

Chan|禪|Magazine

Spring 2012



February 3, 2012

Shifu,

This date marks the end of our three-year mourning period for you. The significance of this period, especially for filial children, has a long history in traditional China and the rest of East Asia. We honor it now because you are our spiritual father. Children in their first three years depend completely on their parents' care to live, but you have nourished us for more than three decades!

Your vision of a spiritual renaissance for Chinese Buddhism in the modern period is ours. We will live the rest of our lives fulfilling it, generation after generation. You have said that cultivating a peaceful mind and body is wisdom; cultivating a peaceful family and workplace is compassion. Through these methods we will honor the Three Jewels, sentient beings, and your teachings. We will purify our bodies, speech, and minds, and realize that when mind does not give rise to vexations, the myriad dharmas are without defect . . . perfect, pure, no arising, no mind. A pure land on earth is already here.

May all those who read these words contemplate and actualize the Buddhadharma in their lives.

Guo Gu

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From the Editor

Since David Berman announced his retirement in the previous issue, this is my first editorial as editor-in-chief. Although I was the magazine's original editor when Shifu asked us to begin it in 1977, I had left the magazine by 1980, and did not return to the Chan Meditation Center until the mid 1990s. But I always received the magazine and I've kept every issue. Over these 35 years it matured into a very different publication than what we had started. It was always put together with loving care. But it really came into its own over the past ten years under the careful guidance of David Berman.

I came on as David's Associate Editor starting with the Winter 2009 issue, prior to that I had little direct contact with him or knowledge of the administrative details of the magazine. Looking through my collection now I see that he is first listed as Managing Editor in the Spring 2001 issue, and then Editor in Chief starting with the Summer 2002 issue.

I do remember, a dozen or so years ago, hearing about some suggestion of discontinuing the magazine due to financial and manpower issues. I heard that Shifu's response to this was, "As long as I am alive there will always be a Chan Magazine!" This is when David stepped in as managing editor. Wanting to know more as I prepared to write this editorial I asked around of people who worked with him then. It seems the magazine had gotten off track a bit, and was late a few times. David got it synchronized again by putting out a double issue (Fall/Winter 2001) and ever

since the magazine has come out on time, four issues each year.

People told me how impressed they were by his unwavering dedication and conscientiousness, by what he was able to accomplish with few resources at his disposal. He purchased publishing software and although he was not very technically oriented at the start, taught himself how to do layout. Now I *am* a technically-oriented person with twenty years experience of graphics and electronic documentation. I thought laying out the issue you are reading now would be a piece of cake. But these past months of teaching myself the software have shown me otherwise; hours of painstaking care go into the aligning of each text box and photo. So I must say that my respect for David, already great, has increased *tenfold*. I feel quite repentant now about the times I submitted material to him after the deadline, or sent an article much longer than he was expecting.

My task of laying out this issue was actually much easier than it might have been, because I have the benefit of the template created and refined by David over years. Looking back over past issues one can see how the style evolved and then standardized into the clean design you see here, strong and simple and expressive of the mind of practice.

Everyone I spoke to said they always looked forward to reading David's thought-provoking and insightful editorials. I hope we will have more such articles from him, as he is stay-

ing on as a contributing editor. He remains available to me as a guide and mentor; I will always be grateful to him for empowering me with the confidence to be able to take on this responsibility. The most important direction I received from him is this (and he in turn received it from Shifu): in considering whether a piece belongs in the magazine, one should ask, “Is it of use?”

I would like thank our Coordinator, Virginia Tan, who is also retiring from the magazine. Virginia has worked tirelessly for more than ten years, supplying the calendar information for “The Future” section, as well as assigning reporters and photographers to cover events for “The Past” section. I am glad she will have some leisure time now, though she is still working with us, training up her young successor Chang Jie, who has already proven to be quite capable.

Our Shifu said, “As long as I am alive there will always be a Chan Magazine!” Shifu is gone from us three years now. But I vow, as long as I am alive and there are people who want to read it, there will always be a Chan Magazine.

Bufe Maggie Laffey
Editor, Chan Magazine

A Different Melody: David Berman’s Contribution to the Chan Magazine

By Guo Gu

It is hard to believe that we have been publishing the Chan Magazine for over thirty years. For the past ten years it has benefited from

the leadership of David Berman. Not only did the magazine’s format change for the better, it has become more structured, focused, and insightful. These improvements, no doubt, are the direct results of David’s practice, writing skills, and personality.

Practice comes in all forms. Writing is also a practice. The saying that Chan “eschews all words and language” is only a device for those who attach to them. Words and language may obstruct and delude—hence, practitioners are taught not to rely on them, and to learn to see through the veils they create in our lives. However, practice is also clarified through words and language, without which we would have no way of deepening our understanding. For the past thirty years the magazine has produced tens and thousands of words that have helped numerous people. Words and language are not the problem, obviously. It is how they are used, who’s using them, and whether or not listeners are truly listening, that problems arise. The Chan Magazine consists of many teachings through Shifu’s words. But it is through David’s editing of them that readers derive these benefits.

In the Chan text *Gateless Barrier*, Chan Master Zhaozhou (778-897) demonstrates himself to be an exceptional teacher. When he opens his mouth, we see his liver, heart, and guts: the Chan path is revealed to us in its totality. But whether we are enlightened or deluded by his words depends on how ready we are. When David writes his editor’s notes in each magazine, we see his discipline, focus, and insights. Writing is his practice. The question is, are we ready for him? For example, in the “From the Editor” section, he often begins with some mundane but interesting facts about modern living. Once the reader becomes captivated by

his narrative, s/he is presented with insights into the ways Buddhadharma can relate to our lives or how it can challenge who we are. He often poses unanswerable, and at times, uncomfortable, questions that make us stop and reflect. Such strategy and questioning emulate the typical method of Chan masters: first entice, and then go in for the kill!

So often we are settled in our comfort zone about what is acceptable, what is correct, and what makes us feel good about ourselves. Seldom do we realize that we can only grow as a practitioner by facing problems and challenges. David is very good at posing them. When I was at the Chan Center, as the instructor for the Dharma Teachers Training program, I used to assign monthly “homework” readings and practicing exercises to David and other students in the program. I could always count on him to raise challenging feedbacks. Other trainees also found them insightful, but once in a while they would be offended by his in-your-face questions. The Chinese analogy for someone like David is a person who “sings a different melody.” That is, when everyone is singing in the key of A, he is singing in a different key. This “melody” is also reflected in the Chan Magazine’s “From the Editor” section, where he persistently challenges common assumptions about Buddhadharma and how it relates to other areas of life. In the past I have heard complaints about his comments on those “other areas of life” that appear to be unrelated to Chan, but how can Chan be separated from life?!

There is a saying in Chan: “Small doubt, small enlightenment; big doubt, big enlightenment; no doubt, no enlightenment.” The point is, if we don’t question ourselves and reflect on the teaching deeply, how is it possible to truly

make it relevant? Such questioning must be grounded in deep conviction in the benefits of Chan. In the twenty some odd years that I have known David, he has always strived to make Chan part of his life. Where most people merely accept Buddhadharma and use it to gloss over the surface of their lives, he tries to integrate it and make it his own. This process is more difficult because vexations stir up, but it is supposed to be that way. Yet, the line separating vexations and insights is as thin as a hair. All the areas of life that cause vexations (human relations, family, social issues, politics, etc.) point to the path. When we examine life, we examine ourselves. For the past ten years, David’s “From the Editor” column has been a platform that allows some feedback, questions, and challenges to Shifu’s teachings in real life. Prior to having David on board in the magazine, we never had a column like that. In this sense, the teaching has only been unidirectional. I hope the “From the Editor” column will continue.

Even though David has resigned as the editor of the Chan Magazine, and has passed the mantle on to Buffe Laffey, I hope he will continue to contribute to it. Personally, I am grateful to David’s “melody” because his was the one that taught me the most among his peers in the Dharma Teachers Training program. There is a saying among guitar players: Yes, one should learn the pentatonic scales, because when one makes music with these notes, every note sounds “correct,” and thereby the tune can be quite pleasing to the ears. But it can also be boring. In creating exceptional music, one should not be boxed in by the scales because it is not the scales that matter so much as the surprising notes outside of it and the personal feel for the melody that make a piece interesting.

World Crises and Fundamentalism

by

Chan Master Sheng Yen

This talk was given at the Chan Meditation Center in Elmhurst, New York on April 25, 2003. It was translated by Rebecca Li, transcribed by Bruce Rickenbacher and edited for the magazine by Buffe Laffey.

Collective Crises

Today, I would like to talk about two topics. The first is how to look at world crises through the perspective of Chan practice. The

second is how to use the Buddhist perspective to understand fundamentalist teachings in religions. In our world every once in a while there is a serious disaster, or a disease that affects many people. In fact, even though a



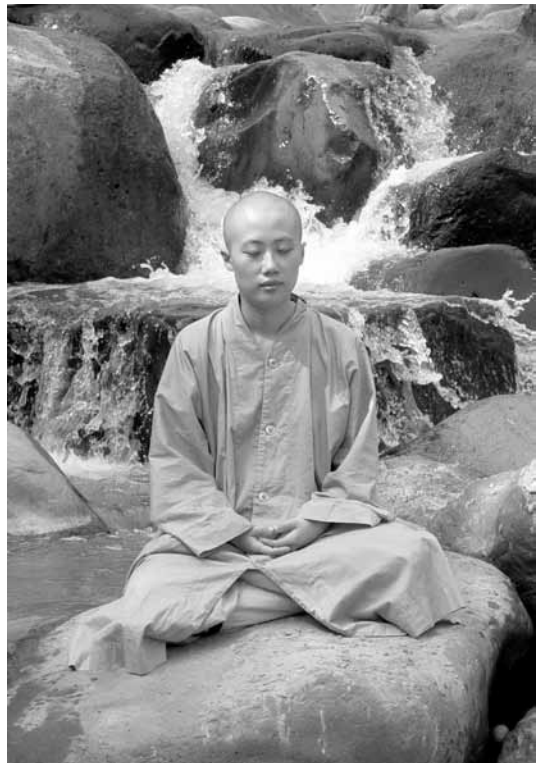
disaster or a disease is in only a certain part of the world, it actually affects the entire planet. During the twentieth century alone there were two world wars and two serious diseases – cancer and AIDS. Now we are in the twenty-first century and this new disease SARS has everyone worried. At the same time, there was a terrorist attack that has affected all humanity. Some American people believe that the way to deal with this is to address the several countries that support terrorism, that as long as we can change those regimes, the problem will be solved. However this will not really solve the problem. In fact, it will only create more problems of the same type. Shakyamuni Buddha said that this world of ours is indeed very fragile. There is actually never a safe environment, nor is there a safe period of time. How do we face these problems? First, we should not be generating these problems ourselves. Second, when we encounter these situations, we should handle them with wisdom.

