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Birth and Death

BEGINNERS THINK THAT THEY SHOULD fear birth and death, and seek nirvana; they believe that before attaining enlightenment, they are shackled by vexations, troubled by birth and death, and tormented by myriad sufferings. And that once they attain enlightenment, they will be liberated from the cycle of birth and death, and become completely free. Little do they know that such a dualistic view is an expedient means for the confused, to lure them into practicing the Dharma; it is not for the enlightened. Once they step into the gate of the Dharma, gain faith and start to practice, they should be taught to not practice for any goals, that seeking enlightenment is also attachment.



CHAN MASTER SHENG YEN

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*The Easy and the Difficult Path of
Bodhisattva Practice*

BY

Chan Master Sheng Yen



This article is excerpted from a book by Master Sheng Yen titled *Common Questions in the Practice of Buddhism*, which was originally published in Chinese as “學佛群疑” (Xue fu qun yi) in 1988. It was considered by him to be a companion volume to his book *Orthodox Chinese Buddhism*, which was published in 1965. The English edition of *Common Questions in the Practice of Buddhism* was published by the Sheng Yen Education Foundation in 2017. It was translated by Dr. Hueping Chin, with bilingual reviews by Dr. Jerry Wang and Dr. Wei Tan, and English editing by Ernest Heau.

Two Ways of Bodhisattva Practice

QUESTION What are the so-called easy path and difficult path of cultivation for bodhisattva practice?

ANSWER The easy path (*yixing dao*) and the difficult path (*nanxing dao*) are two ways of bodhisattva practice. The terms first appeared in Chapter Five, “On the Easy Path” of Nagarjuna’s *Exposition of Ten Stages of Bodhisattvahood* (Sanskrit *Dasabhumivibhasa Shastra*). The chapter introduces the two paths of bodhisattva practice. It is like traveling in this world: going on foot takes more effort and is more arduous, while going by boat is less physically demanding and thus easier. In general the easy path is to rely on faith as an expedient means until one attains the stage of non-regression, while the difficult path relies on one’s diligent effort to make progress.

The easy path described by Nagarjuna in his treatise consists of reciting the names of ten buddhas in the ten directions including Buddha Bhadrashri (Chinese *Shande Fo*); or those of one hundred seven buddhas including Amitabha Buddha; or those of one hundred forty-three bodhisattvas including Shumana Bodhisattva (Chn. *Shanyi Pusa*). By the time of Grandmaster Tanluan (476–542) of China, the practice of focusing on just reciting the name of Amitabha Buddha was advocated, as in the first fascicle of the master’s *Commentary to the Treatise on Rebirth in the Pure Land* (Chn. *Wangshenglunzhu*). This is called the easy path. It promotes the other-power of Amitabha Buddha’s original vows. By relying on that

power, one will be able to transcend to the pure land, and eventually attain the stage of non-regression with the empowerment of Amitabha Buddha.

In his *Anthology on Happy Contentment* (Chn. *Anleji*), Grandmaster Daochuo (562–645) referred to the difficult path as the way of the saints, and the easy path as the pure land way. Japanese Pure Land Master Honen Shonin (1133–1212) used the terms “self-power saintly way” and “other-power pure land” to differentiate the difficult path from the easy path.

It is evident that the easy path mentioned by Master Nagarjuna is to recite the names of various buddhas and bodhisattvas, and to seek rebirth in one of the pure lands in the ten directions. However, in China and Japan, pure land followers take the practice with Amitabha Buddha as the easy path, relying on the power of his vows to help them transcend specifically to Amitabha Buddha’s pure land of ultimate bliss. After one arrives in Amitabha’s pure land, all things seen and heard there are mediums and designs through which Amitabha Buddha teaches the Dharma. Therefore, whatever one sees and hears constantly reminds one to be mindful of the Buddha, mindful of the Dharma, and mindful of the Sangha. As a result, it becomes much easier for one to attain enlightenment and get to the stage of non-regression.

Nevertheless, it would take a very long time for one who transcends to the pure land by completely relying on the power of Amitabha Buddha’s vow to



Chan Master Sheng Yen Photo by Ssu-Hsien Chiang

reach the stage of non-regression. That is because in the pure land one can cultivate wisdom, but not blessings. Cultivating wisdom leads one away from vexation, but without cultivating blessings one cannot attain the merits of a bodhisattva. Therefore, though the pure land path is easier it is quite circuitous: one would need to wait till they have reached the stage of non-regression, and then return to the world to deliver sentient beings, to fully cultivate the blessings and virtues of a bodhisattva. Only when both merits and wisdom are complete would they attain buddhahood. As a wondrous expedient means, the easy path is particularly conducive for sentient beings that lack self-confidence, who are weak and timid, and who have deep retribution karma, giving them hope for

deliverance. It also encourages them to diligently study Dharma and recite the names of the buddhas.

Three Kalpas

As for the difficult path, it entails practicing for three *asamkheya kalpas*, as well as accomplishing the most challenging ways on the bodhisattva path, and withstanding the most unbearable obstacles to attaining buddhahood. But it is the common pathway in the practice of Buddhadharma. All past, present, and future buddhas who have attained and will attain buddhahood, owe it to generating the unsurpassed and perfect great bodhi-mind on the causal ground. In other words, one who vows to become a buddha should first attain faith and confidence.



