simply by seeing, meeting, or speaking with the Buddha. Sometimes the Buddha would just say one thing, such as, "Ah, you've finally come!" and the one to whom he spoke achieved arhatship. I felt that my karmic obstructions were heavy, and I despaired of ever seeing the buddhas or encountering a liberated teacher.

I had many questions and many doubts. I thought, "I'm not stupid. Is it really possible that no one can help me understand how to practice?" But everyone I asked told me, "Your karmic capacity must be poor. You must have many karmic obstructions. Practice hard, repent, do prostrations and venerate the Buddha."

My questions about practice continued to plague me. Then, when I was 28, I had the good fortune to meet Master Ling Yuan, a disciple and spiritual descendant of the great modern Master Xuyun. Just by chance, we shared a room in a monastery we were both visiting. In the room there was one large platform for sitting and sleeping, and we shared it for the night. I thought, "Ah, maybe this is my chance. Master Ling Yuan is quite renowned. Maybe I can ask him the questions that have been bothering me all these years." At night, Master Ling Yuan was sitting in meditation,

so I sat next to him. After some time passed I said to him, "Master, may I ask you a few questions?" and Master Ling Yuan said, "Yes, go ahead and ask."

I started asking questions, and after each question he would say, "Any more questions?" This went on for about two hours. I became puzzled and thought to myself, "He keeps asking if I have more questions but he does not answer my questions. What's going on here?" Still, I continued to ask questions. When Master Ling Yuan finally again asked me: "Any more?" I hesitated, and was confused for an instant. Master Ling Yuan loudly slapped the platform with a hand and said, "Take all your questions, just grab them, and put them down." Suddenly my questions were gone. The whole world had changed! My body was running with perspiration but it felt extraordinarily light. All my questions were laughable. What I had been was laughable.

This was the most important experience in my life up to that time. Afterwards, when I read the Buddhist scriptures or the records of the sayings of the Chan Masters, I understood them immediately, without explanation. I felt as if they were my own words. Previously I would wonder, "What does this word mean? What is the point behind that phrase or this expression?" Words are words and that is all. If you understand the idea behind a word, that's fine, but if you don't understand, that's fine, too. People listen to my talks and ask me questions about practice and life. Some people understand what I say and some do not. Either way

is fine.

The experience I had did not cause all my vexations and afflictions to disappear. I was still aware of them. They were no longer so evident externally, but I knew in my heart that under certain circumstances my problems would manifest. So I felt a strong need to continue to practice. As a result, in 1961, I went into the mountains to begin six years of solitary practice.

I did not concentrate on sitting meditation at first, but spent most of my time performing repentance rituals and prostrations to the Buddha. The ritual for repentance I used is called Ta-bei T'san (Great Compassionate Repentance Ceremony), and is based on the *Dharani of the Compassion of Avalokiteshvara* (Guanyin). I also prostrated my way through the Lotus Sutra, doing one prostration for each character. There are about 80,000 characters in the Lotus Sutra, so that was about 80,000 prostrations. I have heard that in Tibetan Buddhism there is a similar practice, but the practitioner does 100,000 prostrations. I guess as far as Tibetan tradition is concerned I lack ten or twenty thousand prostrations.

These practices took up most of my time for about half a year. Then I began to concentrate on sitting meditation. I also did some reading from the sutras and I wrote. Originally, I planned three years in retreat but they passed so quickly that I decided to stay for three more years. This may surprise you. For most of us, when we don't have anything to do, time seems to pass slowly, and when we have a lot to do time

seems to pass quickly because we are distracted. Meditation is different. When you notice that your legs hurt, time seems to pass extraordinarily slowly. But when you practice well, time seems to pass very quickly, but in this case you're not distracted.

When I came out of retreat, I felt that it was time for me to spread the Dharma. I decided to teach the Buddhist scriptures, the doctrines, and the methods of practice. At that time Buddhist practice was not strong in Taiwan. The standard of practice was not high and Buddhist monks and nuns were not well educated. I was particularly struck by the criticism of a Christian preacher who claimed that Buddhist monks couldn't even read and understand their own scriptures. With this criticism in mind, I decided to go to Japan to study at a Buddhist university. Japan has a strong tradition of Buddhist learning, and I thought I could take what I learned back to Taiwan and try to raise the standard of Buddhist education there.

In Japan I divided my time between studying and practice. I practiced in several different schools of Buddhism, and according to several different styles, including Rinzai and Soto, and at Myoshinji and Harada Roshi's temple. Some people wondered about my real commitment, since I spent so much time on both practice and study. In fact, my studies progressed quickly, and by my sixth year in Japan I had completed my doctoral thesis. This was considered to be extraordinarily rapid progress. When people asked how

I was able to finish so quickly I said, "I'm a Buddhist monk. I don't have anything else to do. Everybody else looks for boyfriends or girlfriends or other distractions."

In 1975 I left Japan and returned to Taiwan briefly. Then I was invited to the United States by the Buddhist Association of America, and was appointed abbot of the Temple of Great Enlightenment in the Bronx, New York. I didn't know what I might be able to teach people here and my English was rudimentary, so I stayed in the temple and waited to see who would show up. Soon people began to come to see me.

I recalled how difficult it was for me to learn how to practice, and how many years it took. No one had ever talked to me about the stages of development and the methods of practice. I decided that in my own teaching I would emphasize these two approaches. Although Chan is not based on words and does not have techniques or stages, the Buddhist scriptures and treatises discuss definite practices and definite stages of practice. Work hard, work slowly, get results. This was the kind of practice I experienced in the Chan monasteries of my youth. There was a conceptual basis for this method of practice, even though no one discussed it. It was based on the observation that with slow, hard work, eventually good results appear.

If you ask people today try this sort of "blind, no-practice," practice, which is a slow and deliberate process, they are unlikely to be interested in practicing at all. People

in modern societies do not understand such practice, and feel that they are too busy to spend the time this style of teaching requires. In this day and age it is important to teach people about the methods and stages of practice. Then they will have a foundation to work from, and they can benefit from practice.

After I had been in the United States for a while, I returned to Taiwan for a visit and went to see my two old masters. I had not received transmission before, because I had left my Master Dong Chu to go into retreat and then to Japan. At this point I received transmission in both extant lineages of Chan, the Linji and the Caodong.

I said to my master, "I am teaching Chan in America. Is that O.K.?" and he responded, "Ha, so you think you can teach Chan! Is that so?" I answered, "I'm just deceiving people. Don't worry." He said, "Oh, that's O.K., then." After that I started teaching Chan in Taiwan, too, deceiving people there, as well.

Do you have any questions? If you don't you had better leave and avoid further deception!

Question: Can one become enlightened through reciting the Buddha's name or through chanting or reciting Buddhist scriptures?