Mind Affects Environment

Recently, a book was published in Japan, a scientific study of the shape of water molecules. The researcher found that when a person with a very irritated mind (for instance, someone throwing a temper tantrum) stands by a body of water, the water molecules actually change. The shape of the molecules becomes chaotic and fragmented when in the presence of a person in an agitated state of mind. Conversely, when a person meditates next to a body of water, sits very well with a calm mind and no scattered thoughts whatsoever, after a while the shape of the water molecules becomes settled, like crystal, very clear and stable. This study concludes that the state of a person's mind can affect the wa-

ter in their environment. One's state of mind can also affect the air around oneself, as well as other living things, including plants and animals. So you can see that if a large group of people were to engage in sitting meditation together, their collective state of mind would affect the environment around them. Plants, animals, even minerals around this group of meditating people would all become peaceful and pure. This meditative state of mind of human beings could cause the environment to become ever more pure, so that it would not give rise to any toxicity. Even if toxic elements already existed, that toxicity would slowly fade.

What I've just said is the conclusion drawn from the content of this book. However, from



my own perspective, it does not mean that all we need do is have a large group of people engage in Chan sitting meditation and there will no longer be any natural disasters such as plagues and floods, hurricanes and wildfires, or infectious diseases such as SARS. That's not the case. Even though we all engage in Chan practice, disasters still occur, and illnesses arise. However, the destruction resulting from such disasters is lessened.

Calmness and Common Sense

Furthermore, if you are accomplished in your Chan practice, when such disasters occur you will not panic. Because you are not frightened you will be able to handle the situation with wisdom. In fact, in this way you will have constructed a safer environment for yourself. Maybe I can give you an example. Perhaps it's not an entirely appropriate example, but here it is. In Taiwan the first place where SARS was discovered was the hospital in Taiwan University. People became very scared and worried. No one would go to that hospital to see doctors anymore, or to visit the patients who were already there when SARS was discovered.

At that time there was a patient staying in that hospital whom I felt I should visit, so I decided to go and see them. When my disciples heard about this, a large number of them said things like: "Shifu, don't go! It's very dangerous there!" And I said, "Well, if it is my time to die, then I'll die anyway." And then they said, "No, Shifu. You're going to give your life this way." And I said, "Well, there are so many people in this university hospital that if someone has to die, probably a lot of them will be before me. If I go, and if I die, then I deserve it; it's probably my time."

When I entered that hospital, I put on my mask. So, a disciple of mine asked, "Shifu, aren't you immune? [*laughter*] I thought you were not afraid? Why are you putting on your mask now?" I responded to my disciple, "Of course it is still necessary to be careful. I'm not so dumb as to go into this hospital and say, hey SARS, come get me!" [*laughter*] That would be ignorant. One should be still be careful and take the safety measures that should be taken.

Maintain a Daily Practice

What is most important is for us to have a calm mind, not to panic when we encounter these disasters. When we encounter these situations with a calm mind, what we need to do first is to be careful, and second to handle what needs to be handled. Is there any place, anything that we do, that is absolutely secure and safe? No. There is no such thing, there is no such place, and all we can do is to keep this calm mind.

Is this useful to you? What is it useful for?

I am here to remind you not to have this attitude: "I'll wait until the disaster happens, then I'll do sitting meditation." I tell you, there will be no way you can settle your mind. It's important that you practice now, in your daily life. Practice settling and calming your mind. That way when a crisis situation happens, you'll be in a safer place with this practice already under your belt. Don't wait until SARS gets to you, thinking "Oh, I know the method already, so I'll wait until I get sick and then I'll do sitting meditation." It won't be useful then. However, if you do come down with a serious illness, if you can maintain a calm and peaceful mind, you will get well sooner.

Intolerance and Ignorance

I'd like to move on to the second topic, which is religious fundamentalism and terrorism. This is a big problem. There is no religion out there that teaches people to kill other people or to destroy the world. All religions teach people to help each other and to save the world. Fundamentalism occurs when followers of a religion have extremely strong faith in that religion's beliefs and are at the same time unwilling to learn about or tolerate the beliefs of other religions.

Some people hold a very strong belief that their religion is the best, that the god they worship is the most loving and peaceful god. Of course that would be no problem if everybody believed in the same religion. However,

our world is made up of many diverse ethnic groups, with different religions and cultures. These groups have very dissimilar understandings of what peace, love and justice mean, and different methods to achieve these things.

So what happens when different religions look at each other? They all think of the others as the demon. And since this world is only made up of God's side and the demon's side, then if you are not on God's side you must be on the demon's side. All try to use God's side to fight the demon's side. As a result, different religions tend to engage in conflicts which often result in wars. The main cause for religious fundamentalism is that some people are unwilling to learn about or understand other religions or cultures. They insist on preserving only their own religious beliefs.



Any Religion Can Suffer From Fundamentalism

Very often when we think about religious fundamentalism, we only think of Islamic fundamentalism. The reason is that the Islamic religion is closely connected to politics, and that's why holy wars result. However, Islam is not the only religion that has religious fundamentalism. Now, I would like to ask you, is there fundamentalism in Buddhism?

Shifu [in English]: Yes, or no? Bruce?

Student: I think that in Ceylon there's some of that – in Sri Lanka.

Shifu: It's not necessarily just in Sri Lanka. Whenever it is a very closed environment, the belief within that environment tends to be a fundamentalist belief.

Buddhist Fundamentalism

While some fundamentalists may engage in killing other people and making war, this is probably rare within Buddhist fundamentalism. However, even though killing is not involved, if it is a fundamentalist belief, it is still fundamentalism. You might have heard of the Nichiren Shu, a Buddhist sect that arose in Japan in the 13th and 14th centuries. This sect was very rigid. They very harshly criticized practitioners who engaged in the recitation of Buddha's name and those who practiced Chan. They said that those who recite the Buddha's name will go to hell and that those who practice Chan are the kings of demons.

When I was a teenager in China I knew of these two old masters, both were very well

known at that time. One of them studied the Huayen School. The other studied the Pure Land School. These two schools thought very differently from each other, but both of them engaged in the practice of reciting Amitabha Buddha's name. However, because the thinking of the two schools was so very different, these masters were constantly accusing each other of being the old king of demons. When you talked to one of those old masters, he said, "Oh, that old king of demons over there!" And when you talked to the other old master, he'd say the same thing: "Oh, that old king of demons over there!" They were constantly accusing each other of being the king of demons, even though they were both so old at the same time.

Some people would go to either of these old masters and say to them, "If that other old master is such a demon, shouldn't we destroy him?" And both of these old masters would reply the same way: "Well, when it's time for him to go to Hell, he will surely suffer then. There's no need for me to do anything to send him there. When he goes to Hell, the speed of him going will be faster than an arrow leaving the bow. And when he's in Hell, he'll be killed again and again every day and die many, many times a day. He will suffer, so there's no need for me to do anything." So, that's a Buddhist fundamentalist for you. *[laughter]*

All Religions Have Something to Offer

However, Shakyamuni Buddha's attitude was very different. In his time there were a lot of religious schools, and he knew the teachings of all these schools very well. He clearly knew

both the strengths and weaknesses. He would affirm that the strengths of these religious schools were, indeed, strengths and often applied these in his teaching.

So, when a follower of Jainism came to Shakyamuni Buddha and became his disciple, he asked the Buddha, "My Jain teacher was very good to me. So, from now on, can I continue to regard him as my teacher and give donations to him?" Shakyamuni Buddha replied, "Of course, because he was your original teacher." In fact it would be very strange to say that after one begins practicing the Buddhisthadharma one's former teachers are no longer one's teachers. An analogy is that when you go to elementary school, you have elementary school teachers, and when you go to college, you have your professors. So you can say that Shakyamuni Buddha is your university professor, while your teachers in your elementary school and secondary school are still your teachers.

Shakyamuni Buddha was able to be tolerant and inclusive of different religious schools because he understood their teachings. As for myself, when I was in my twenties, up to thirty years old, I was very interested in other religions. I found them very important, so I read a lot of books of other religions and tried to discover their strengths. I believe, in my teachings, I have been applying the strengths from various religions I have studied. For example, the exercises we do in retreats actually have elements I have taken from Daoism,

from Yoga, and also from the Chan School; I combined them together. It is very useful to look at the strengths and apply them where they are appropriate.

War Enables Terrorism

From the perspective of Buddhism, when people of diverse ethnicity encounter different environments, inevitably unique cultures will result. A religion is born for a particular culture in a particular historical period, and for the people in that environment at that time, that is the most useful religion for them.

"THERE IS NO RELIGION OUT THERE THAT TEACHES PEOPLE TO KILL OTHER PEOPLE OR TO DESTROY THE WORLD. ALL RELIGIONS TEACH PEOPLE TO HELP EACH OTHER AND TO SAVE THE WORLD."