According to the *Jeweled Necklace Sutra* (Chn. *Yingluo Jing*), cultivating faith takes one, two, or three kalpas in order to gain faith and confidence without regression, and to progress to the first of the ten stages of abiding in bodhisattva wisdom (Chn. *chuzhuwei*). However, in Ashvaghosha's (100–160) *Treatise on Awakening to Faith in the Mahayana* (Chn. *Dasheng Qixin Lun*; Skt. *Mahayanasraddhotpada Shastra*), he says, "Cultivating faith and confidence takes ten thousand kalpas." Building up faith and confidence and being able to enter the first abiding stage of bodhisattva wisdom is the starting point of the first *asamkheya kalpa*. Then, arriving at the first *bhumi* stage of the bodhisattva path to buddhahood, one begins the second *asamkheya kalpa*. Completing the seventh *bhumi* stage is the starting point of the third *asamkheya kalpa*. When all ten *bhumis* are achieved, one has completed the three *asamkheya kalpas*, and becomes an absolute, universal, enlightened

bodhisattva, and enters the final two stages before realizing full buddhahood.

Bodhisattvas such as Avalokiteshvara (Chn. *Guanyin*), Mahasthamaprapta (Chn. *Shizhi*), Manjusri (Chn. *Wenshu*), Samantabhadra (Chn. *Puxian*), and Kshitigarbha (Chn. *Dizhang*), all have one hundred more kalpas to go before attaining buddhahood. This is the difficult path. During their time on the path, bodhisattvas sacrifice their lives and take on rebirths, make unlimited giving of alms, cultivate countless offerings, and study with uncountable buddhas. While being with sentient beings, they "never seek comfort and happiness for themselves, but vow to free sentient beings from suffering." Day after day, gradually the self-centered attachment will gradually dissipate, and blessings and wisdom will grow. When one's selfless great compassion reaches its fullness, it will be the realization of buddhahood.

Photo by Charles Hsu

Before completing the first *asamkheya kalpa*, one is still an ordinary being. According to the Tiantai School, before the attainment of faith and confidence, one is at the "external ordinary rank." From the first of ten abiding stages of bodhisattva wisdom, till completing the ten stages of transference (Chn. *shihuixiang*), they are at the "internal ordinary rank." At these ordinary ranks, bodhisattvas still have the sense of self and perceive that there are still sentient beings to be delivered, vexations to be eliminated, and buddhahood to be attained. Because of their unshakable faith and convictions in the Three Jewels, as well as the confidence on themselves, they bravely move forward and keep practicing in accordance to the teachings without looking back.

Obstructions and Regression

Before the first stage of abiding and during the ten stages of faith and confidence, there would be dangers of losing faith from four kinds of obstructions: demonic, karmic, afflictive, and retributive. There is still a danger that one may lose faith and that's why these stages are called "with the possibility of regression." One might experience fluctuations of progress and regression; sometimes one would have strong faith in Buddhadharma and continue to practice, at other times one would drift away from Buddhadharma. However, once bodhi-mind has been generated, one has already planted the cause of eventually becoming a buddha. Regardless of the strength of one's causes, there is the chance of such causes emerging again and again from one's eighth consciousness; and that would keep one continuing to practice Buddhadharma. Upon attaining non-regression in faith and confidence, there is no more uncertainty in the remaining time to be taken before one becomes a buddha. However, from the viewpoint of suffering, one can say that the torment gets

stronger, and the journey becomes more challenging. This is the difficult path for bodhisattvas.

Did not the Chinese sages and heroes all hold the same view that "even in a cauldron of boiling oil, I would gladly endure hardship and suffering?" Bodhisattvas having to endure hardships and suffering is due to their vows, not to their karmic retributions. Therefore, to bodhisattvas this kind of difficult path is really a normal path of cultivation.

However, it should be recognized that the pure land method of Amitabha Buddha is not only for those with lesser faith and confidence. According to the *Contemplations on Amitabha Buddha Sutra* (Skt. *Amitayurdhyana Sutra*; Chn. *Guanwuliangshou Jing*), the conditions for being reborn among the nine grades of rebirth in the pure land, especially that for the highest grade, include the bodhisattva path of generating the bodhi-mind and cultivating the three sources of blessings. Therefore, it is not completely dependent on Amitabha Buddha's effort. Only at the lowest level of rebirth in the pure land does one rely completely on the other-power of Amitabha Buddha's fundamental vow.



Photo by Clarence E. Hsu

The Vows of Bodhisattvas

QUESTION Should bodhisattvas vow to deliver sentient beings before they attain buddhahood?

ANSWER According to the chapter titled “Karmic Retribution of Sentient Beings in Jambudvīpa” in the *Original Vows of Kṣhitigarbha (Earth Store) Bodhisattva Sutra*, countless of kalpas ago, Kṣhitigarbha Bodhisattva was the ruler in a small kingdom, and a friend of the neighboring king. In both kingdoms, people often committed evil acts and seldom did good deeds. To improve the situation, the two kings wanted to find ways to help people become more virtuous. The first king vowed to attain buddhahood quickly in order to liberate sentient beings from suffering. The second king vowed to deliver sentient beings from suffering, so that they may live in peace and attain enlightenment, even before attaining

buddhahood himself. The king who vowed to attain buddhahood quickly eventually attained it and was known as Sarvajñasiddha Tathagata (“Thus Come One Who Has Attained Omniscience”) innumerable kalpas ago. The second king, who vowed to deliver sentient beings before attaining buddhahood, was Kṣhitigarbha Bodhisattva, who has yet to attain buddhahood.