Sheng Yen: You can become enlightened through virtually any activity. You can become enlightened by installing your TV or by getting hit. It really depends upon your readiness to become enlightened. According to Chan

tradition, anything can provide the catalyst, depending upon your ability and maturity. Many Buddhist scriptures describe the merits of reciting the scriptures or reciting the Buddha's name. Many people have used these methods effectively. For example, Master Chi-i of the Tiantai sect practiced repentance based on the Lotus Sutra. He concentrated and recited the Lotus Sutra. When he got to the chapter on Medicine King Healing, he became enlightened. Through the practices of recitation and chanting one can also develop chanting samadhi, one of the four kinds of samadhi.

Question: Please explain the stages and methods of Chan practice.

Sheng Yen: Most people are plagued by deluded and scattered thoughts. The first methods we use in Chan practice are intended to make our thoughts less deluded and scattered, and to concentrate the mind. After practicing counting the breath for a while, for instance, you should be able to maintain a steady stream of concentration on a thought. When you are able to concentrate well and use your will to control your mind, you can focus your mind on a particular thought, and keep your attention on that thought. Once you can do that, you can progress quickly, and soon your mind will become calm and clear, rather than scattered and deluded.

The next stage is to develop the power of concentration until your mind becomes unified. When your mind is unified there is no separation between body and mind. They

are fused or absorbed in a single stream of concentration. You may feel that your body has lost its weight or heaviness, and disappeared. What you really experience is a fully unified and integrated body and mind, and a concentrated mind. This unified mind will deepen and become more refined until you feel that there is no distinction between inside and outside, or between body and environment. It feels as though the one and the two are absolutely unified in oneness.

Next you begin to see that there is not such a distinct break or division between the thought that you had before and the one that follows. There is a steady single point of concentration, or stream of concentration. A single thought, if you will. If that one thought disappears you experience what the Japanese call *kensho*, or seeing one's true nature. When the one thought, the unified mind, disappears, the self attachment which perpetuates the one thought, or is behind it the unified mind, disappears.

This last stage, the breaking up and disappearance of the single, concentrated stream of self into no-thought or no-self, is not only the aim of Chan, it is the method and practice of Chan as well.

Question: After your experience with Master Ling Yuan, and the world suddenly changed for you, did you still have vexations and afflictions? Did you finally solve your problems?

Sheng Yen: Traditionally, Buddhism says that there are

several ways to look at vexations. One is to see that there are vexations connected with views and vexations connected with cultivation. Therefore there are vexations which are removed by correct views and vexations which are removed by cultivation. The vexations associated with cultivation are more basic, root vexations or afflictions. Uprooting the vexations of cultivation doesn't occur until the first stage, or bhumi, of the bodhisattva path, a fairly deep level of development.

What happened to me removed the vexations caused by view. It radically changed my world and my perspective on things, but my root vexations remained and still needed to be uprooted through cultivation. After you see your true nature, when afflictions occur there can still cause vexations. But you are clearly aware of them and recognize them as vexations. Be clear about this. Do not imagine that a little bit of enlightenment will cause all your afflictions and vexations to vanish. That is not the case. If a Chan master claims that all of his problems and afflictions are gone, don't believe him. I am still an ordinary person and I still need to practice regularly. In fact, I have never seen evidence that any Chan patriarch or master ever claimed that he had no more problems or that he had become a buddha.

One begins to remove root vexations by the first stage of the bodhisattva path. At the point of buddhahood, they're completely gone. This is the highest level of accomplishment. A first experience of Chan enlightenment,

or seeing one's true nature, involves removing deluded views, and the vexations caused by view. All your vexations do not disappear, but because you have glimpsed your true nature your faith becomes extremely strong. It is based on firm foundation.

Very accomplished Chan masters, who have experienced very thorough and deep enlightenment, may no longer need to follow the strictly defined rules of discipline. For instance, they may no longer need to sit in meditation. But they continue an internalized process of observing their own minds and thoughts very carefully.

Enlightenment and Buddhahood

From Chan Newsletter No. 113, February, 1996

Chan Meditation Center Oct. 30, 1994

The Chinese term *kai wu*, translated as “enlightenment,” consists of two characters so the meaning may seem to have two parts, but they constitute one term. In English we either use the word “enlightenment,” or “awakening.” An unenlightened person is in a state of sleep, a dream state, continually dreaming through births and deaths; the enlightened on the other hand, have awakened from this dream. In this sense, buddhahood and awakening are one and the same. This morning in a short talk during the meditation session, I introduced the idea of “using but not attaching.” Some related ideas: utilize but do not possess; share but do not monopolize. Are they related to enlightenment?

Attachment is vexation; possessive mentality is vexation; attempting to monopolize is vexation. But with wisdom we may make use of anything and that need not be vexation. There are many things we do not share: a wife, a husband, savings, and so on. This is not to say that the enlightened share their wives or husbands, but they have no self-interest, and they make available whatever is necessary to help

others. This is the attitude of a bodhisattva.

Is the enlightenment we have just spoken of the same as “sudden enlightenment?” We often speak of sudden and gradual enlightenment. The end results are the same but the methods to achieve those results may be what we call sudden or they may be gradual. The Parinirvana Sutra states that anyone directly on the Mahayana path is considered to be on the path of sudden enlightenment, whereas anyone proceeding along the Hinayana path is considered to be on the gradual path, moving sequentially from one stage to another. Within the Hinayana are two paths: the first is that of the shravaka, literally, “sound-hearer,” meaning a disciple of the Buddha who achieved arhatship through hearing the Buddha’s words. The second is the pratyekabuddha, someone who reached enlightenment by observing and understanding the law of conditioned arising.

I addressed all of you as bodhisattvas. By that I meant that we are all followers of the sudden path. This does not mean that you are enlightened already. But do not underestimate yourselves, enlightenment may be at hand. The *Essentials of Entering into the Path of Sudden Enlightenment*, a book by a famous Chan master, says, “What is meant by sudden enlightenment? In an instant of time all illusory thinking is eliminated. Nothing is attained when one awakens; yet, in realizing sudden enlightenment, one can attain liberation within this lifetime.” Eliminate illusory thinking, and your vexations and attachments

disappear, leaving only liberation.

Enlightened awakening is an important concept. At this stage, there is nothing to be attained. So, if you understand nothing I say, that may be the best thing, because when you go home and are asked, "What did you learn from that Dharma talk?" you can say, "Nothing to be gained, nothing to be gotten." You should then be congratulated for your deep attainment.

This doesn't mean that the best thing you can do is to plug up your ears so that you don't hear anything I say, because that will prevent you from getting enlightened. That is definitely not the idea. We must know everything, yet not attach to what we know; we must possess everything, yet lay no claim to it. This is enlightenment, this is awakening. This does not mean that one is deaf or an idiot.

But to achieve sudden enlightenment, to abruptly eliminate illusory thinking is quite difficult. For this reason you need to practice; you need to strive for a moment in time when, suddenly, your wandering thoughts and illusory thinking disappear. At that point you might say, "Now I have no illusory thinking." But that thought might immediately bring back your illusory thinking. Or, you might utter those words while in a state of illusory thinking. But completely ridding yourself of illusory thinking, and thereby achieving sudden enlightenment, is not so easy. If you are aware of your illusory thoughts, this suggests you are not too far from this kind of enlightenment; you already

know something about enlightenment. But if you are in a state of illusory thinking and are yet unaware of it, that is problematic.