If we try to use war to destroy terrorism, it will only create more terrorists. The best way to handle this problem is to find ways to allow both teachers and followers of fundamentalist religious schools to come into contact with the teachings of other religions. In this way they may discover that the virtuous teachings in the Koran also exist in Buddhist sutras and in the Bible, as well as the writings of other religions. This way, when one has the opportunity to be exposed to diverse religious teachings, one will develop tolerance toward other religions.

The same thing applies to Buddhists. It is important for Buddhists to gain an understanding of all the different Buddhist schools as well as the teachings of other religions. One needs to have at least a basic understanding of the teachings of Buddhist schools and of other religions. Otherwise, we too become fundamentalists.

Hidden Assumptions, Fixed Views

by

Simon Child

Dr. Simon Child is the third Dharma Heir of the late Chan Master Sheng Yen. He received Dharma transmission in 2000. His Dharma name is Chuan-fa Jing-hong, which means “transmitting Dharma, pure greatness”. Simon trained for over thirty years with both Chan Master Sheng Yen and Dr. John Crook, and was the Secretary of the Western Chan Fellowship from its founding until his appointment as its Teacher in 2011. The following Dharma Talk is from a Silent Illumination Retreat, November 2010 at DDRC. It was transcribed by Catherine Burns and edited by Eddy Street.

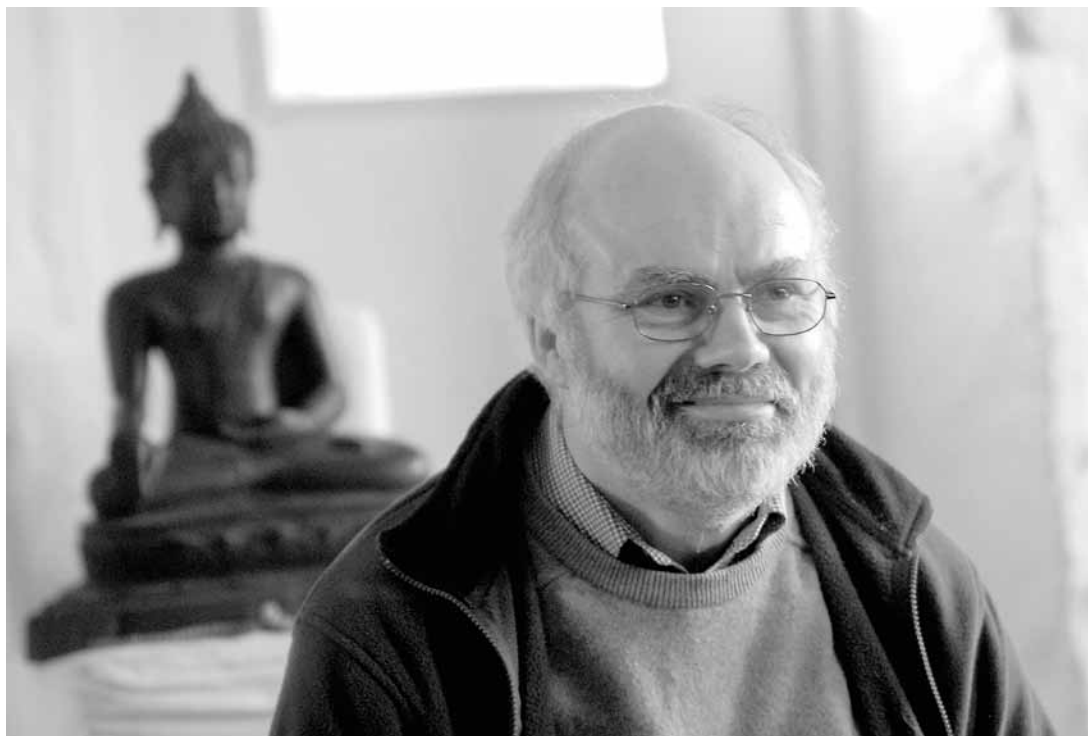


Photo: Rob Stratton

Perception and Sensation

At each morning service and evening service we chant The Heart Sutra together. In one part it says:

*Form is precisely emptiness
and emptiness precisely form.
So also are sensation, perception,
volition, and consciousness.*

Most of you will know that these are the five skandhas: form, sensation, perception, volition, and consciousness – the five skandhas being a model of the human mind. “Form” referring to the shape, the body, the substance. “Sensation” referring to the ability to sense the world through touch, sight, smell and so on. “Perception” is what we make of what we receive through those senses – do we see a tree? Do we see a drum? Or when we hear a sound, maybe there is an interpretation of what the sound is. We hear a click; we have some sense of whether it is a twig snapping or maybe a car door shutting. Perception therefore is not the same as direct sensing. Direct sensing is just the sound – then we have some interpretation of it and that is perception.

Volition

Today I want to focus on “volition” which refers to our response, or our reaction, which is different from interpretation. Interpretation requires us to be involved and to have some prior knowledge. For example if we had never seen a tree we would not be able to call it a “tree” when we saw it. From our experience there is a straightforward correlation for most objects – we know it is a tree or we know it is a drum, or whatever. Volition, referring to

our response or reaction, is more complex and worth investigating.

The word “volition” tends to imply free will though it is not a word that we use much in everyday language. Generally we might say, “Someone did something of their own volition.” – they chose; they decided to do it. But this sense does not quite carry the full flavor of the word. The Sanskrit word is *samskara*, and it implies something more and different from free will. Sometimes it is translated as “impulse” or impulsiveness. This implies spontaneity and also a habitual reaction and this is where it becomes interesting. Here there is something about a habit-response, not a predetermined response, but a tendency to respond in a certain way. “Volition” refers to our habit tendency – some could call it our karmic tendency. For whatever reason, given a particular sensation and a particular perception we will tend to respond in a certain way. It is not the only response that could have been made; other people may well respond differently. It is not quite free will as you may feel impelled to respond a certain way. Indeed, you may just do it without any sense of thinking about it, judgment, or working out what is best. We all have habitual reactions for certain situations and circumstances and this word *samskara*, translated here as “volition”, is pointing that way.

Karmic Tendencies

So what decides which habits we pick up? What decides what our reactions are going to be? I used the phrase “karmic tendencies” which is the Buddhist terminology for it and in psychological terms we would say “conditioning”. Certain things have happened in the past, and we have acquired a way of respond-

ing which seems to work for us, so we carry it on. Our response becomes conditioned by past experiences and it then becomes a habit, somewhat unquestioned and switched on automatically when the appropriate triggers are present.

These can be the way we protect ourselves, such as shying away from certain situations where someone else might step forward and deal with it. Or indeed we might be the one who steps forward and responds, being very vigilant when others shy away. For some reason we are choosing that course of action but it does not necessarily seem to be a free choice. Most of us will recognize that we find ourselves doing things and we are not quite sure how we ended up doing them: *How did I get myself into this situation, again, and again?*

Hidden Assumptions

The question is – how did you? Somehow, certain conditions arose and you responded in a way which got you into that situation again, even though last time you were not very comfortable with it. But here you are finding yourself doing it again! These might be coping strategies we have learned through our experience of the rough and tumble of life. They may be actions that we do. They may be attitudes we have. They may be internal reactions, feelings, responses or thought patterns and they can reveal themselves in different ways.

In a sense, we have a particular way of interpreting life and we carry with us some translation tools. We translate certain situations subconsciously, into an evaluation of “step forwards” or “step back”, “say something”

or “do not say something”, “go in this direction” or “go in that direction”. It is not that it is pre-determined but it is that we have a tendency to go in the same direction each time this particular situation arises. We carry a particular interpretation of the world and, perhaps without realizing it, we carry “hidden assumptions” about situations. Certain situations may carry risk for us and certain situations may carry opportunity. We have an assumption built-in, hidden and unseen, which moves us towards the situations which unconsciously we feel may be of benefit to us, and similarly these assumptions may move us away from the other situations.

Fixed Views

It is the hidden nature of these assumptions, the fact that they are habits rather than open free choices, which causes us some confusion. Sometimes we do not quite understand our own actions or attitudes. Even when we notice what we are doing we do not necessarily understand what is going on. These are fixed views.

We find ourselves holding certain fixed views, – *these are my values, these are what is important to me* – and in treating them as important we do not quite know *why* they are important to us. So just saying *these are my values* can be something of a rationalization: *I find myself carrying these; these must be my values*. Well how did you come to choose your values? How did you come to choose your preferences? Particularly and curiously, you find yourself saying: *How did I get myself into this situation, again?* Somehow we do not seem to learn from them. We find ourselves performing behaviors which do not work for us, and yet we repeat them again

and again. There is something strongly driving us towards making repeated choices in the same direction – even when the evidence of our own recent experience does not seem to support it. This is what gives a clue to the strength of these hidden assumptions and fixed views.

Fossilized Responses

We all have responses which we picked up in the past, perhaps in childhood, perhaps later on, but then they became fossilized and we have buried them deep. But still they drive us from below even though they may be quite stale. The logic which embedded them is often no longer valid. That logic comes from another time, another place, when that reaction, response, or attitude was helpful. It may not have been the best possible one at the time but it is one that worked. It

got us through a difficult situation. As living beings with a capacity to learn from experience, we learned, *this works* and we decided *I'll keep on doing this*. By this process, it became embedded into our way of being in the world. This is curious as it seems that we are not learning from our current on-going experience, we go by what we learned in the past. As the saying goes, you can't teach an old dog new tricks. The young dog learns the tricks, but we older dogs do not learn so easily, we keep on making the same choices even if they are unhelpful or harmful.

Now I can give you lots of examples of this. Here is one I have heard often: Imagine you are a small child with a heavy drinking alcoholic father who comes in drunk, especially on Friday and Saturday nights. You find yourself liable to get a beating, so of course you learn to hide, especially on Friday and Saturday nights. Maybe some other nights of the week are not safe too, so you generally learn to be a person who hides. You conclude that it is not safe to be in the presence of authority figures. You generalize and you extend this. You become an adult who is a bit reclusive, shy, especially feeling very uncomfortable in

the face of authority figures – which might be your schoolteacher, your boss or it might be anyone. In this manner you have picked up a certain way of being in the world, which related to a way of coping in childhood.