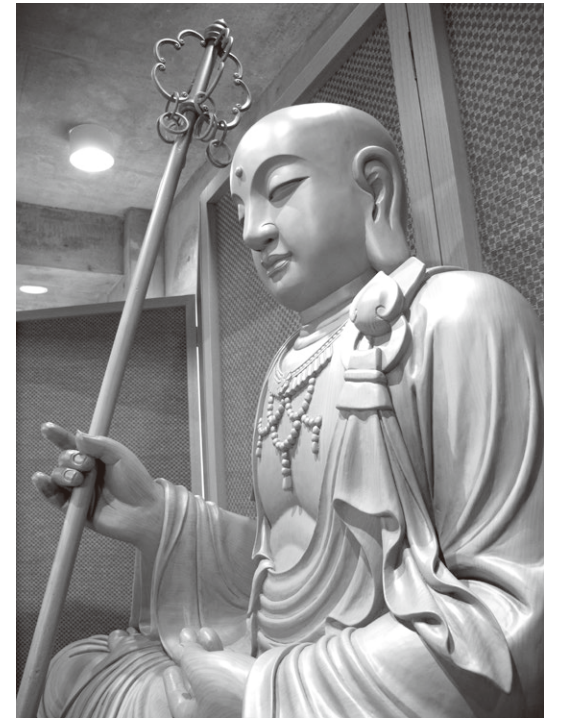
Looking at these two cases people might ask, “Which should I aspire to first, attaining buddhahood or helping others to reach liberation?” The answer depends on one’s aspirations. When he was still a king, Sarvajñasiddha Buddha vowed to attain buddhahood quickly in order to deliver sentient beings; he did not say he wanted to attain buddhahood first, and then deliver sentient beings later. In other words, he vowed to attain buddhahood as a result of completing his bodhisattva path; after

becoming buddha he would still deliver sentient beings. In fact, after attaining buddhahood he lived for sixty thousand kalpas, so the sentient beings delivered by him were countless.

The second king, Kṣhitigarbha Bodhisattva, vowed to deliver all sentient beings ahead of attaining buddhahood, and since his vow is perpetual, to this day Kṣhitigarbha is still a bodhisattva. Based on his own aspirations, Kṣhitigarbha did not want to follow the usual bodhisattva path of taking three *asamkheya kalpas* – so-called because they are incalculably long – plus one hundred kalpas to attain buddhahood. This does not mean that everyone needs to make the same vow as either Kṣhitigarbha Bodhisattva or Sarvajñasiddha Buddha.

Vows and Karma

Bodhisattvas experience rebirth due to the power of their vows, while ordinary sentient beings experience rebirth due to the power of their karma. Bodhisattvas take rebirth again and again in the three realms of desire, form, and formlessness for the purpose of delivering sentient beings, while ordinary sentient beings wander through the three realms to receive karmic retribution. Though in the three realms, bodhisattvas are free beings who have already achieved liberation, ordinary sentient beings are pitiful beings bound by karmic retribution to the cycles of birth and death. Since saintly bodhisattvas are free and at ease, to them there’s no difference between attaining buddhahood first or liberating sentient beings first. Therefore, Kṣhitigarbha Bodhisattva vowed not to become a buddha as long as hell is not empty. Among all bodhisattvas, his compassionate vow stood above all others. Other bodhisattvas who have not made this vow follow the customary bodhisattva path of practicing for three great kalpas before becoming buddhas.



To follow the bodhisattva path is to vow to pursue buddhahood while also transforming sentient beings. The vow does not mean that one would attain buddhahood having to deliver sentient beings along the way. In the *Kṣhitigarbha Sutra*, Sarvajñasiddha Buddha vowed to reach buddhahood quickly, but that’s not to say that he did not go through three great kalpas of practice and delivering sentient beings. However, compared with Kṣhitigarbha Bodhisattva, who is still going through numerous kalpas of time on the bodhisattva path, Sarvajñasiddha Buddha attained buddhahood more quickly. Accordingly, “I vow to attain buddhahood quickly in order to deliver sentient beings,” and “I vow to deliver all sentient beings before attaining buddhahood,” are just different compassionate vows of buddhas and bodhisattvas.



Photo by Kochphon Onshawe

Photo by Ven. Chang Duo

Delivering Sentient Beings

QUESTION Why should the Buddha deliver sentient beings?

ANSWER In the *Diamond Sutra* the Buddha says to Subhuti: “Those to whom you refer are neither sentient beings nor non-sentient beings.” The sutra also says, “According to the Tathagata, sentient beings are not sentient beings; they are merely called sentient beings.” Also, “Truthfully, there are no sentient beings to be delivered by the Tathagata; if there were sentient beings to be delivered by him, he would be holding the notion of a self, others, sentient beings, and lifespan.” To deliver sentient beings is a vow made by future buddhas when they make the great resolution to attain buddhahood. It is a vow made before the attainment of buddhahood, and thus while one still holds the sense of self. Therefore, before bodhisattvas and ordinary people attain buddhahood, there are sentient beings to be delivered.