We mentioned two interpretations of sudden path: first is to directly enter the Mahayana path; and second, to completely drop illusory thinking and instantaneously become enlightened. A third understanding is from the Sutra of *Complete Enlightenment*, which says that those who have good karmic roots can follow the bodhisattva path and go directly to the Mahayana path of enlightenment, without going through the gradual process of the Hinayana path. The first two interpretations will do, but the third one, which incorporates them both, is better.

As I said earlier, sudden enlightenment does not necessarily mean getting enlightened right away. But anyone on the Mahayana path already has the karma of sudden enlightenment. Enlightenment in this teaching can be of different levels. It can be the great enlightenment of a buddha, but it can also be a somewhat shallow experience—like someone opening their eyes for a second before returning to sleep. Have you ever dozed off, only to be nudged on the shoulder by someone? You open your eyes, and glance at them once, before you fall back to sleep. This is analogous to a small enlightenment. With great enlightenment, once awakened, you never go back to sleep. There are no longer vexations or obstructions in the mind, no sense of gain or loss.

In Japan I met someone reputed to be an enlightened master. He is married and lives at home with his wife. I said to him, "As an enlightened person, you should have no attachments." He responded, "I have no attachment to my wife, but she has attachment to me." So, do you think that is an appropriate attitude? Is this like saying, "I don't care for money, but it just comes to me." Is this enlightenment? What is really the nature of the relationship with his wife? He may simply conduct himself in the role of marriage. This is the idea of using, or behaving in a particular way, but not attaching. If there were physical desire in their relationship, that would not be liberation.

Even Shakyamuni had to eat, but that does not mean he wasn't enlightened. Shakyamuni left his family life behind, but the lack of sex and companionship will not kill you. Eating is a basic need, the other is desire; we should not confuse the two.

Question: If the master goes home to his wife out of respectful obligation, but without desire, is this enlightenment?

Sheng Yen: If there is no desire, then it is not a contradiction. Even Shakyamuni himself, after his buddhahood, still took care of his wife and his son.

Question: How do you abstain from desire, yet still keep the desire for liberation?

Sheng Yen: We can divide desire into that which is pure and that which is not pure. Pure desire is really a kind of

aspiration. Aspiration may be the closest word, though sometimes we use the word “wish.” In Chinese, the word is actually the same as “vow.” Thus in the case of enlightenment, we are not talking about impure desire. We refer to a vow or aspiration to go beyond the world. I would like to explain what is meant by enlightenment. Enlightenment can be very broad or deep, or not very deep. It can be what is considered complete enlightenment. In other instances, hearing even a single phrase of Buddhadharma may cause a change in thinking, and may also be considered a kind of enlightenment. Thus enlightenment does not have to mean the complete elimination of vexations, for enlightenment can come in a complete or deep manifestation, but it may also come in a partial manifestation.

I will quote from a few sutras. The first quote is from the first chapter of the Saddharma Pundarika Sutra, also known as the Lotus Sutra, which states that the Buddha explains the right Dharma through a variety of causes and conditions (here, “causes and conditions” primarily refers to various kinds of actions that bodhisattvas cultivate in their causal ground, and the kind of attainment or accomplishment they reach), and also through countless fables and analogies that clearly illuminate the Buddhadharma in order to enlighten all sentient beings. Quoting the sutra, here enlightenment basically means “to ensure that people understand.” In this sense, today, I am giving a Dharma talk, and the

understanding we share is a kind of enlightenment. So we should all be overjoyed that, in this sense, we are enlightened.

But perhaps in this context we should not use the word "enlightened." It sounds more plausible to say, "Now I understand the Dharma," rather than saying, "I am enlightened" because there is a general idea that before one is enlightened one is an ordinary sentient being, and that after one is enlightened one is something very special, no longer ordinary. Throwing around the word "enlightenment" may scare off some people.

People often ask me if I am enlightened and I always answer, "What do you think?" Most of the people who study with me hope I am enlightened because if I am not they may feel, "What's the use of studying with him?" There also may be people who would prefer that I am not enlightened. They may think that an enlightened person is really different, may eat different kinds of food, may talk in a different manner, and may use obscure language. So some people may prefer that I am not enlightened so that I can still interact and speak in a manner that they can relate to.

When I was a young monk, I knew that some of the elderly monks had achieved excellent cultivation. And when I overheard their conversations, I did not understand at all what they said. I asked, "What were you just saying?" Typically their response would be, "What do you know, little kid?" At that time, I thought that enlightened people talked

in an incomprehensible way. So by this standard, if you understand what I'm saying, I'm probably not enlightened; and if my words leave you in the dark, that means I am enlightened. Do you agree with this idea?

Someone asked, "What is the mental state of a Chan master?" A master who is truly enlightened is always aware of where he is, during the day, during the night, even while sleeping. But a master who has not reached this level might lapse into dream-like or illusory states. Here is another quote, from the Avatamsaka Sutra: "To enlighten all sentient beings in darkness or in ignorance." How does one enlighten sentient beings? By expounding the Dharma. Whether or not the expounder is enlightened, whether or not the listener will become enlightened, simply expounding the Dharma is enlightening sentient beings.

The ancient master Ashvagoshā Bodhisattva expounded the Dharma through music. Using music he explained the Dharmas of emptiness, no-self, and suffering, also known as the Three Dharma Seals. Upon hearing this Dharma, as many as five hundred princes in the city simultaneously left home to cultivate the path. It does not mean that five hundred princes upon hearing this music became enlightened, but that they were able to cut off the attachments to the five senses.

So, to the extent that you have some understanding of Buddhadharma, though you may not leave home like the princes, this is a kind of enlightenment. Now, I want to

discuss this idea of enlightenment in greater detail. Here according to the Lotus Sutra, “enlightenment” should really consist of four words together. The first word can be translated as “open,” the second we translate as “show,” the third “awaken,” and the fourth, “realization.” This realization is meant not in the sense of intellectual understanding but deep, experiential realization.

Until now we have not said what one is enlightened or awakened to. In the Lotus Sutra, “open” refers to uncovering the wisdom of the Buddha or “what the Buddha sees” or “what the Buddha sees and knows.” “Showing” is the Buddha expounding to sentient beings what he sees and knows. “Awaken” also means “enlighten” but this is more of an intellectual understanding. “Realization” connotes “experiencing”; it is the true personal experience a sentient being has of what the Buddha sees and knows. In the Lotus Sutra, “what the Buddha sees and knows” can be further understood as the Buddha’s wisdom, or as all-encompassing wisdom.

All-encompassing wisdom is of three kinds: The first is the Wisdom of Liberation; this is the wisdom by which one sees that emptiness is the true characteristic of all phenomena; it is the wisdom obtained when one is enlightened. Second is the Wisdom of All Paths, which all buddhas and bodhisattvas have; it is the wisdom of helping sentient beings of different backgrounds and dispositions on the various paths to buddhahood. This wisdom manifests

only after the Wisdom of Liberation has manifested. Third is the All-encompassing Wisdom of Everything, which only a Buddha can fully manifest; bodhisattvas who have obtained liberation and who are sages, understand the All-encompassing Wisdom of Everything, but they cannot fully manifest it until they attain buddhahood.