But now as an adult you are no longer living in a household with an alcoholic father, so what are you hiding from? It is a behavior which has become embedded, stuck and fossilized. You do not understand it; you just know that you feel awkward in certain situations and with certain people. You do not know why you do, but you rationalize it and say: *Well I'm a shy person. I'm a private person* (or something like that).

But these stories are not always as straightforward as this; there can be twists and complications to them. For example, that small

boy hiding on Friday and Saturday nights may then have heard his mother being beaten. The mother was the one who cared for him, the person he looked to. So then comes a torn feeling: Do I hide and protect myself or do I intervene *and try and protect my mother and thereby get beaten anyway?* A twist in the tale, which adds another process to the coping mechanism with another attitude to life established. Of course different people may react differently to this, and different responses will evolve, in this fairly gross example which unfortunately is not an uncommon one.

Buried Tendencies

There are much simpler examples; maybe an over-stern school teacher; a child who bullied you at school; or maybe being shamed at some point for something. All these things sting us, they stain us and we learn from them; but we learn in a rather inflexible way. We find a way of coping and managing them thinking *I have got it!* and we carry on doing it.

You may recognize some of these in yourself and you may have some idea of what patterns you have picked up. Some of them you may have been able to let go of, because you have re-evaluated them in the light of your present situation: *Actually I'm no longer living with my parents, I do not need to be afraid of Friday and Saturday nights*; and you are able to break free.

But if you do not know why you are afraid of authority figures, if you do not know where the fear came from because it feels deeply buried, it is very hard to break free of that tendency. Some of these tendencies remain hidden for decades, for lifetimes. We carry on

exhibiting certain attitudes, habits, behaviors, and we really do not know why, even when we know they do not quite suit us.

So why am I mentioning this now? Well often the obstructions you meet in practice are related to something buried in you. You are carrying a fixed view that is not compatible with open awareness. We all have limits and as you cultivate your practice you reach your limits, and if it is a limit of which you are not aware then that can become confusing. You are not quite sure what is going on but you have a sense of being stuck, unable to progress, and this might show itself in symptoms such as recurring, wandering thoughts. You have done your sheep pen exercise and the sheep pen is overflowing and still the sheep keep coming. What is going on here?

(Editor's Note: The Western Chan Fellowship's retreat center in Wales is on a sheep farm. When Master Sheng Yen led a retreat there he noticed the farmers sorting the sheep into different pens. So he talked about a method of calming a scattered and confused mind; he called it "using sheep pens". You take each thought as it comes and notice what category of subject the thought it is about, and you put the thought into the pen for that subject. What you usually find is a thousand thoughts only need about three or four sheep pens.)

Have the Courage to Look Directly

This is a recurring story in the mind – recurring again and again. Maybe there is a habit force driving it. Maybe there is actually a message for you in this story. Maybe this is not a random wandering thought; maybe this is one of your obstructions speaking to you, saying “Hear me”. But you think: *I am*

hearing it. I'm fed up with hearing it. Well maybe you are not hearing fully. Maybe you have got so fed up with it you are only really giving it half a glance and thinking: *Oh it is that again. Oh, okay, put it in the sheep pen.* Well, actually, this needs to be looked at more closely. So, again we bring up this word "investigate". What does investigate mean in this context? It actually means: Look directly at what is going on here. It is not a matter of trying to suppress it, of trying to say: *This is not proper practice, this is a disturbance to practice.* It is a matter of saying: *Here is a part of the mind which is not yet fully illuminated.* Here is a part of the mind with which you are not yet in full contact. So turn your gaze onto this story.

What is the story? Well it is just a collection of words. What is the message? Now, the message might be buried in the words. The words may be modified, sanitized. You are only really letting yourself touch the tip of the iceberg of this story – because there is pain underneath it. There is a power to this story which has not yet been expressed. The mind is offering you a little taster, and it is seeing if you have the courage to look it directly in the face and see what is below the water-line of this iceberg.

So one way is simply digesting this story: *What is the context? I wonder why it keeps coming back?* Sometimes the answer is to be found, not in the words, but somewhere else in the body. Move yourself out of the head – what is the bodily experience of this story?

Is there a feeling, a churning in the pit of the stomach? Is there a fear associated with this story, an anger, a grief, a loss? Very likely, with these stories, you are just touching their tips. To experience it fully you need to allow yourself to experience the whole of it; which includes the whole of you – the whole of your response to it including the emotional context.

Silently Investigate the Story

So if you find yourself with a recurring story of this sort, investigate it. Which means, "silently investigate". Place your attention on the story. It does not need any verbal analysis.

It does not need any working out. It needs you to be fully present with it, whole body presence; an open mind seeing more than just the surface words. Then the context for this story, the fullness of the story, may rise in the mind and be felt in the body.

“YOU DO NOT KNOW WHAT IT IS. HOW WILL YOU FIND OUT? ARE WORDS ANY USE TO YOU? NO. YOU LOOK. NOT KNOWING BUT BEING WILLING TO KNOW. ACKNOWLEDGING NOT-KNOWING; KEEPING LOOKING.”

Now this can be a turning point, because you can suddenly see through what has been happening – that you are being driven by something old and stale whose time has passed. It is ready to be released, and there is no particular problem about releasing it now. It seemed like it was something you could not deal with. It was a behavior which kept you safe in childhood and it seemed very dangerous to risk letting it go. But when it is fully seen, uncovered, experienced, the staleness of it becomes immediately apparent: *It is totally irrelevant to my life now. This is something*

that was relevant to a past time, but not now. Then it can quite easily happen that you find yourself perfectly able to set it aside. Then you think: *I wish I'd spotted that sooner!* When it is fully seen it can be very easy to put it aside. It is the half-seen, the half-hidden film, the hiding from fear, that makes it hard to put down.

There are No “No-Go” Areas

There may well be other reasons that make it hard to put down – fear is just one. There may be guilt associated with the story, a personal responsibility to be owned up to – your part in that particular story. In some stories we are the victim, in some we are the aggressor, and quite often there is a mixture of the two. There can be shame attached to the story. You can catch yourself out sanitizing your stories – making it look as if you are only the victim and actually you did not do anything wrong at all. Most of our life we do something wrong, don't we? Perhaps in this particular story there is something wrong on our side, as well as the other person doing something.

Sometimes we are purely victims as this can be the nature of life, and so we do not have to find any guilt on our side as there is not always any. But be on the lookout – maybe the part of the iceberg which is under water is your part in the story, which is a shameful, guilty secret that you would rather not be seen. Then again maybe not, you do not have to make of yourself an extra victim by being a “victim” who looks to blame themselves. Do not do that.

So be open to which way it goes, to which way the story unfolds for you. In general, through this practice, there are no “no-go”

areas. If a story is coming up – especially if it is coming up repeatedly – you need to turn your awareness onto it. Do not give yourself extra excuses not to look at certain things in practice. Do not say: *Oh that's not practice, that's thinking. Thinking's bad, I shouldn't be doing that.* As I have said, in order to get a very wild mind to settle, there is a case for suppressing thought so you can get a beginning of calmness. But there is also a case for going in the other direction.

When a puzzle, a problem, needs penetrating there is a case for letting go of attachment to the calmness and allowing some thinking, analysis and free-association to try to illuminate this story. So sometimes, yes, we do suppress thoughts, just to get some calmness; and sometimes we do a bit of thinking, to get some clarity. But in the end we come together, into unified, silent, illumination.

Take Off Your World-Distorting Glasses

On occasions it is appropriate to push ourselves a bit more in one way or the other. So do not have that excuse for “no-go” areas – thinking: *Oh it is not proper practice.* It is actually a very important part of practice to address your obstructions.

At times we need to be a little more sophisticated with our blockages and not tell ourselves: *Oh I already know all about that. I have thought about that in the past so I do not need to do it now.* Well, if it keeps coming at you, probably you *do* need to do something with it now. And then sometimes we tell ourselves: *Well I have had all that therapy and it cost me a lot of money, so I can't possibly*

question that and go down that route again. It must be finished by now mustn't it? Well, maybe, but maybe not – check it out.

Open awareness includes everything – even things which at first glance do not quite seem to be what you expect to deal with on retreat. But they are what is coming up in your mind and that is what needs to be dealt with. If you are not dealing with them, if you are pushing them to one side, there is a sense in which you are distorting your perception. You are saying: *I'm carrying my world-view filter on my glasses and I'm not going to take it off and see clearly, because I feel comfortable with these glasses on.* But they are actually distorting glasses; they are giving you a distorted view of the world – a distorted view in which, for example, all authority figures may harm you, or are likely to harm you. But this is not actually so. Of course we need to take common sense precautions in life – there are risks out there – but they are not the ones we think they are – they are not those old risks. We need to take off our distorting glasses and see the world directly. Indeed if we don't we are laying ourselves open to more risks by carrying old patterns around with us and applying them indiscriminately to the present.

Apply Direction to Your Practice

How do you judge which way to nudge your practice? Towards silence? Towards illumination or investigation? Well you do your best and you probably will make some mistakes along the way. Some of the time you may be cutting off thought, trying to get the mind to calm down, and you might overdo it ending up in “the cave of demons”. Sometimes you might spend too much time thinking, working

things out and end up just with a scattered mind. But you do need to nudge yourself in these directions sometimes. Simply telling yourself: *I'll just sit here and it will sort itself out*, does not always work, because you are sitting here off-course distorted and skewed. You do need to apply some effort, some direction, to your practice. There is a bit of tinkering to be done – some trial and error.

One of the *samskaras* that we pick up as Buddhists seems to be that thoughts are bad – we must get rid of thought; thought is the enemy. Well that comes about partly because we teach methods of calming the mind and naturally, as practice progresses, the mind becomes calmer. But because we understand that as practice progresses the mind becomes calmer, we think we can turn that around until it is backwards and say: *If I get rid of thought I'll be progressing in practice.* But that is not it.