But after one attains buddhahood, there will no longer be sentient beings or buddhas; otherwise, there will still be a duality. If there is still the notion of those who deliver in relation to those who are delivered, it would not be complete. In that case, one is yet to realize the dharma body in its totality. This is because upon attaining the dharma body in its totality, there will be no more distinctions such as inside and outside, this and that. It is like a drop of water that comes from the ocean and returns to the ocean. From the ocean’s perspective, all water belongs to the entirety of water, and only when seeing it from each drop’s perspective are there rivers, streams, rain, dew, snow, frost, ice, and fog.

Again the *Diamond Sutra* says, “Virtuous men and women who vow to attain the unsurpassed perfect wisdom of a buddha (Skt. *anuttara-samyak-sambodhi*), should give rise to such a mind: ‘I should deliver all

sentient beings, and when all sentient beings are delivered, there is really no one sentient being that is delivered.” Before attaining buddhahood, all aspiring bodhisattvas must deliver sentient beings; therefore, there are sentient beings to be delivered. So, from the standpoint of bodhisattvas, there are always sentient beings to be delivered. Even after reaching the first bodhisattva ground, knowing there are no sentient beings to deliver, they would still strive to deliver sentient beings. After reaching the eighth bodhisattva ground, it would be a natural process, and they no longer need to make a deliberate effort to deliver sentient beings.

Therefore, upon becoming a buddha one would no longer need to deliver sentient beings, because in fact there are no sentient beings to deliver. Rather, all sentient beings deliver themselves. They receive resonating response of buddhas and bodhisattvas in manifested forms depending on the level of their virtuous roots, merits and blessings, and karmic affinity. These manifestations are the buddhas and bodhisattvas in the minds of sentient beings, not the buddhas and bodhisattvas out there.

The virtuous roots of sentient beings are inherent but without cultivation and nurturing, they would not grow and manifest. The more one strives to learn Dharma, the more one can resonate with the responses of compassionate guidance from buddhas and bodhisattvas. One needs to first help oneself so that one can be helped by others; only then would they receive resonating manifestations of buddhas and bodhisattvas.

Growing Virtuous Roots

Buddhism often uses the analogy of a bell – when a bell is struck lightly it chimes softly; when struck firmly it chimes loudly, but if not struck it won’t chime by itself. Therefore, if sentient beings do not



Photo by Anke Sundermeier

strive to grow their virtuous roots, even though the Buddha’s dharma body is omnipresent, it would not be of help. To grow their virtuous roots, people should generate bodhi-mind; it means that when sentient beings resolve to strive for buddhahood, they would obtain the Buddha’s guidance and resonating response. When they attain buddhahood, they would receive and resonate with sentient beings’ request for guidance, rather than for the Buddha to seek resonance with sentient beings. On attaining buddhahood, all buddhas are omniscient. That is why they are said to be completely and perfectly knowing and enlightened, and to respond to requests without fail. When sentient beings ask for help, the Buddha will definitely respond.

The Buddha does not rely on knowledge to deliver sentient beings. The Buddha’s omniscience does not mean that he needs to know everything known by all sentient beings, nor does he need to base his response on the logic and ideals in the experience of sentient beings. This is because the Buddha is the whole, while sentient beings are partial and individual. The Buddha can give sentient beings what they need, without having to learn what sentient beings know. Rather, he would give directly to sentient beings what they need. Therefore, sentient beings of different

capacities benefit differently from the Dharma. The analytical and inductive methods used by ordinary human beings are based on individual and partial perspectives. The capacity of the Buddha’s mind contains the whole; therefore, his completely and perfectly knowing cannot be explained or measured by the methods used by ordinary people.

Transformation Body

The buddhas we see in this world, such as Shakyamuni Buddha, principally exist in his transformation body. They look like human beings when in the human realm, like heavenly beings when in heaven, and like hell denizens when in hell. When among a particular type of sentient beings, buddhas are like that type of sentient being. As such a manifested buddha has a shape and form, and exists in space and time. Therefore, he would need to learn in order to attain all knowledge of human beings; he would then use that knowledge as tools to deliver all sentient beings, thus benefitting them. The Buddha can simultaneously appear as countless forms in countless places to enlighten countless sentient beings. Yet, the essence of his dharma body does not move.

Therefore, simply because the transformation body of a buddha arises and subsides, it does not mean that his dharma body would also arise and subside. It is also not correct to assume that the dharma body of a buddha has limitations just because his transformation body needs to acquire human knowledge. In fact, the transformation body of a buddha is also completely and perfectly knowing; this is because in its different forms the transformation body is never apart from the dharma body. However, it is not correct to say that the dharma body’s complete and perfect knowing can be deduced from the knowledge and ability of the transformation body as perceived by ordinary sentient beings.

Chan Practice and Enlightenment

QUESTION What shall one do if after lifelong Chan practice, one still has not attained enlightenment?

ANSWER In Chan Buddhism, enlightenment means letting go of everything and having no attachments in the mind; that is to say, there is nothing to seek and nothing to give up. So if within a single thought we could let go of all our myriad engagements, in that moment we would be in enlightenment. As far as sudden realization or sudden enlightenment is concerned, there is no gradual progress or stages



of attainment. So there is no need to worry about whether one has attained enlightenment before passing on.