Of the four terms discussed, opening, showing, enlightening, and realizing, the fourth term literally translates as "entering," but it means "entering into realization." I explained the term "awaken" as intellectual understanding, but that is only a partial meaning. Another meaning of "awaken" is a partial or sequential entering into realization. For simplicity, we can say that "awaken" can also be understood as a partial and sequential realization.

If this seems difficult, just remember these four terms: "open, show, awaken, and realizing." They are, of course, verbs, action words. But what object do they take? The object is what the Buddha sees and knows, that is to say, the All-Encompassing Wisdom of Everything. A further explanation of the Wisdom of the Buddha (the third wisdom), which for lack of a better term we translate as the All-Encompassing Wisdom of Everything, includes the Wisdom of Liberation, in which equality or non-differentiation is emphasized.

The second wisdom, the Wisdom of All Paths, emphasizes the difference among sentient beings. We recall that with the first wisdom, the emphasis is on equality based on the emptiness. In the Wisdom of All Paths, the emphasis

is on the differences between sentient beings. Sentient beings differ, therefore they need different paths and they go by different paths. And then, finally, the All-Encompassing Wisdom of Everything incorporates and transcends the first two kinds of wisdom.

No matter what stage of enlightenment we are in, we have not reached buddhahood yet. So what do we mean by becoming a buddha? There can be two interpretations: first is that buddhahood is attained by accumulated action. For example, in the Agamas, and also in some early Dharma discourses, it is said that a practitioner has to go through an enormously long period of time, basically three countless great kalpas, in order to attain buddhahood.

The second interpretation is that one can attain buddhahood instantaneously. This may be further divided into two classes. The first includes people who become full, complete buddhas. In Buddhist history only Shakyamuni has done this. In the other class are people who attain the partial merit and virtue of the Buddha. Just traveling the path to buddhahood, and attaining the merit and virtue of the Buddha is considered attaining buddhahood.

There is a Chinese saying, "When the butcher lays down his cleaver, he attains buddhahood right away." That indeed is true. When you put down the butcher's knife and your mentality is changed, at that moment, you have attained at least partial buddhahood. To the extent that you who hear this Dharma talk achieve a new understanding, this is a kind

of attainment of buddhahood.

When people cultivate any method, such as going to temple and making offerings, this is part of cultivation. When you listen to a Dharma talk, this is also cultivation. People make offerings [to the Three Jewels] is also cultivation. Even something that seems insignificant, like children making a sand Buddha, is considered attaining buddhahood because by acting this way, the children have turned their minds toward buddhahood. The mentality is there; there is a beginning.

What about people who have not made offerings? This is no reason for concern. The *Lotus Sutra* said: "If someone, though of scattered mind and no concentration, wanders into a stupa or a temple, and says just once, 'I take refuge in the Buddha,' such a one has already attained buddhahood." So it does not matter why you came to the Center. Is it with real dedication? Or perhaps you weren't very clear-headed and let friends or relatives talk you into coming, though you were not really willing and enthusiastic. Nonetheless you came, and before lunch perhaps you said a few words of taking refuge. Or you performed some other act or acts moving in this direction. In doing these things you have attained buddhahood. This is to say that anybody who has the opportunity to listen to the Dharma and who knows that he has the potential to attain buddhahood, or who has unshakable faith that he will attain buddhahood, such a person has attained buddhahood.

The Parinirvana Sutra states that all sentient beings have buddha-nature, regardless of what they have done. You may have criticized or slandered the sutras, you may have committed any number of serious offenses, but you, as all sentient beings, can attain buddhahood. Regardless of whether you have faith or not, regardless of whether you want to attain buddhahood or not, you will all attain buddhahood. These are not merely my words. This is a quote from the sutra.

Question: From the quote, all you have to do is recite the Buddha's name once, and then you will attain buddhahood. Is that right?

Sheng Yen: When I said just reciting the Buddha's name or paying respects at temple will cause you to attain buddhahood, it should be understood that "attaining buddhahood" only means planting the seed for buddhahood. Planting the seed is the cause; the full ripening into buddhahood is the consequence. But we must say that the cause and the consequence are simultaneous. A fully ripened apple is the consequence, but a tiny green apple is also a consequence.

Again, in the Parinirvana Sutra, it is said that there are three causes for buddhahood. The first is the primary cause; all sentient beings can attain buddhahood. The second is the final cause; Shakyamuni Buddha is an example of this by completing the full transformation to buddhahood. The third are the conditional causes, which applies to every point

in the path. Different points in the path, different situations, all lead sentient beings to move on and on, to complete buddhahood. This is also called "the conditions as cause." So altogether we have three kinds of causes for buddhahood.

To summarize, the Parinirvana Sutra has two phrases which say that "consequence pervades throughout all the causes," and "causes incorporate all consequences." In other words, from the perspective of the consequences everything is cause, and everything is consequence. From the perspective of the causes, everything is consequence, and everything is cause. This is not all that easy to understand.

Chinese Buddhism and the Chan Tradition

From Chan Newsletter No. 120, December, 1996

University of Bristol, England, June 10, 1995

Buddhism was transmitted to China mainly during the early and middle periods of Indian Buddhism (ca. 500 B.C.E.-500 C.E.). Developments in Indian Buddhism during the later period were transmitted principally to Tibet. As Buddhism developed in China, it was transformed by Chinese culture. In Indian Buddhism there was great emphasis on logic and philosophy but less interest in history. Chinese Buddhism also emphasized philosophy but was more concerned with the totality of things, less with systematic and logical development of ideas.

When Buddhism arrived in China, Confucianism and Taoism already existed, but the literature showed that there were not many structured philosophical discourses. Whereas Indian literature included many enormously long works in verse, the poems of ancient China rarely exceeded a few thousand words. The development of fiction and of the novel in China came much later during the Ming Period, and was very much influenced by the growth of Buddhism. In ancient China there was an emphasis on simplicity and a holistic, rather than a logical and analytical, approach to

philosophy in both literature and religion. Most of the great works of Indian Buddhism – the sutras and the shastras, the structured discourses – were translated into Chinese, but most Chinese do not care much for this kind of writing, and the Buddhist sects based on them were not popular. However, there were a small number of Chinese Buddhists who devoted themselves to the study of these Indian scriptures from the Tripitaka. They then restructured and reorganized them, and presented the scriptures in different ways. In so doing, they brought into being the ten different Buddhist sects in China, of which two were Hinayana and eight were Mahayana. Within Indian Mahayana Buddhism there were three major traditions: two of these, Madhyamaka and Yogacara, had a strong intellectual and philosophical flavor; the third, the Tathagatagarbha tradition, did not become a philosophical school. Four of the eight Chinese Mahayana sects had a strong Indian flavor. Only two of those, the San-lun-tsung, which was based on Madhyamaka, and Wei-shih-tsung, based on Yogachara, became popular, only for short periods of time. Similarly, the two Chinese Hinayana sects derived from the Abhidharma shastras received little attention.