Natural Thought and Deliberate Thought

There is an interesting way of looking at thoughts and at two different types of thinking; Roshi Jiyu-Kennett of Shasta Abbey, in her writings identifies “natural thought” and “deliberate thought”. Now when I first read this I got her meaning the wrong way round, because I understood her to mean “natural thought” as the random wanderings of the mind, and “deliberate thought” as the thoughts we are in control of.

But actually, she sees these thought processes the other way round. “Natural thought” is perfectly natural, as it is perfectly natural to have thoughts. Thoughts come and they are

not a problem. What she called “deliberate thought” – you could say deliberating, elaborating – is the problem as it gets in the way and separates us from directly experiencing the world; from directly experiencing our own nature. Because we have this layer of theory, interpretation, evaluation, commentary and so on, this is what separates us. But if we simply make direct contact with our natural thought, our natural feeling, our natural environment, then we directly see the nature of who we are and the world we live in. There is no filter, there is no block.

So do not try to clear every thought out of the mind. As you practice, the mind settles as you cease the habit of doing the elaboration, being left with just the natural quiet wanderings of the mind – the quiet perceptions of nature. We are not about getting rid of those. This practice is about moving you towards being a fuller human being – not being an unthinking, unfeeling robot. It is perfectly natural that a certain amount of thinking and feeling will occur – but catch yourself out, rambling off on elaborations.

Catch yourself out getting attached to what we might call those “temporary practices” of the extremes such as cutting off thought to try and get the mind calmer. It is good to do it some of the time, but it is a temporary practice. Then the other extreme: thinking, working something out, analyzing; these are useful and we should do them, but not all the time. These are like the raft that takes us to the other shore – very useful but we put them down at some point. We no longer need to carry them. But a raft is very useful for crossing the water; so make use of a raft when appropriate, but do not think the raft is the only way to travel for the rest of your life.

Silently Investigating

Master Sheng Yen used to say that you should be whole-hearted in your practice. This could be interpreted in terms of putting full effort into your practice, but it also means putting your full being into your practice – your heart and your mind. There are no “no-go” areas. Then when you settle back into the middle ground – when you are not suppressing thought and you are not thinking – there still needs to be investigation.

Now this is a tricky concept so let us review it. What do we mean by “silently investigating”? Imagine you are in a situation – the light is poor, you are outside somewhere, maybe walking in the woods. Then in the half light there is some shape in front of you which you do not quite recognize, cannot put a label to. There is some pattern. You do not know what it is. How will you find out? Are words any use to you? No. You look. You look. The investigation is the not-knowing but wanting to know. Not knowing but being willing to know, acknowledging not-knowing, keeping looking. Maybe the mind has a tendency to wander away, but you bring it back – you want to know.

You keep looking. No answer comes. No progress, but you keep looking. That is investigation; it is the keeping-on looking. Then at some point the pattern may suddenly shape itself into something you recognize, or maybe there is some movement. Maybe the animal you have been looking at has changed position; or maybe it was a leaf and the wind blows it and suddenly it becomes clear. Now you know what it was. But words did not help you to work it out; it was the looking, the constant looking with a penetrating gaze, that helped you.

Not Knowing, Keep Looking

This is how we apply investigation in this practice. We start by cultivating an awareness of the body. Which means opening the mind to look and see and feel and hear; to be open to every piece of sensory information which comes, but not to shape it into any particular object or form – to look with an attitude of wanting to know but not knowing, with the not-knowing keeping you looking.

Then maybe a bit of extra information comes along, a change in the environment or in the quality of the attention. There is a difference:



Oh actually I can feel my toe; I didn't know I could feel my toe. But this does not resolve the matter of who you are, or what life is about, or what is your nature. So you keep looking. Your practice goes on, and as you keep looking the gaze stabilizes. The scenery may expand but you keep looking. There may be a certain wonder at certain experiences along the way, a certain awe, but still you keep looking. There is no stopping from this practice, you simply keep going, keep looking.

Let us finish by reading a little from Master Hongzhi, the twelfth-century master who put together these practices under the name Silent Illumination. He left several writings, some of which are called “Practice Instructions” but they are actually more like practice descriptions. In these “instructions” there is often not much method as it is more a description of a state. Here is one from him. I’ll just read you a sentence or two:

The correct way of practice is to sit simply in stillness and silently investigate.

Deep down there is a state one reaches where externally one is no longer swirled about by causes and conditions.

The mind, being empty, is all-embracing.

Its luminosity being wondrous, it is precisely appropriate and impartial.

Internally there are no thoughts.

Vast and removed, it stands alone in itself without falling into stupor.

Bright and potent, it cuts off all dependence and remains self-at-ease.

Leaving Home

David Kabacinski Becomes Changwen Fashi, Part Four



by

Ven. Changwen

Venerable Changwen is a Western monastic disciple of the late Chan Master Sheng Yen. Formerly known as David Kabacinski, he was ordained as a novice in



2004, received his monastic education at Dharma Drum Sangha University in Taiwan, and received full ordination in 2006. He currently serves as Director of the Dharma Drum Retreat Center in Pine Bush, NY. The following is the fourth installment of his autobiographical account of becoming a Buddhist monk. It was originally published in Humanity Magazine in Taiwan, and was edited for Chan Magazine by David Berman.

Not Paying Attention To Being Paid Attention To

When I was a young lad, I often enjoyed being the center of attention. Up until graduating from college, I often sought center stage in social situations, whether with friends or family. I wasn't so aware of it, but I enjoyed the attention that people gave me. Of course this refers to positive attention—I liked being praised.

I also enjoyed engaging in a kind of improvisational “theatre” where my friends and I would use our zany humor and make up imaginary characters with eccentric behavior. Of course, this kind of theatrics peaked

when we were under the influence of various intoxicants. Although on the surface it was just a way to have fun with friends, later I became aware that it was a kind of escape from being myself—I found it awkward to sincerely express my thoughts and feelings, yet easy to pretend being someone else and talking nonsense. This is how I related to friends a lot of the time, and made myself comfortable when confronted with a social situation where I would have to present my “true self” or my actual feelings and thoughts. If I felt threatened, pretending was the best way to redirect the attention.

Only after discovering Chan practice in college did I begin to see how I was masking sincere expression with comedy, and how it prevented me from having more meaningful interactions, and how exhausting it was. I felt like I was learning to be a real person again, learning to sincerely express myself, but I often felt a little insecure in social situations, and the habit of acting and pretending was still strong, especially when I felt uncomfortable. This lessened to a great degree after a few years practicing with the CMC sangha, as the environment was conducive to being sincere with people. And by that time, I no longer wanted to be the center of attention. But as the masks and theatrics were being worn away, my underlying layer of sensitivity was being slowly uncovered. I began to realize that I was quite shy and insecure, and fearful of expressing myself in front of a group of people. I often felt overly self-conscious of saying or doing the “wrong” thing. A lot of complicated self-referential thoughts and vexations were in play, mostly coming from the fear of not being “right” or “perfect.”

So after becoming a monk, for the first year especially, I was still struggling with this, and being a Western monk in Taiwan, I became the center of attention everywhere I went. As soon as I stepped outside of the monks’ quarters and into the open, it seemed as if everyone wanted to talk to me, or they’d be looking and saying, “Hey,

look! There’s Changwen Fashi, he’s the new American monk . . . ” On the streets people would often come up to me and ask where I was from; once when walking with another brother monk, we were passed by a few young women, and I overheard one say, “Hey, that foreigner monk is kind of cute.” And there were reporters from magazines who wanted me to do interviews, and people were always asking me to help with projects related to English translation, etc. In becoming a monk I wasn’t at all looking for attention, and would rather have been left alone to clean toilets or do other menial work. Yet I seemed to be getting more and more attention.

It was a challenging practice to reflect on my own reactions to this attention and learn how



to adjust my mind. I was clearly aware that I felt uncomfortable receiving so much attention, and actually that I also had a growing feeling of self-importance. On the one hand, I didn't want people to pay attention to me, yet on the other hand, I kind of felt special and a little proud at being noticed all the time. I began to pay too much attention to other people's paying attention to me. My self-consciousness caused my mental state to swing back and forth from pride to insecurity. I was aware that this was vexation, but couldn't help being obstructed by it at the time. It took quite some time to learn to let go of this concern about how other people viewed me. It is still an ongoing practice, as this kind of habit energy is very strong. Even now as I write this article, and share my story, I'm aware that if for a moment I were to think that I'm somehow special, that would be arrogance.

Culture Shock

The protection and support that I received at the Mountain (formally called the Dharma Drum Mountain World Center for Buddhist Education) allowed me to feel safe and worry-free in an ideal environment for study and growth. I was truly grateful for that. However, during the first year of monkhood, I didn't have much chance to experience the culture of Taiwan outside of the Mountain. And on the occasions that I headed down the Mountain, I rarely had a chance to enter into an environment of non-Buddhists. Most of the places that I would go were other branch temples or practice centers, to help with Dharma services and/or meditation retreats. So I was quite sheltered from the outside world, and ignorant of the culture of Taiwan, and out of contact with the average person. When I did encounter the larger world, it was often a kind of a shock.

First, I was surprised at the way people interacted with each other, especially in the city. In my perception, it seemed as though there was a great distance between people. For example, when buying something at a store, or talking to someone on the street, it seemed as if many people had a coldness about them. I didn't see the same friendliness that is expressed by people in the States, like the smiling face of a store-owner, or the friendly greeting by a stranger on the street. It seemed as though people were in their own worlds, not concerned about others. It looked as though people were colored in grey, with grey on the inside as well—their minds heavy and dull. The environment also had a kind of greyness to it, as the city streets were so tightly packed with people, cars, and scooters that there was no room for natural life, apart from a few sparse potted plants and an occasional small grove of trees.