In Chan practice one must guard against setting one's mind on seeking or anticipating enlightenment. Seeking enlightenment, one will not attain it; anticipating enlightenment, one is merely lost and confused. Seeking and anticipating are delusions, attachments, entanglements, and clinging. Therefore, while true Chan practitioners are aware of enlightenment, they do not covet it as the goal of practice. The thought of being enlightened is appropriate before one begins practicing, but during the course of practice, one must let go of this thought in order to practice well.

Therefore, practitioners of Chan emphasize the process rather than the goal. During the process, one follows the guidance of a good teacher, uses the correct methods, and practices diligently to go forward with determination. As the saying goes, "One slap, one bloody palm, one step, one footprint." One simply upholds the method in each and every thought, paying no concern to anything else. If one is clearly aware thought after thought without a break, holding closely to the method without gaps, meticulously without end, the practice naturally gathers strength. At this time one will know that none of these ideas – being enlightened or not, birth and death or nirvana – has anything to do with practice.

Renounce All Attachments

Beginning Buddhist practitioners generally know that the cycle of birth and death is an ocean of sufferings, and nirvana is the shore of liberation; but they do not really understand that there is no absolute boundary between birth and death, and nirvana. So beginners think that they should fear birth and death, and seek nirvana; they believe that

before attaining enlightenment, they are shackled by vexations, troubled by birth and death, and tormented by myriad sufferings. And that once they attain enlightenment, they will be liberated from the cycle of birth and death, and become completely free. Little do they know that such a [dualistic view] is an expedient means for the confused, to lure them into practicing the Dharma; it is not for the enlightened. Once they step into the gate of the Dharma, gain faith and start to practice, they should be taught to not practice for any goals, that seeking enlightenment is also attachment. One has to be rid of all attachments in order to attain enlightenment, and not be afflicted by birth and death. Recognizing this, one will be able to let go of the desire to seek or anticipate enlightenment.

Spending one's whole life practicing without gathering strength indicates that from beginning to end, one has not learned to renounce attachments or let them go. Nevertheless, if one always practices diligently, even though one is driven by the fear of birth and death and the yearning for enlightenment, at least one need not worry about falling into the three lower planes of the desire realm. After all, focusing one's mind on leaning towards enlightenment is better than towards hell.

Vow Power

Buddhadharma emphasizes the power of our vows as well as the force of karma. If in our practice we are guided by our vows, even though obstacles from our past karma might prevent us from attaining liberation in this lifetime, we would at least not stray from the Three Jewels. If we cannot attain enlightenment in this life, we will still be able to continue diligently practicing the three learnings of precepts, samadhi, and wisdom in the next life, guided by the power of our vows. This is because

the merits of upholding the precepts, together with the deeds of samadhi and wisdom, will lead us to be reborn in a heavenly place or in the pure land, or even attain enlightenment. At the very least, we would be reborn into the human world to continue studying and practicing the Dharma.

Therefore, Chan practitioners should not be concerned about the direction they may go after death. However, there are practitioners who perceive that the strength of their practice is weak, who lack confidence and doubt the strength of their vow and the depth of their cultivation. They may fear that because their vow and their strength in the practice of precepts, samadhi, and wisdom are not strong enough, at the time of death they would be affected by the manifestation of bad karma or led astray by demonic foes. This would separate them from the Three Jewels, causing them to fall into the three lower planes, trapped in the cycle of birth and death with no chance to return. For these practitioners, it's better to rely on Amitabha Buddha's vow and seek rebirth in the Western pure land. In the meantime, they can use the merits accrued from all aspects of their practices including Chan meditation, to increase the provision for rebirth in the pure land; this would be the most reliable way.

Therefore, since the Song Dynasty there has been much interaction between the schools of Chan and Pure Land, and the dual practice of Chan and Pure Land has been promoted. This entails an equal emphasis on the methods of Chan and the power of the vow to seek rebirth in the pure land. If one can gather strength through Chan practice, there will be no need to worry about whether one will attain enlightenment. As in the case of a true Chan practitioner mentioned earlier, if one's practice cannot gather strength, one would still have the wondrous pure land as one's temporary home to continue one's practice. ☸

Photo by Han-Jie Chen

A black and white photograph of a misty landscape. In the foreground, two bare, leafless trees stand on a grassy slope. The background features a dense forest of evergreen trees on a hill, partially obscured by a thick layer of mist or fog. The sky is overcast with soft, diffused light.

An Interview with Simon Child

In May of this year, our sister publication *Humanity Magazine* in Taiwan celebrates its seventieth anniversary with a special issue. They invited authors and scholars around the world to share their views on Buddhism and its challenges. As part of this effort, *Humanity Magazine* invited Simon Child, one of Master Sheng Yen's Dharma Heirs, to respond to a series of questions about his personal journey learning Buddhism and Chan, and his observations about the development of Buddhism in England, and in Europe. *Chan Magazine* is very grateful to *Humanity Magazine* for allowing us to print the English version of this article.



Simon Child Photo by Tong-Yang Lee

Could you tell us about your personal growth and development, your academic background, as well as how you came into contact with Buddhism, Chan practice, and how you met and learned Buddhist practice with Master Sheng Yen?

I was born into an ordinary middle-class family. My father was a radar engineer who studied for his PhD and then became a university teacher in electrical and electronic engineering for the rest of his career. My parents divorced when I was twelve and my mother trained as a school teacher and taught in junior/middle school until her retirement. I have two younger brothers. I'm married with two adult sons both in their thirties.