In China the Tathagatagarbha tradition became concerned with faith and with the whole, the totality, rather than with the dialectic, logical, and structured approach to ideas. This appealed to the Chinese, and all four of the major Chinese sects are part of the Tathagatagarbha system.

Chinese Buddhism, then, is part of the Tathagatagarbha tradition. Of these sects, two emphasized theory and two were more concerned with practice. Although they developed in China and their ideas were therefore structured and presented in a Chinese manner, they were nonetheless based on the Indian tradition and do not contradict basic Indian Buddhism. The two sects most concerned with theory were the earlier Tiantai and the later Huayen. The two sects primarily concerned with practice were the Pure Land and Chan. These four sects make up most of Chinese Buddhism.

In India there were many sutras and discourses in the Tathagatagarbha tradition, but, when the teaching was transmitted to China, additional sutras and discourses appeared which have no apparent counterparts in India. The Shurangama Sutra, the Sutra of *Complete Enlightenment* and the discourse of the *Awakening of Mahayana Faith* are perhaps the most important of these. These are all very popular with the Chinese. However, modern scholars cannot locate Sanskrit originals, identify the authors, or even be sure when these works were written. They believe that the authors were early Chinese Buddhists, but they cannot identify Chinese masters whose views were advanced enough and sufficiently similar to those expounded in these three works to be the likely authors.

The Tathagatagarbha concept is a good example of the richness and complexity of the philosophies expounded in

the scholarly works of the Tiantai and Huayen sects. On one hand the Tathagatagarbha teaching proposes that there are levels of Buddhism: there is basic Buddhism for ordinary people and higher levels for people who have developed more wisdom and merit. On the other hand, not only does the highest level incorporate all other levels, but by the very totality of its embrace, the highest level elevates even the most basic Buddhism to the highest level. This is called the Complete Teaching.

The Nirvana Sutra says that every sentient being can become a buddha and this concept—that every sentient being has buddha-nature—is shared by all Chinese Buddhist sects. From the point of view of a buddha, every sentient being has always been a buddha; so, on the one hand we speak of different levels—sentient beings here, buddhas on a higher level—but from the point of view of the buddhas, all sentient beings are buddhas.

The term “tathagatagarbha” is usually translated as “buddha embryo” (tathagata+garbha). It is where the wisdom, merit, and virtue of the Buddha are stored in every sentient being, much as gold is present in gold ore, although surrounded by earth and impurities. The expert recognizes the gold at once, much as a buddha sees the buddha-nature within every sentient being directly, even though it may remain hidden from the mind of sentient beings. In Chan, when we speak of enlightenment we mean to be enlightened to tathagatagarbha—to discover the wisdom, merit and

virtue, which is in every sentient being. According to the Tathagatagarbha system, all of you, whether you believe it or not, possess buddha-nature. Do you believe that? It is because of the buddha-nature within each of you that you have been so patient and listened to my talk up to this point.

What was the source of Chan? The Chan School as we know it cannot be found at all in India, and even in China it was the last of the eight Chinese Mahayana Buddhist sects to appear. According to Chan lore, around 500 C.E., the monk Bodhidharma brought what became Chan from India. He is considered the first patriarch of Chinese Chan and the twenty-eighth patriarch of Indian Buddhism. In the annals of Chan, Mahakashyapa, who received Dharma transmission from the Buddha, is honored as the first Chan patriarch; the second was Ananda, and so on down to Bodhidharma. However, as I said earlier, the Indian people of ancient times were not particularly concerned with recording an accurate history, and there is no record from India of some of these patriarchs. The belief in the existence of Chan in India does not seem to be founded on historical fact, and the literal truth of the Chan transmission lineage is questionable.

This morning in Wales, at the conclusion of a Chan seven-day retreat, I mentioned that I had received Dharma transmission, and that this came originally from Shakyamuni Buddha. Besides that, I have now transmitted the Dharma to England. However, I also say that the

historical truth of the transmissions in India is questionable. Does this mean that my own transmission is questionable? What do you think? There may be inaccuracies in the history, but there need be no doubt about the reality of the transmission. I know very well that I had a shifu (teacher), and that my shifu likewise had a shifu. From Shakyamuni Buddha on, throughout the history of Buddhism in India, great emphasis was placed on the transmission between a master and a disciple. It is the same in Tibetan Buddhism and for all Buddhists. The names of the people in the line of transmission may not be correct, and the history of the lineage may also be confused by the appearance of monks with the same name at different times and in different places. I do not know the name of my Dharma grandfather's Dharma grandfather, but I would never doubt that my grandfather had a grandfather. From an academic point of view there may be errors in the record of the names, but from a practical point of view I have absolute faith in the reality of the transmission.

Chan is not precisely the Buddhism brought by Bodhidharma from India, but Bodhidharma brought certain insights to China, and the Chan tradition is related to these. Actually, in India the kind of Buddhism Bodhidharma practiced was called by the Sanskrit term, dhyana. Dhyana had a very specific meaning in the Indian language. Dhyana Buddhist practice was a gradual process, involving eight levels of dhyana, or samadhi, and a ninth level, liberation.

In China this system was reorganized or synthesized by the Tiantai School, which adopted the Indian dhyana practices and the multi-stage system. They adopted the Indian practices of samatha (stilling the mind), and vipashyana (contemplation) and the understanding that wisdom develops through different levels. However, the Tiantai sect added that when eventually the highest level of samatha-vipashyana was reached, it was complete and instantaneous. This idea was not found in India.

The other Chinese Tathagatagarbha School that was concerned with theory, the Huayen, dropped all of the lower levels and retained only the highest. The Huayen School eventually merged with, or rather faded into, the Chan School. The essential ideas of the Huayen School can be summarized in four famous lines:

Unobstructed with respect to principle.

Unobstructed with respect to phenomena.

Unobstructed interrelation of principle and phenomena.

Unobstructed interrelation of each and every phenomenon.

Although the fourth kind of non-obstruction represents the highest level, the first three kinds are more difficult to explain and understand, so I will leave that to the professors. The fourth non-obstruction is easy to understand. It is the perspective of the Complete Teaching where everything is

embraced and incorporated. From this highest point, all non-sentient phenomena in the universe possess dharma-nature, which pervades everywhere; and all sentient phenomena, or living beings, possess buddha-nature which also pervades everywhere. Dharma-nature can be understood as the Dharma Body (Dharmakaya) of the Buddha, which pervades everywhere because it is also the nature of emptiness. In sentient beings that are capable of attaining enlightenment, it is called buddha-nature, whereas for non-sentient phenomena, upon which sentient beings rely, it is called dharma-nature.

The highest teaching views everything in this world as complete, with nothing lacking. This is a basic view of Chan. The completely enlightened view the world like this and are free from all vexations. This is the furthest point of the development of Tathagatagarbha philosophy, and it was the Huayen School which developed it to this point. While the Chan sect adopted this idea, the Huayen School was theoretical and the Chan school practical. The Chinese preferred practice to the conceptualization, so the Chan School became more popular.