Another phenomenon that I found shocking was the way people rode scooters and drove cars. Scooters weaved in and out of traffic, driven by people who often wore no helmets or just sandals, and seemed to have no fear or concern for life. Cars also seemed to ignore scooters and people, and left it up to the pedestrians or cyclists to watch out for themselves. When pedestrians crossed an intersection, the drivers would often weave just enough not to hit them, and without waiting at all for them to walk across, and almost urging them to walk faster by speeding up. The common courtesy shown on the roads in the States was not visible in Taiwan.

Maybe I just happened to bump into people who were having a bad day, but it's also possible that there was something in Taiwanese society producing a kind of distance or cold-

ness between people. Maybe it was the rapid technological and economic growth, or lack of space in the big cities, or the pressure to keep up with the rest of the world, but it seemed that the traditional humanistic culture that used to be strong in Taiwan was disappearing. People seemed to want to be more like Westerners, or copy what was shown on Western media—TV, movies, and websites. It's possible that due to this Westernization, people lost a sense of identity, and didn't know how to connect with their own families, especially the older generations, or their living environment. It seemed much like what had happened in the States—with the increase in material abundance there was an increase in spiritual poverty.

Dharma Shock

During my first year as a monk, I also experienced a bit of Dharma-shock. I found that the Buddhism practiced in Taiwan was quite different from what is practiced by the mainstream Western Buddhists in the States. Most Westerners that I knew were interested in the practical implications of Buddhism on their lives, and how to find liberation from vexations through a path of self-reliance. Of course, one must still rely on the Three Jewels—Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha—but the emphasis in the West is on realizing one's own Buddha-nature through one's own effort. And the focus is on meditation—even doctors and hospitals in the States are recommending meditation to their patients. It's from this cultural background that my interest in Buddhism was born. I felt strongly connected to Chinese culture, but I was focused on the contemplative aspect of the Dharma, and saw Chan Buddhism as the gem of China's contemplative heritage.

Not long after arriving in Taiwan, however, I realized that the culture of Buddhism there does not emphasize meditation or contemplative practices. Taiwanese Buddhists largely emphasize devotional practices. The number of people attending Dharma services (including chanting and recitation of liturgy) and praying to Buddhas and bodhisattvas seems greater than those attending meditation retreats. I had assumed that my fellow Buddhists were all enthusiastic about contemplative Chan practice—in particular meditation. I thought that monastics would be able to spend much time devoted to sitting meditation and Chan studies, in addition to daily work of course. On arrival I found that monastics spend a considerable amount of time practicing for and holding Dharma services.

At that time, I had quite a negative perception of these services, which reminded me of days in church with my family. As a child I hated going to church, and had no interest in praying to God or devoting my life to a higher power and his wishes. The content of Buddhist Dharma services is definitely not theistic or completely devotional, and on the contrary is actually a way to practice Buddhadharma, through generating faith in the Three Jewels, repenting, making vows, reciting mantras and sutras, and cultivating many wholesome seeds. However, I still felt that the devotional aspect of practice was not what I was looking for. I didn't want Amitabha Buddha's help, and I wasn't at all interested in the Pure Land practice. Guanyin Pusa seemed nice, but I wasn't interested in asking her for support either. So when it came to participating in these rituals and liturgies, I was thoroughly vexed. To start with, I was often tired, and didn't feel like kneeling and prostrating all the time. It was crowded, and every

time we prostrated we had to be careful not to bump into people in the front and behind. The chanting, often conducted by the nuns and attended by mostly female devotees, was done in a key so low that it was hard for me to even eke out a sound as I chanted. It felt like a torture chamber – I was displeased going in, and joyous to be released. It took quite some time to overcome the aversion to attending these services. Only when I started to understand Chinese better, so I got the content of the liturgies more clearly, did I begin to understand what the mind should be focused on during these services.

Afterwards I realized that reciting and chanting Dharma is an excellent practice, and actually began to enjoy it, and I now find it a great method for calming and strengthening the mind. Our sangha's chanting instructor, Guangci Fashi, has an excellent voice, and after listening to his audio tape instructions, I found a new appreciation for chanting. Eventually, a few years later, upon hearing monks from Mainland China chanting, I found that

Chinese Buddhism's chanting is very rich and unique, and when done with concentration and attention to detail can be very conducive to developing a subtle and refined state of mind.

Sangha Life

Another difficulty I had during the first year or so of monastic life was learning to live alongside many people. I wasn't quite used to community living. And I especially wasn't used to talking a lot. Although I had shared a house with four other friends in college, it was still a quiet house, and I had a lot of free time to go off alone to take walks, read, and meditate. After college I also led quite a solitary lifestyle, and just occasionally spent some time with friends. Apart from time at work and the Chan Center, I almost had a hermit's lifestyle – a suburban hermit. So living with 30 or so Dharma brothers at the Mountain, and being in a place where there is constant interaction with people, required an adjustment that took quite some time.



It was especially difficult because of my attitude towards practice. I very much liked the silence of Chan retreat, and appreciated not talking, and minimizing discursive thinking, just being aware of the present moment. After becoming a monk, I thought, "This is great. I'm a monk. I can finally now plunge myself into the practice 24/7 and surely I can soon make some quick progress . . ." I assumed that everybody else would also want to be silent and use the method of practice. However, I found out that not only did my Dharma brothers enjoy talking, but they were curious about me. I didn't mind exchanging a few words, but then I'd find the talking bothersome, and feel irritated by it. Especially if

some people were laughing or making humorous conversation, I would grumble to myself, “Why are you guys talking so much? Don’t you want to practice? Don’t you know how to use the method? You’re distracting others, and you’re distracting me!” I found that the more they talked, the more I paid attention to them, and became distracted, irritated, and exhausted.

What I didn’t realize at the time was that my attitude was incorrect. First, I was paying too much attention to others, and requiring them to fit my own standard of what a monastic practitioner should be like. I became very sensitive to other people’s behavior and judged them as being right or wrong, good or bad practitioners. I was internally conversing with the impressions that I had of others, and discriminating ceaselessly, which made me very tired and irritable. Secondly, I held the view that all thoughts were vexations. I became so intent on quieting the mind and eliminating thoughts that I began to see thoughts as the enemy. If anything stirred up thoughts I became irritated. I didn’t want to respond; I didn’t want those thoughts to arise. I often became quite grumpy and disliked people, and was only happy when I was alone.

My Dharma brothers also felt this negativity. Some expressed that they were even afraid of me, because it seemed that I’d have some kind of angry expression whenever they came near me. Obviously, I was affecting others, and making them feel uncomfortable, but I didn’t know how to deal with this internal conflict. I struggled with the teaching: “Whether speaking or silent, moving or still; while dealing with people and handling affairs, all [these activities] are the Path.” I didn’t understand how to practice amidst activity or amidst interaction.

Only later on did I realize that a sangha cannot be harmonious if people don’t talk. Not only must sangha members talk to get work done and carry on daily operations, but there must be mutual care and concern for each other, which is often expressed through speech. People need to hear, “So how are you doing?” and need to have healthy interactions with others to feel accepted and supported. After all, it was the concern and encouragement that I received from Shifu and the sangha that had made me feel welcome. I must have forgotten that, as I was instead focused solely on eliminating my own vexations and ignoring everyone else. I had tried to make every day into a Chan retreat, which was like trying to put socks on over your boots.

Only later on, when given the task of caring for others, did I begin to understand how to make talking and interacting with others into a practice. I started then to realize what the practice of a bodhisattva is about.

Attending to Shifu

In April 2004, one month after my ordination as a novice, I had the rare chance to be an attendant to Shifu. He was changing attendants, and needed a short-term substitute. Though still a postulant, I was deemed a good candidate, having performed some duties for him, such as driving him to his doctor, and accompanying him on walks in the park. I was somewhat familiar with an attendant’s duties. The plan was for me to accompany Shifu, his secretaries, and a few others on a tour through Singapore and Australia before heading back to the U.S. for the routine three-month period. For this trip, an English-speaking monk would be a most suitable attendant, and I was one of few candidates who fit the job description. However, Shifu told

me, “Chang Wen, as a *shramanera* (novice monk) you know it is better that you join in the sangha’s activities and follow the routine of the community. Then after a while, maybe you can be my attendant and possibly a translator. But for now, you need to learn what it means to be a monk, and you need to improve your Chinese skills. So this attendant task is just temporary.” I understood fully, and was thoroughly happy to be his attendant for the time being.

Learning From Shifu

Before heading to Singapore, we attended an inauguration ceremony at the Confidence and Practice Monastery (Ch. 信行寺) in Taidong, Taiwan. It was my first experience in really taking care of Shifu, helping him with day-to-day tasks like delivering his meals, washing his clothes, folding his robes, tidying up his room, and relaying messages. While attending to Shifu, he taught me many things. For example, he showed me how to fold the *haiqing*—the long-sleeved robe worn under the *sanghati* robe during ceremonies and services—so that there would be no wrinkles and a very neat fold pattern. To do this, one actually lays the whole robe out on a flat surface, like a table, and folds it inwards so that the front is completely covered and protected. He said, “My Shifu, Dongchu, showed me how to do this. It makes the robe look very neat and tidy.” During the short breaks between activities, he gave me some lessons on basic Chinese word usage and commented, “You know, your Chinese is not bad, but it’s not good either. You’ll have to work harder.” I laughed and was very encouraged. He also gave me instruction on how to have proper demeanor for a monk, and how to always be attentive to the needs of the master.

During this time, I saw another side of my teacher, which was more that of a Dharma friend. There were lots of times when he just made small talk, and we had very pleasant yet meaningful conversations. He would sometimes ask my opinion about the new monastery or the ensuing ceremonies. At these times, it seemed like I was talking to a close friend. Shifu was very able to sense when to take the role of a stern disciplinarian, a caring friend, or a keen-eyed teacher. When I felt nervous, he’d make small talk and even crack jokes. When I was comfortable but absent-minded, he’d remind me to be mindful and would teach me a better method for doing something. When I messed up due to carelessness or laxity, he’d be quite firm and give me a good stern talk.