I trained to be a doctor at Bristol University medical school. Up till then the focus of my education had been on physical sciences such as physics,

chemistry and mathematics and I had little knowledge of social sciences. Becoming aware of this gap during my first year at university I deliberately read quite widely on sociology, psychology, philosophy, and related topics to broaden my education. During this period I became aware of Buddhism and other traditions but did not specifically investigate any further at that time.

In my fourth year at university, while training in the psychiatric wards, I went along with some others to an evening talk at the Bristol Psychotherapy Association. I didn't even know what the topic of the talk was to be, but it turned out to be one of the psychiatrists talking about their experience of a Vipassana meditation retreat. During the talk he asked us to try an experiment, to sit still for five minutes with our eyes closed, and not think about anything. I was shocked to observe how out of control my mind was, as it kept busy even though I had told it to be quiet! I was intrigued to consider: who/what decides what I think about and when I think about it?

I became interested in meditation and read some books. Later in the same series of talks John Crook, who subsequently became Shifu's second Dharma Heir, gave a talk about the Western Zen Retreat that he had started leading. I was interested to attend either a Vipassana retreat or a Western Zen retreat but had no availability in my busy schedule. I learned Transcendental Meditation (TM) from a local center, but did not find that very interesting as the main effect seemed to be simply to make me sleepy.

During a short vacation period in January 1981, about six months after I graduated from university, I attended a Western Zen Retreat with John Crook and found it a very powerful and effective introduction to meditation practice and its benefits. I continued to attend these retreats once or twice a year for the next ten years.

John Crook had many influences in his life, including in his Buddhist life. He experienced and practiced both Tibetan Buddhism and Japanese Soto Zen Buddhism, but his first contact with Buddhism had been attending talks on Chan in Hong Kong where he had been sent as an army officer during the Korean war in the 1950s. He maintained contact with his original Chan teacher in Hong Kong, returning there from time to time until in the early 1980s his teacher was too old to continue teaching. John found another Chan teacher, Master Sheng Yen (Shifu), by discovering Shifu's book *Getting the Buddha Mind* in a Buddhist bookshop in Hong Kong. He attended several retreats with Shifu in New York, and also persuaded Shifu to travel to teach in the United Kingdom. It was in 1992 on Shifu's second trip to lead a retreat in the United Kingdom that I first met Shifu and practiced with him. Thereafter I continued to practice with both John Crook and also with Shifu, attending Shifu's retreats in the United Kingdom and in Germany as well as at the Chan Meditation Center in Elmhurst, New York and later at the Dharma Drum Retreat Center in upstate New York.

How has learning Chan practice and Buddhism with Master Sheng Yen influenced and changed you?

As I just related I was shocked to discover how my mind was out of my control. Almost more surprisingly I discovered that the mind can be trained to be calmer and clearer and develop insight. I often comment that the third noble truth seems miraculous. It might have been the case that we are hard-wired to experience *dukkha* and it cannot be avoided, but the Buddha discovered that it is possible to be released, and he taught the path to do so.

As I took tentative steps on the path, as a personal seeker rather than a believer following a Buddhist path, I found practice effective in revealing my

habitual tendencies and the thought and feeling patterns that sustain them, and as I saw them to be unhelpful and dysfunctional I found it possible to release these habits. The work of practice still continues, but I am undoubtedly more at ease, more present, more aware of others and more compassionate to others than where I started as somewhat disconnected and unaware young man.

From your observation and perspective, what are the most appealing features of Chinese Chan Buddhism or Master Sheng Yen's teaching in this regard?

From my first contact with Master Sheng Yen I was impressed by and appreciative of the clarity of his presentation. His combination of practice experience and scholarship enabled him to speak with authenticity and clearly explain both practice and teachings and how they relate to each other. He covered different levels within each talk, meaning that there was something relevant and helpful for everyone in every talk.

Chinese people often have a family and cultural background in Buddhism and may be ready to practice without requiring explanation and justification for practice. Shifu observed that Westerners tend to ask more questions and require more information and understanding of practice and its rational basis, to give them confidence to try and persist at practice. Westerners do not usually have much knowledge of Buddhism, and have been educated to question what they are told and to check it makes sense, so as not to be tricked by irrational and superstitious claims. Shifu's style of teaching met this need, clearly explaining not only how to practice but also why this would be beneficial and what may be experienced during practice.

Another important aspect of Shifu's teaching was that he emphasized and clarified the depth that

practice can reach and the importance of persisting in practice and not stopping just because you have experienced some shift in mental state. He would say, “Whatever you experience, remind yourself that this is not what you seek, and continue practicing.” This is an important antidote to a problem that is common in practitioners, to reach a relatively peaceful state and cling to it, or to experience some interesting or exciting shift in mind state and then become focused on trying to regain that. Years and decades can be wasted in such erroneous approaches to practice!

Shifu’s approach to Buddhist practice was that it should be useful to people, not merely some ritual or form carried out for the sake of tradition or superstition. In encouraging and facilitating people to take practice deeper and deeper, and really transform their ignorant and deluded minds, he was achieving this purpose, a transformation of the individual which can support transformation of society.