We cannot be so simplistic as to say that the Chan School came from the Huayen School. From the time of Bodhidharma through the next five generations of Chan patriarchs, the masters emphasized sitting meditation, as did Indian dhyana Buddhism. But by the time of the Sixth Patriarch Huineng and in the next generation, we read many

stories of practitioners who did not practice sitting meditation. Even in the case of Bodhidharma, who did practice sitting meditation, we do not read that his disciples did so.

There is a famous story about the enlightenment of Bodhidharma's disciple, Huike. He went to Bodhidharma and said, "Master, could you calm my mind for me?"

Bodhidharma said, "Hand over your mind and I will calm it for you!"

Huike searched within, and then told Bodhidharma that he could not find his mind.

Bodhidharma then said, "There, I have already calmed your mind for you." This is the account of Huike's enlightenment. Those of you who went to the retreat in Wales and suffered a lot of pain in your legs apparently need not have done so. Unfortunately, you did not meet Bodhidharma.

Another interesting concept which did not exist in India appeared in the Chan tradition very early, around the time of the Fifth Patriarch Hongren (601-674). It was that every existent object, animate or inanimate, can reach buddhahood. Shakyamuni Buddha himself said that all sentient beings, including animals, could reach buddhahood, but he did not say that plants, rocks and so on could also do so. Indian Buddhism did not say that these things could not become buddhas, but only spoke of sentient beings. This notion came from the Daoist tradition,

especially the writings of Zhuangzi, where it is said that the Dao can be found everywhere. Daoism has a very naturalistic flavor. By the time of the Sixth Patriarch (638-713), both the methods of practice and the concepts of Chan had become uniquely Chinese.

Does this mean that Chan is different from Buddhism? Chan is definitely Buddhism; there is no doubt about that. First, Chan emphasizes the cultivation of samadhi, and there was no time when the Buddha was not in samadhi. With the power of samadhi a person can be free from the distractions and temptations of all kinds of situations. Second, like all forms of Buddhism, Chan emphasizes the cultivation of wisdom. In any situation, the accomplished practitioner experiences phenomena as emptiness, and emptiness as phenomena. This is wisdom. Third, the ultimate goal of practice is the same for the Chan practitioner as it was for ancient Indian Buddhists. Thus, the emphasis on samadhi and wisdom in Chan, and the final goal of practice, all accord with Indian Buddhism.

In the history of Chan, few practitioners have attained enlightenment without prolonged practice of sitting meditation. Most of us are unable to practice so constantly, so other methods have been developed to subdue our vexations and pacify our mind. Here is one which relates to the way we live our daily lives: in all the situations, whether eating, sleeping, cooking, cutting wood, or going to the bathroom, our minds should remain calm, clear, and

concentrated. Can this be done? It is easier if you live in a monastery, but those who do not live in monasteries can dedicate short periods of time to full-time practice, such as a retreat. If we train ourselves sufficiently on retreat, it is possible to maintain concentration and clarity in daily life.

Question: Is sitting meditation an important part of the life of the monks and nuns in Taiwan?

Sheng Yen: I did not have time to talk about the second Chinese sect that emphasizes practice, the Pure Land. Their method of practice is reciting of the name of the Buddha. Sitting meditation is demanding, especially on the legs, so people need an alternative method of practice where the legs will not hurt so much. In Taiwan, my monastery is one of the very few where sitting meditation is the main method of practice, but by reciting the name of the Buddha we can also reach the goal of samadhi.

Question: What do you see when you look at the audience?

Sheng Yen: I see the audience paying a lot of attention. If I could see that all of you were buddhas, then that would mean that I had attained buddhahood. But I cannot lie.

Question: Do you then see suffering beings, beings in samsara?

Sheng Yen: Yes, it can be said to be like that. Otherwise, there would be no need for me to go to different places to spread the Dharma, to teach people to sit in meditation, and to alleviate suffering.

Question: How different is teaching Chan in the West from teaching Chan in the East? Are there cultural differences which entirely change your emphasis in teaching?

Sheng Yen: When I teach Chan I take different approaches, but that only depends on the personality and level of education of the students. It doesn't have much to do with their cultural background. When I first went to the United States to teach Chan I was already forty-five, so I think that in the future when Westerners teach Chan in the West they will do so somewhat differently.

Question: In what way might that be different?

Sheng Yen: I cannot really predict what it will be like. Buddhism went to China and changed somewhat in style. Similarly when it went to Japan, and the same will be true for the West. The structure and the style of the teaching will be different, but not the principles.

Question: Does Chan have any special attitudes to the dimension of time as we know it?

Sheng Yen: Could you be more specific?

Question: Attitudes to the nature of time often seem to reveal human nature and its mysteries. Does Chan have any special attitude to the way we experience time, for example, different from clock time, psychologically?

Sheng Yen: As the time you perceive or feel becomes less, does this mean that the spatial movement you feel becomes less or more? For the Chan practitioner, the fewer thoughts

you have the shorter is your perception of time. When you have no thoughts, time does not exist. When you use methods of practice that involve contemplation on the external environment, as your perception of time gets shorter and shorter, your perception of space gets larger and larger. When time does not exist, space expands to infinity. At infinity, space does not exist. The other direction is when your mind is turned inwardly in contemplation. Now, as time gets shorter and shorter, the sense of space gets smaller and smaller, but at this limit also, space does not exist. In other words, your perception of time and space depends on your method of practice, but at the limiting points neither space nor time exists. Any experience of time is illusory.

Question: You sound as though you take the extreme view of nihilism.

Sheng Yen: It may appear that way. Quite often people misunderstand the concept of emptiness in Buddhism as something that is nihilistic or that results in a passive attitude towards the world and life. But when you have very few thoughts you do not necessarily stop your activity. When you have very few distracting thoughts you see the environment more clearly, and when you have no thoughts at all you can reflect the environment perfectly, with a precisely appropriate understanding of it. Besides wisdom, compassion is emphasized in Buddhism. An enlightened person, perfectly reflecting the environment, experiences no problems or vexations himself or herself, but he or she

understands that many sentient beings experience vexation. The enlightened person with wisdom and compassion will engage in a limitless endeavor to help these sentient beings and to deliver them from suffering. So it is not a nihilistic world-view, but on the contrary a very active attitude towards the world.

Living and Dying with Dignity

From Chan Newsletter No. 122, May, 1997

How can we live and die with dignity? This question can be asked from the perspectives of philosophy, religion, science, psychology, and medicine. I am not an expert in those disciplines but I would like to make some observations on living and dying with dignity based on my understanding of Buddhist Dharma.

Transforming our perception of life and death

Ordinarily, people often cannot control their life situations or make things happen according to their wishes. Too often, people feel that they have no one to rely on, nowhere to find security; nowhere to turn in life. These are the feelings and situations in which most ordinary sentient beings find themselves. But it is possible to change this perception to one that contains a sense of beauty and love while affirming that life is meaningful. In this process, one can also grow and mature. This is the typical and appropriate attitude towards life from the Buddhist point of view.