In Singapore, I actually did little attending to Shifu, and instead was helping the other monastics conduct a three-day retreat. Only when we were finished in Singapore and went to Australia did I take on the role of attendant. Again, I learned quite a lot during this short time. In addition to learning directly from being with Shifu, I learned how to take multiple scoldings and sharp reminders from his secretaries. They were both very attentive to Shifu’s needs, and very well-aware of what that entailed, as they had served Shifu over the years, traveling in Taiwan and the U.S. So, as I was not yet familiar with my new role, and was a bit slow (I enjoyed doing things mindfully and *slowly*), they often appeared on either side of me with commands: “Chang Wen Shi . . . pay attention . . . remember Shifu’s water . . . hurry up . . . Shifu is waiting . . . don’t forget this . . .” Since at that time Shifu had an eye condition that made him very sensitive to sunlight, one of my main roles was to be the “umbrella monk.” Often,

I was at Shifu's side, holding an umbrella over him—while walking, sitting, standing, taking a group photo, getting a tour in the park—and at certain angles it was really hard to keep Shifu covered. I ended up chasing him around, while the two secretaries kept me on my toes with their directives. Some photos of these scenes are quite funny, especially one where I'm standing about 10–15 feet away, trying to angle the umbrella perfectly so that Shifu's head is covered, but at the same time without spoiling the group photo. I ended up aware of nothing but whether Shifu's bald head was in the umbrella's shade, and the secretaries took the responsibility for looking out for me while crossing the street.

Practice Questions

During this time in Australia, I also had chances to ask Shifu questions about Dharma and practice. During breaks when Shifu was giving Dharma talks, he would sometimes ask what I thought of the talk, or of the audiences' reaction, and once I took the opportunity to ask about the difference between Silent Illumination Chan and the Four Foundations of Mindfulness of the *Satipattana Sutta*. I wasn't clear about how the mindfulness of traditional "contemplation" differed from Chan "illumination". It seemed both emphasized mindfulness of oneself. Shifu's reply was, "In Chan, all you have to do is put [everything] down. There's no need to do any kind of complicated contemplation. Just put your attachments down, that's all." His reply was very simple and straightforward, and very clear. I was very happy to hear it, and it cleared up a lot of questions I had about the method. Later on I understood that with Shifu's approach to Silent Illumination, a practitioner can use a simple, non-analytical

application of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness as a foundational practice. In this way, one can settle the mind on the breath, body, and sensations. Eventually however, the practitioner puts aside any intentional contemplation and just allows the mind to be open and naturally aware of the totality of one's experience.

Exhaustion and Humor

Shifu's health was very frail during this time. After one Dharma talk, on the way to the car, I held his arm as he walked up a small flight of stairs. He seemed to be almost dragging himself around, with little physical strength at all. He almost fell backwards while walking up the steps, and I had to use my hand to support his back. Although exhausted, he didn't complain. Rather, a few steps later, he showed concern for a volunteer walking with us and asked, "So how are you lately?" I was very moved at how Shifu didn't worry about himself at all, and was ceaselessly concerned for others. This inspired me to try to do the same, and not be so concerned with my own ills and difficulties.

I also had the opportunity to witness his great sense of humor. On the second trip that year, in the winter of 2004, Shifu attended a forum on economic development in Ireland with various other religious leaders. One cold foggy day before the meeting began, we accompanied Shifu on a walk in an old part of town. We were dressed in thick robes and Shifu was wearing two winter wool hats. Just then a jogger, wearing thin shorts and a tank top, passed us by. He had a very serious look—quite a grimace of intensity—and was panting. Shifu said, "Whoa, it's so cold, but he's hardly wearing any clothes. Maybe

I should try jogging.” Shifu imitated the jogger, panting and pretending to jog, flipping up his hat, mimicking the same look of intensity and gritting his teeth. We all were thoroughly amused and laughed out loud. Shifu chuckled a bit, and then went back to walking as if nothing had happened.

Another time in Ireland we had to leave to attend a meeting but Shifu could not find his scarf. We were all ready to go, and the secretaries were on the phone urging us to hurry up. Being the attendant, I felt at fault for holding everyone up, and was nervously looking for the scarf. We were in a little hotel room; there wasn't any place to misplace something. I said, “Shifu, I'm so sorry, I don't know where your scarf could be, do you?” and Shifu replied with a pretend look of urgency, looking frantically left and right and saying “I don't know!”. We both laughed. His simple and funny reply had the effect of helping me to relax, and Shifu showed that he wasn't bothered at all by a simple mistake.

A moment later he found it hanging on the back of the bathroom door. “I must have misplaced it,” he said. I learned that even a Chan master misplaces things. Possessed of great wisdom and compassion, [in his seventies] he was still an ordinary person with human limitations.

Harsh Encouragement

During this trip, I also witnessed how Shifu could use harsh words to encourage his disciples. One of the other attendants at the time was helping to prepare food and attending to Shifu's daily needs. In her presence, Shifu remarked to me, “You, know, she is really stupid!” He turned to her and said, “You're really stupid, you know?” I was quite shocked to hear this. I thought, “But Shifu, aren't you supposed to be compassionate, and gentle . . .” But I kept this question to myself. Later, I saw that he used different ways to communicate with different disciples. With some,



he was very stern; with others, very gentle. Some he would scold; others, just a simple gesture, and the person would understand. It seemed that, for those who were particularly willful, he used a most stern approach. I saw that harsh words from a Dharma master can be powerful reminders to be more careful and to be humble. I never asked Shifu about these instances, but they left a powerful impression in my mind, and served as reminders to be always humble, and to face my fears.

Example of a Master

Another thing I learned by observing Shifu was mindfulness. On this trip, I had the task of bringing Shifu his food. While he ate, I just sat silently in another part of the room. To my surprise, Shifu seemed to eat quickly, and made a lot of noise with the bowls and utensils. At first I thought, “Why is he eating so quickly and making so much noise? Shouldn’t a Chan master be slow, and careful, and silent?” So I paid more attention to how Shifu was eating, and I noticed that Shifu was doing nothing else but eating. I didn’t sense that he was rushed, but just that he had nothing on his mind. He was doing as Chan Master Huihai (Ch. 大珠慧海), said: “When I eat I eat.” That’s Chan practice. Observing Shifu, I got a better sense of mindfulness. One doesn’t have to be especially slow, or use forceful concentration; one should simply and naturally do what one is doing—that’s enough.

During these trips Shifu seemed fully relaxed and serene. He walked and moved with the ease of someone on a springtime stroll in the park. Around Shifu, people could be rushed and nervous, while he remained unhurried and relaxed. He followed quickly along with whatever was happening, but he did not seem

affected by anything. One time before going to a meeting he had a terrible headache, but he didn’t complain or show signs of discomfort. He attended the meeting and talked with various people there. He was concerned with how other people were doing, and with making good connections and friendships where possible. When things were troubled—as when there were heated arguments during meetings—he seemed unaffected and remained attentive. Shifu knew the right thing to say or do to help the people deal with their situations.

These few months were a precious time to learn about practice and monastic life. It was a gift to have so much time near him. Subject to the ordinary physical and mental limitations of any human being, he was still a great practitioner of Chan Buddhism. Even before I became a postulant, he told me, “I’m not perfect, I still have vexations, but it’s just that I know how to deal with them. If vexations arise, in a flash they are gone.” On those occasions where he showed some vexation, he was able instantly to change his response to a skillful one that helped people. Thus I saw how, for a great practitioner, vexation is wisdom.

Shifu often said that one should not judge one’s teachers’ behavior, or try to ascertain their level of attainment. Rather than critically analyze what the teacher does, one should focus on the instruction that the teacher gives, and whether or not it’s in accordance with right view. It’s the views and methods that we use to liberate ourselves from vexation. We can learn from our teachers’ strengths and be inspired by their virtue, but view them realistically as ordinary human beings. This is the healthiest way to learn from our teachers.

The Past

*News from the Chan Meditation Center,
DDRC and the DDMBA Worldwide*

John Crook Ashes Ceremony

On September 10, 2011, there was a ceremony for scattering the ashes of Chan Master John Crook. In accordance with his wishes, a Buddhist ceremony was held at his Maenllwyd Retreat Center in Wales. This was attended by a large group of people who have trained with him over the years, together with family members and others who also attended to pay their respects. John requested in his Will that the officiate use the occasion to convey the meaning of Enlightenment to those present. Dr. Simon Child officiated, giving a short

Dharma talk aimed mainly at the non-Buddhist family and friends present. They then chanted and recited a liturgy comprising both Tibetan and Chinese texts.

After the ceremony inside the hall, the group assembled in the area behind the Chan Hall. Following John's Will, his ashes had been split beforehand into four portions. One was to be scattered behind the Chan Hall, and another on the wilder hilltops above Maenllwyd. Two more portions, one for his son's children



Photo: Rob Stratton

and one for his daughter's children, were held back in case his grandchildren might one day wish to take them to scatter on Mount Kailash. Simon first scattered ashes behind the Chan Hall on behalf of the Western Chan Fellowship. The assembly then processed up the hill. At the top of the hill, trumpets, horns, conches, bells, and drums were sounded until everyone had arrived. Then they were stilled while the ashes were scattered in silence by the family members, John's son Stamati, his daughter Tanya, his sister Elizabeth, and his grandchildren. A beautiful slideshow of the ceremony may be viewed at: www.westernchanfellowship.org.

108 Couples Tie the Knot with the Blessings of DDM

The 17th Buddhist Joint Wedding ceremony of Dharma Drum Mountain (DDM) on the morning of January 1, 2012, saw one hundred and eight couples tie the knot, making faithful vows to uphold the "Three Jewels" (Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha) in their family life.