In your Chan practice group, the Western Chan Fellowship, how do you cater activities for Chan practice and Dharma propagation to the specific habits, preferences, and needs of practitioners in Europe? As far as you are concerned, which represents the expedient means, and which are the core essentials that we should insist on and remain unaltered or unmodified? Compared to other Chan/Zen practice groups in the west, what are the special features of Western Chan Fellowship?

The Western Chan Fellowship (WCF) arose out of the dedicated and sustained activities of John Crook teaching on retreats organized and led by him from the mid-1970s. He was not at that point a fully authorized teacher but he already had commitment to the Dharma and was teaching from his own experience of practice. Many people, myself included, found these retreats to be transformative in their own lives and returned to continue practice. John attended retreats with Shifu from the mid-1980s, and on retreat in the United Kingdom in 1989 Shifu



confirmed John’s experience of “seeing the nature” and authorized John to lead Chan retreats as Shifu’s representative¹. Subsequently, in 1993, Shifu gave transmission to John, making him Shifu’s second Dharma Heir².

I attended these Chan retreats with John, having the experience of seeing the nature on the first of these retreats in 1990 and this was confirmed by Shifu on the first retreat that I attended with him in 1992. John invited me to train with him to assist with the teaching at our United Kingdom retreats, and I started leading residential retreats in the late 1990s. In 2000 Shifu gave me transmission to make me his third Dharma Heir.

In the mid-1990s John raised the idea of establishing an institution which could continue the teaching beyond his own lifetime. Over the next couple of years John and I with others worked to create the WCF, which was founded in 1997 with a written constitution and registered as a charity in 1998. The written constitution is important because, aware of scandals in other Buddhist organizations, John wanted there to be clear rules to define and limit the powers of the guiding teacher and to allow the possibility to remove the guiding teacher from their position in the event of inappropriate behavior. We have recently modernized the constitution in some respects but the same principles still apply. It might be said that we are not completely democratic as the guiding teacher is the Dharma authority in the organization, but s/he does not have unlimited power and can be fired if there are problems in their approach or actions.

We feel we have an organizational structure which can support the sharing of Dharma but which includes protection for the organization and the practitioners from some of the problems relating to power and money and abuse which have occurred in some other organizations. We are also pleased

to be able to present an authentic lineage, coming from Shifu, initially through John Crook and now through me since I was appointed to succeed John Crook as guiding teacher following John’s death in 2011. Our members and practitioners comment on the importance to them of this, as not all Buddhist organizations have a clear transmission and lineage.

One of the features of the WCF is that it is entirely a householder organization, both its teachers and its members. Where householders are being taught by other householders there may more easily be a sense of connection and feeling of a shared understanding and experience of the pressures of practicing within busy work and family life.

Shifu found that Westerners typically have more interest in meditation than in other aspects of the Dharma. This is true for our members and hence a large part of our effort is put into running intensive residential meditation retreats. We run at least one retreat per month of between five and nine nights and usually these are fully booked (the capacity of the venues we use varies between about sixteen to thirty). But we don’t want practice to be something which is just an occasional event once or twice a year on retreat. Our seniors train and mentor some experienced practitioners who lead meditation groups and day retreats around the United Kingdom, to support ongoing practice in daily life. We have also given these local leaders some Dharma theory training to help them present the Dharma more clearly.

Over the centuries Buddhism has found different ways to present itself to different times and to different peoples/cultures. The fundamental principles such as *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anatta* do not change from tradition to tradition, though the choice of original and secondary teachings used to illustrate these principles may vary considerably. In the same way the essence of meditation practice, training

the mind to be calmer and clearer and to cultivate deep insight penetrating to realization, applies to all traditions but may be accessed via different dharma doors in each tradition. These principles and essence are certainly maintained in the WCF, whereas teaching approaches and Dharma doors may vary from other groups as we try to be skillful in our approach to our particular generation of Western practitioners and the most effective means of engaging them and supporting them in practice.

It isn't that Westerners have different minds than Chinese. But the upbringing and education of Westerners has different characteristics to Chinese upbringing and education. This creates difficulties in using some traditional approaches to sharing Dharma which do not speak to Westerners, and also creates opportunities which would not so often apply to Chinese audiences. For example Westerners often approach practice not as a religious activity but seeking personal growth, personal gain, so explanation and rationalization of practice is required instead of assuming culturally inherited faith in practice and teacher. On the other hand, this "difficulty" of having a gaining-mind can be made use of to encourage engagement in practice, acknowledging the potential for individual personal benefit while deferring emphasizing that practice is also for the benefit of others.

What is the content of the Western Zen Retreat that combines communicative questions, as well as gong'an and huatou? Have you attempted to do any experimental trials and adjustments in this regard?

The *Western Zen Retreat* (WZR) is essentially a huatou retreat. The way it is run has some differences from other huatou retreats. These differences are mainly in the ways we assist participants to engage with the practice so that they can enter the practice deeply in a

short time. The doors through which our participants may enter the practice may be a little different to the traditional entry points to practice, but the practice they enter is the traditional practice.

Unlike some misunderstandings about the retreat, it is not a psychology or counselling event – it is a Chan retreat. We usually run it as a five-night retreat, and it has a standard retreat structure with waking early, a rule of silence, meals followed by work periods, many periods of sitting meditation, with exercise or walking meditation and an outside free walk in the afternoon. We also have Dharma talks and instruction, and morning service and afternoon chanting, and individual interviews with the teacher.