Having said that, I should point out that many Buddhists feel that life is basically suffering — a burden to bear,

especially with regard to the body. What they fail to understand is that attaining enlightenment, that is to say, living a life based on wisdom, is possible only if one has a human form. Without a body to practice with it would be impossible to attain liberation and buddhahood. There is a Buddhist saying that a human form is very difficult to attain, but having it is a great opportunity to hear the Dharma. Therefore, attaining wisdom begins with having a human form. In this sense, Buddhists who hold a negative attitude towards life misconstrue the Dharma. With an appropriate understanding of the Dharma, one would treat life as something very, very valuable.

From another perspective, some Buddhists may think that the best way to attain buddhahood is to be reborn in the Pure Land, the Western Paradise of Amitabha Buddha. But while the Pure Land is a spiritual realm of bliss, one cannot attain buddhahood if one remains there. To attain buddhahood one must acquire a human form to be able to generate the vows to practice the bodhisattva path. So, the whole process, from becoming an ordinary sentient being to coursing the bodhisattva path and eventually attaining buddhahood, is accomplished in the human realm.

Life and death are not separate

If we can see that living and dying are intimately related processes, we can accept that the two are inseparable — if we are born, we will die: the one is intimately connected to

the other. In this sense being born may not be seen as such a joyful thing but it need not be such a hazard. Likewise, death need not be seen as either sad or joyful. It all depends on one's attitude. If you do not appreciate the beauty of life, then living can be viewed as pitiable. Some people find life joyful but if there is no dignity, what is there to be happy about? If you do not know of the true meaning of death, then it will be sad and depressing when it comes. But once you understand that life and death are innate parts of the process, you will be able to find dignity in life as well as in death.

How can we find dignity in our life? One way to answer this question is to look at life from three aspects: the meaning of life, the value of life, and the goal of life. If you can experience these, you will find dignity in your life. When I speak of the meaning of life I refer to the reason why we continue living. From the Buddhist point of view the significance of attaining life is that we have an opportunity to repay our karmic debts from our past lives. Karma says that the things we do are causes that will create consequences. With this life we can receive and accept appropriate karmic retribution from our actions in previous lives. In any present or future life, we must accept a certain amount of retribution from past karma. We can also use this life to fulfill the vows of practice that we have made in previous lifetimes. In a previous life if we made certain promises and vows, this also becomes part of our karma.

Then in this lifetime we have an obligation, as well as an opportunity, to fulfill those previous promises. So, from the Buddhist perspective the meaning of life is to receive karmic retribution as well as to fulfill our previous vows.

The value of your life is not assigned by someone who examines your life and makes a judgment; it rests solely on your intentions and actions in fulfilling your responsibilities, and to offer yourself to sentient beings. It is the effort, within your limits of time and energy, to be of use to others. Whether they know of or understand your dedication, the value of your life is simply in this effort to offer yourself. In society we play roles: to be a mother you accept the responsibilities of motherhood. Likewise for any other role you play. Responsibility means doing your best in that role without expecting a reward. We can also offer ourselves to the benefit of the natural environment. All these activities belong to the realm of benefiting oneself as well as others – in other words, practicing the bodhisattva path.

Having goals means establishing a long-term direction for your life, including sharing it with sentient beings. It means continuing to make and fulfill vows. If we set these goals not just for this life but for future lives as well, whether our life is short or long; we live with dignity. As it is with value, the dignity that is conferred on you by others is not necessarily reliable or genuine. The only reliable dignity is that which you give yourself by the way you conduct your life.

Life and death are two sides of the same coin

It is useful to understand life and death as two sides of the same coin, as aspects of an unlimited process in space and time. Seeing it this way, there is no reason to be so attached to life or so afraid of death. Life and death are, on one hand our right, and on the other hand, our responsibility. When alive, accept life and make good use of it; when dying, accept and welcome it. I have told people on their deathbed: "Do not just wait for death nor fear it. So as long as you have one more minute, one more second, use that time to practice." We should not be averse to life nor wish for death, but when it is time to go, clinging to life will not work. Of course, this is very difficult to do!

From a fairly early age children should learn that just as there is life there is death. To teach them to be aware of death is better than shielding them from that fact. Not to frighten them but to help them understand that to all living things, death will eventually come. Knowing that life and death are part of the same process provides for a healthier, more wholesome view of life. To be mentally prepared for the eventual coming of death is beneficial for the growth of wisdom. Before he became an enlightened buddha Siddhartha Gautama witnessed first-hand the processes of life: birth, old age, sickness, and death. That knowledge inspired him to devote his life to finding a way to help people relieve their suffering and attain liberation. So, the Buddhist path began with Shakyamuni Buddha facing the

realities of birth, old age, sickness, and death. His life shows that if we treasure life as an opportunity to grow in wisdom and offer oneself to others there is no need to fear death.

The origin and destination of life

Religions and philosophies have views about where life comes from and where we go after death. Some people even try to use supernatural powers to look into previous and future lifetimes. While wanting to look into the past and future are typical human strivings, the results are not so reliable. Confucius had a saying that life and death depend on fate but he was not so clear on just what fate was. Though not a Buddhist, Master Laozi said that as soon as one is born, the causes for one's death are already in motion. He also said, "Out of birth, into death." As a philosophy this is quite good. The idea that life was created by God and we die because God wants us to return to Him is also good in that one can feel that someone is taking care of the process. One difference is that most religions do not believe in past and future lives. As a Buddhist, however, I believe that the origin of my life extends back to my previous lives without limit, and my future lives will follow until I attain buddhahood. That is the Buddhist view to the origin and destination of life.

Buddhists believe that life comes from a past without beginning. So, if we just look at this lifetime, the moment of our birth is not the beginning of the process and the moment of our death is not the end of this process — our current life

is but one segment out of an unbounded life process. Let's use the analogy of a tourist. Today he is in New York; tomorrow he is not in New York because he has gone to Washington DC. The day after, he disappears from Washington because he has gone to Chicago. So, in any specific city (one lifetime in our analogy), that person appears for a period of time and then moves on. But if you look at his total itinerary, it is all one journey. So, what you may perceive as the end of this period of life actually signifies the eventual beginning of yet a different period of life – for me, for you, for everyone. So when you see life as part of an unlimited and continuous process, there is no need to feel too disappointed in this one life, however it turns out.

Conditioned arising

The phenomenon of life and death can be described in a more general way as the *arising and perishing of causes and conditions*. The Buddhist term for this process is “conditioned arising.” This refers to the fact that all phenomena consist of effects due to a myriad of changing causes and conditions acting together. The result of causes and conditions arising and perishing are all the phenomena we experience, including our own life. From the perspective of conditioned arising, we can speak of three kinds of birth and death.

The first kind of birth and death is the *arising and*

perishing of the moment. In other words, in every instant of time, there are changes in our mental processes and changes in our bodily processes. Normally we do not take notice of such minute changes in us, and therefore we do not think of them as “births” and “deaths.” In this kind of arising and perishing, it is only the physical body that appears to be constant from instant to instant. But the cells of the body are constantly undergoing these processes of arising and perishing – our cells continually generate and die. So, in the mind as well as in the body, in every instant, there are constant occasions of births (arising) and deaths (perishing).