DDM's Abbot President Venerable Guo Dong, the President of Po Chung Culture and Education Foundation Mr. Po-Hsiung Wu, the President of Dharma Practice Society of DDM Mr. Chang-Bun Chan, and the President of DDM Humanities and Social Improvement Foundation Mr. Shen-I Lee, were all present to give their warmest blessings.

Venerable Guo Dong said in his speech that marriage is a significant milestone in furthering one's life towards fulfillment, and it also represents a fertile reservoir for cultivating merit and wisdom. The Abbot President blessed every couple with joy and happiness and a peaceful family life.

The late Venerable Master Sheng Yen, founder of DDM, once said that the foundation of purification of the earth is instilling the Buddhist way of life in the family, which itself is built on a marriage mindful of Buddhist principles; such a marriage will serve to improve the character of those involved.

News of Dharma Drum Mountain's Social Welfare and Charity Foundation (DDMSWCF)

Peace of Mind Relief Station

For students wishing to further their understanding of the meaning of life, activities on life education were initiated by DDMSWCF's Peace of Mind Relief Station in Northern Sichuan, China. The three month event began on October 19, 2011, and was held at the Xiushui First Primary School and the Minxin High School. Upon completion of the event, many student participants gave positive feedback; a sense of happiness and contentment was felt through their participation in the group activities.

A third-grade student of Minxin reflected: "I used to believe my dreams and wishes were impossible, and would never come to reality, however, after being through these activities, I have realized my dreams do stand a chance – if I work hard and don't give up."

Relief to Flood Victims in Cambodia

Following comprehensive assessments of the Northwest districts of Cambodia which recently experienced devastating flooding, DDMSWCF responded quickly to bring some relief to the flood victims in the region.

On November 22, 2011 the DDMSWCF relief team arrived in Cambodia and, working in collaboration with the Red Cross Society of Siem Reap and the Cambodia branch of the Field Relief Agency of Taiwan, soon after began its distribution of relief goods in the Siem Reap and the Sisophon provinces, Northwest of the capital of Phnom Penh. The relief goods including rice, salt, blankets and mosquito tents were delivered to 5,000 households devastated by the floods. Both the victims and the local government were greatly appreciative of this quick and responsive humanitarian effort.

Compassionate Journey in Sri Lanka

The DDMSWCF relief team once again set out on a journey providing humanitarian aid and care in Sri Lanka from December 1-7, 2011. The team members felt the journey was special in that, after years of hard work, it helped complete the Sri Lanka Project which offered both material and mental support to those

who suffered in the deadly South-East Asian Tsunami of 2004.

The 7-day journey has been influential in speaking the language of compassion, through offering financial aid to flood-afflicted poor students, donating 100 pieces of LED solar lights to people living in refugee camps and temporary shelters, and hosting events at local schools to promote the idea of “Spiritual Environmentalism”. More than 1,000 flood victims have been given care and aid on this journey.

End-Of-Year Philanthropic Parties

DDMSWCF kicked off its compassionate campaign of end-of-year philanthropic parties for disadvantaged families on December 10, 2011. The first party was at Taipei’s Nung Chan Monastery. DDMSWCF expected that as many as 2,800 disadvantaged households this year would be given presents, including cooking rice, blankets, soy sauce, cooking oil and clothing.



Photo: Rob Stratton

The Future

*Retreats, classes and other
upcoming events*

“Zen & Inner Peace”

*Chan Master Sheng Yen's weekly television program
Now on ICN Cable, Channel 24.2 in NY, Fridays 7:45 - 8 pm*

Chan Meditation Center (CMC) in Elmhurst, Queens, NY
(718) 592-6593 - ddmbaus@yahoo.com - www.chancenter.org - www.ddmba.org

Retreats

(Pre-registration advised.)

Monthly One-Day Beginner's Mind Retreats

(with workshop)

Last Saturday of each month

9 am - 5 pm (8:45 arrival) \$25

- April 28 - Led by Dr. Rebecca Li
- May 26 - Led by Nancy Bonardi
- June 30 - Led by Dharma Teacher

Classes

(Pre-registration advised for all classes.)

Beginner's Meditation, Parts 1 & 2

Saturdays, June 2 & 9

9:30 am - 12 noon

Led by Nancy Bonardi; \$40

Intermediate Meditation

Saturday, June 23

9:30 am - 3 pm

Led by Dr. Rikki Asher; \$40

Dharma 102: Parts 3, 4, 5 & 6

Saturdays, April 7, 21, May 5, 12

9:30 am - 12 noon

Led by Dharma Teachers; Free of charge

Saturday Night Movies

*Screenings and discussions of movies from a Buddhist
perspective; Free of charge*

Led by Lindley Hanlon;

7 pm - 9:30 pm

- April 21: Buck
- May 12: My Reincarnation

Special Events

CMC Annual Membership Meeting

Saturday, May 19

9:30 am - 12 noon

Buddha's Birthday Celebration

Sunday, May 20; 9:30 am - 4 pm

- 9:30 Bathing of the Buddha
- 11:00 Lecture by Ven. Guo Xing
- 12:30 Lunch offerings and lunch
- 2:00 Entertainment

7-Day DDMBA Chanting Retreat:

Amitabha Buddha's Name

(held at DDRC)

Saturday, June 30 - Saturday, July 7

Regular Weekly Activities

Monday Night Chanting

7:30 - 9:15 pm - Last Monday of each month

*Recitation of the Eighty-eight Buddhas' names and
repentance practice.*

Tuesday Night Sitting Group

7 pm - 9 pm: *Sitting meditation, walking meditation,
yoga, dharma sharing, recitation of the Heart Sutra.*

Thursday Night Taijiquan

7:30 - 9:30 pm - ongoing

Led by David Ngo

\$25 per month, \$80 for 16 classes.

First class is free for newcomers.

Saturday Sitting Group

9 am - 3 pm

Sitting meditation, yoga exercises, walking meditation.

Chan Meditation Center (CMC) Sunday Open House

Sunday Schedule

10 am Meditation
11 am Dharma Lecture
12:30 Lunch offerings
1 pm Vegetarian lunch

Dharma Study Group (English)

1:45-3pm, 2nd and 4th Sundays
Conducted by Dharma Teachers

Chanting and Recitation

2-3 pm 1st Sunday: Bodhisattva Guan Yin's name
2-4 pm 2nd Sunday: Great Compassion Dharani Sutra
2-3 pm 3rd Sunday: Bodhisattva Earth Store Sutra
2-3:30 pm Last Sunday: Renewal of Bodhisattva Vows

(Please note: If there are five Sundays in the month, there will be chanting of Guan Yin's name on the 4th Sunday.)

Dharma Lecturer Schedule

(Please check website for topics.)

April 1 Ven. Guo Xing
April 8 Ven. Chang Ji
April 15 Dharma Teacher
April 22 Dharma Teacher
April 29 Ven. Chang Di
May 6 Ven. Chang Di
May 13 Ven. Chang Wen
May 20 Ven. Guo Xing
May 27 Dharma Teacher
June 3 Ven. Chang Lv
June 10 Ven. Chang Lv
June 17 Dharma Teacher
June 24 Dharma Teacher

Dharma Drum Retreat Center (DDRC) in Pine Bush, NY

(845) 744-8114 - ddrc@dharmadrumretreat.org - www.dharmadrumretreat.org

DDRC holds a variety of Chan practice activities, including weekly group meditation, Sunday services, beginner's meditation classes, as well as beginner's, weekend, intermediate and intensive Chan retreats. Novices and experienced practitioners are all welcome at DDRC. Volunteer opportunities are also available.

Schedule is subject to change. Please check the website for updated and detailed information, or to register for activities online.

Retreats

Young People's Retreat

Led by Chang Wen Fashi
Friday - Sunday, April 6-8

One-Day Retreats & Children's Program

Led by Chang Wen Fashi
Saturdays, April 14, May 5, June 2

Ten-Day Intensive Silent Illumination Retreat

Led by Zarko Andricevic
Friday May 11 - Sunday May 20

Ten-Day Intensive Huatou Retreat

Led by Guo Ru Fashi
Friday June 15 - Sunday June 24

Regular Weekly Activities

Thursday Evening Meditation

7-9 pm; Sitting, walking, moving meditation and Dharma talk.

Sunday Service

10 am - 12 noon; Sitting, walking and moving meditation; chanting; Dharma talk.

Free Special Events

Gardening Weekend

Led by DDRC Residents
Saturday April 28 - Sunday April 29

Family Weekend Activity

Saturday May 5 - Sunday May 6

Chan Center Affiliates

Local organizations affiliated with CMC and DDMBA provide a place to practice with and learn from other Chan practitioners. If you have questions about schedules, activities or publications you may find useful information at an affiliate near you.

NORTH AMERICA		
USA Headquarters <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Dharma Drum Mountain Buddhist Association (DDMBA)</i> <i>Dharma Drum Publications</i> <i>Chan Meditation Center (CMC)</i> 90-56 Corona Avenue Elmhurst, NY 11373 Tel: (718) 592-6593 Fax: (718) 592-0717 ddmbausa@yahoo.com www.chancenter.org www.ddmba.org <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Dharma Drum Retreat Center (DDRC)</i> 184 Quannacut Road Pine Bush, NY 12566 Tel: (845) 744-8114 ddrc@dharmadrumretreat.org www.dharmadrumretreat.org	Hartford Contact: Linyung Wang ling-yunw@yahoo.com District of Columbia Washington D.C. Contact: Jack Chang chiehhsiungchang@yahoo.com	New Jersey <i>New Jersey Chapter</i> Contact: Jia-Shu Kuo 789 Jersey Ave New Brunswick, NJ 08901 Tel: (732) 249-1898 jskuo7@gmail.com www.ddmba-nj.org
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Dharma Drum International Meditation Group:

Contact: Antonio
Tel: 02-2893-4646 ext. 6504
contact@ddm.org.tw
*Saturdays, 2:00 – 5:00 pm at the
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www.ddm.org.tw

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Location: **Bluzew near Warsaw, Poland**



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