The second kind of birth and death is more easily identifiable: *the birth and death of one lifespan.* In other words, the human lifespan arises at the moment of conception and perishes when we die. Needless to say, all living creatures experience the same arising and perishing of its lifespan, but right now we are talking in the human context.

The third kind birth and death consists of *our lives in the three times of our past, present, and future.* Our previous lives are countless in number; our future lives can also be countless in number until we attain buddhahood. When we look at our lifespan this way, it is not just the moment we are born until the moment we die, but extends over the three times. This gives us some hope and consolation in that, having attained life, we should continue to live because we have future lives to come. So, if one is unhappy and contemplates suicide thinking that the next life will be better,

is that a good thing? No, because when one commits suicide, they are being irresponsible to their previous lifetimes, not doing justice to the present life, and are creating karmic disturbances for their future life.

A single lifespan can be likened to the daily rise of the sun, and then its disappearance over the horizon in the evening. After the sun goes down you do not see it, but it is still there and will rise again in the morning. It does not come into being anew every morning. A lifespan is like that. When it ends, it eventually gives rise to another lifespan, like the sun rising again. But this observation only applies to the physical manifestation of a single lifespan, for there is this pure buddha nature in every one of us that is ever-present throughout the three times. Like the sun, the physical body may go through the process of appearing and disappearing, but that has nothing to do with our pure buddha nature, which is there even when we don't perceive it.

So, as sentient beings we experience arising and perishing within the three times of past, present, and future. Each lifespan can be thought of as a segment followed by another segment within the endless process of arising and perishing. If one remains at this level, in the long run one has not benefited from having all those precious lives. In order to elevate or sublimate the quality and the meaning of life in the three times, we have to go beyond segmented birth and death and achieve transformational birth and death, namely, sagehood. That means practicing Buddhadharma.

Transformational birth and death refers to the maturing of merit and virtue in a practitioner whose compassion and wisdom continue to grow life after life. Such a person can be called a sage, that is to say, a bodhisattva or an arhat. This process of transformation continues over the three times. At this level, a sage can still have a physical body or may have transcended the physical body and is basically using pure spiritual energy to cultivate the path. Buddhahood is the ultimate end of this process of transformation. It is the level at which one has transcended samsara – the cycle of birth and death – and has attained the great nirvana. Such a buddha can still appear in time and space to help sentient beings, as did Shakyamuni. While a buddha can manifest in human form and therefore experience arising and perishing, for this buddha there is no attachment to birth and death and none of the vexations associated with birth and death.

Until we become sages or buddhas how can we find dignity in living and dying? First, we should fully accept this rare and precious life that we now have. Then, when death is imminent we should accept it if not with joy at least with equanimity. As you should be grateful to the reality of life you should also be grateful to the reality of death. We do not control when we will be born and most times we do control when we will die. From the perspective of Buddhist awareness most people live without clarity, and when death is near, their mind becomes even more clouded. For such a person life is confusing and delusional. There is a Chinese

saying that we live and die as if in a dream. At a higher level are those who accept life, make the best of it and when death comes, greet it with courage and without clinging. At the highest level is the enlightened practitioner who “cannot find either life or death,” meaning that for such a person there is really no such thing as life and death.

Until we die, we cannot know which of these categories we belong to, but as long as we are alive we should try to elevate the quality of our life and to clarify our mind. We should also be grateful when death comes, as we are being released from the responsibilities attached to that life. Even better, after we die we can use the merit and virtue that we have accumulated to move forward to our next life which should be full of joy and illumination.

Meeting death with a clear mind

If you can maintain a clear mind as death approaches, you can then very courageously accept it with joy. Whatever you have done during your life, virtuous or not, good karma or bad, be grateful for having received the gift of life. At the moment of your death, there should be no resentment, no regret, no anger, and no pride. Gone is gone. Think forward to a beautiful future. For this reason, the mental state of a dying person is most important. Some people about to die think about the things they have done that they regret, and all the suffering they have caused. That kind of thinking is good for a living person but not so good for a dying one.

However, if you approach death while holding no resentment, no regret, no anger, no pride, and just strive forward to accept a bright and illuminating future, it is more likely to happen. Whether you are reborn in the heavenly realms or in the human realm, you can again continue to practice, and that is a bright and illuminating future.

When a dying person's condition is such that clarity of mind is not possible, or when they are unconscious or in a coma, friends and relatives should help the dying person with great devotion and concentration, chanting the Buddha's name, reciting mantras, or meditating, in a calming environment. Through such practices, we use the power of meditation and the power of faith to guide the dying person's mind away from fear and towards assurance, to move towards illumination. This would definitely be helpful. So, for those who on their deathbed cannot maintain clarity of mind, it is important that relatives and friends help such a person with their practice. And definitely it is useful. I myself have had a clear experience of this.

What determines one's future life?

There are three factors that will determine what kind of rebirth you may have. The first is *karma* — the good as well as the bad *karma* that you have accumulated in your current and past lives. The better your karma the better will be your chances of a good rebirth. The second are the *causes and conditions* surrounding your current and past lives that are

most ripe for maturing upon your next rebirth. You may have all kinds of karma but specific conditions can be closest to maturing at this point. If this is the case, they will be the conditions that will determine your next life. The third factor is your *mental state* when you die: What thoughts are in your mind as you approach death? Do you accept your death with joy and gratitude? What aspirations for a next life do you have? Thoughts like these will influence what kind of rebirth you will have. For example, if throughout your life you have made vows, as you approach death you may repeat these vows. However, if you have never had such aspirations, it would be hard to have them on your deathbed. So, practitioners should strive to have good aspirations on their mind as they approach death. If our future life was dependent on only karma and conditions, then we will be in a less reliable situation.

Editor's note

When Master Sheng Yen speaks of “vows” in this lecture, he is referring to vows in the context of Buddhist practice. The most basic vows that Buddhists take are vows to uphold the five basic precepts: not to kill, not to steal, not to engage in sexual misconduct, not to lie, and not to indulge in intoxicants. In addition, monks and nuns are required to take as many as 250-plus precepts before being fully ordained.

Also, in the Mahayana tradition, there are the Four Great Vows of the bodhisattva:

I vow to deliver all sentient beings
I vow to cut off all my vexations
I vow to master all Dharma studies
I vow to attain supreme buddhahood.

These bodhisattva vows are sequential in the sense that in order of fulfillment, for example, the vow to help others (“save sentient beings”) comes before the vow to “attain buddhahood.” On the other hand they are simultaneous in that as one progresses on the path, one fulfills all the vows at the same time. There are other vows one may take in the course of one’s life, but as Buddhist practitioners in the Mahayana tradition these Four Great Vows are the most important. The most important thing to understand is that these vows speak of ongoing aspiration, intent and motivation; they are not necessarily promises to accomplish them in one lifetime.

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 Huaou
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

Chan Center Affiliates

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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