John discussed this retreat format with Shifu the first time he met Shifu, and John continued to lead it even after Shifu authorized him to also lead more traditional format Chan retreats. In 2000 Shifu asked John and I to lead the WZR at Dharma Drum Retreat Center in New York state. Shifu asked us to lead it there six times a year! To do that so often was not compatible with our other commitments, but we have led it there once a year since then (missing only 2002). For our first few years at DDRC John Crook led it, then for several years I led it, and in recent years my second Dharma Heir Rebecca Li has trained in it and is now leading it. In the United Kingdom my first Dharma Heir Fiona Nuttall also leads these retreats as do some others.

John Crook created this retreat format in 1975, based on his experience of Zen retreats and of encounter groups. He had the intuition that some of the techniques from encounter groups could assist in engaging a practitioner with meditation practice, and this intuition was proved to be correct. He named it the *Western Zen Retreat*, "Western" because the features he introduced he felt would be suitable for Westerners to help them to engage with the process,

and "Zen" rather than "Chan" simply because at that time John was practicing more with Japanese Zen in the United Kingdom than with Chan in Hong Kong. Also the word Zen was, and still is, much better known than Chan.

Over the years John made small adjustments to the format as he tuned it to be the most effective. And even today we take note of feedback including comments in retreat reports, but we find little need to make further changes as it is already a very powerful format.

It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to convey the nature of this retreat in written or spoken description. It really needs to be experienced as a practitioner fully engaged in it. Otherwise the reader tends to interpret the written description and imagine how that experience would be, but their imagination misleads them and they misunderstand the retreat. However I will try to describe the format and share something about how practitioners may experience it.

Shifu used to teach to recite the huatou, to question the huatou, to investigate the huatou, and to raise the doubt sensation. Precisely the same applies in WZR. Participants are assigned a short huatou, easy to remember and to bring to mind. For those who have not attended the WZR previously we usually allocate "Who am I?" but following an interview with the person we may give a different huatou especially if they have attended this retreat previously.

On hearing about this some readers may be concerned that focusing on oneself in this way through using "Who am I?" is inappropriate and could increase self-interest and self-concern. But this is partly why John Crook's idea works well. Indeed Westerners can be quite self-interested. Instead of telling them not to be so, we make use of this tendency by giving them a huatou which engages



Who am I? Photo by Simon Child

with their sense of self, and straightaway they are engaged with the huatou. The huatou intrigues them, and the more they turn to the huatou the more intensely it grips them. The huatou is asking about something which is immediately of great concern to them, which is more engaging than treating a huatou as "meaningless words" as I once heard Shifu put it regarding Wu.

Some readers may be concerned that if practitioners become engaged with the meaning of the words of the huatou this may trigger thinking and so not be appropriate for huatou practice. But being told not to think about a huatou, even one with "meaningless words," does not mean they will not think. Westerners are educated to be challenging and investigating all the time. Telling them not to think will not work, they can't do it (as I discovered all those years ago when I tried not to think!). Instead of regarding this tendency to think to be

a problem to be avoided, which may lead to a dull blank mind as the practitioner tries to suppress thought, we make use of this habit as a way to lead quickly to internalization of the huatou. The more they consider and think about the huatou the more continuous the practice becomes, but the more they continue the practice the less satisfied they become with their thinking because they find no answer to the huatou in words or thought. It can happen that quite quickly, in two to three days, they reach a much more wordless intense urgent investigation which has gone beyond ordinary discursive thinking and they enter the doubt sensation stage of huatou practice.

Another feature of the retreat is that we replace some of the sitting meditation periods with a different form of practice. We call it communication meditation or communication exercise. Though it involves speaking it is still in the spirit of a silent retreat as it is not conversation or random talking. The instruction is to be aware of one's mental activity and thoughts/feelings arising in response to the huatou, and to share/communicate these with another practitioner by speaking to them. To make this effective and not distracting, this is structured very carefully with several rules. The speaking between two people is alternated with each person being allocated five minutes, timed with a bell to signal changeover, during which the other remains silent. When it is time to change over then the one who speaks next must not respond or comment on what they have just heard, they do not give any advice or try to help, they simply take their turn to share the content of their practice for five minutes. This continues for thirty minutes, each person having three slots of five minutes each. The next

time they do this communication, later in the day, they will do it with a different participant, not the same one each time.

Why do we do this? It serves several purposes and is very helpful. Firstly it keeps the practitioner engaged in the retreat. During a meditation retreat it can be too easy to doze and daydream, but this is not possible when you are put on the spot and required to present the content of your present moment meditation to another practitioner sitting in front of you. It is rather as though you have just been put in the interview room with the teacher – you must be alert and present. Being forced into presence may allow you to notice more clearly and meaningfully what is going on in your mind, such as habitual tendencies of thought and feeling that might otherwise remain unnoticed and not register in awareness.

The actual act of communicating and sharing with another can be very powerful. It might be that what is arising in the mind is a painful memory, perhaps involving guilt or shame or loss, and sharing it with another can be helpful in offloading it and moving on. To the extent that one is/was at fault in



Photo by Simon Child

these circumstances, sharing with another person can trigger and actualize repentance, i.e. this functions as a repentance practice, a strengthened repentance reinforced by the confessional aspect of sharing with another. This is another “Western” aspect of this approach. Chinese culture tends to make it difficult, even unacceptable, for Chinese people to share their feelings with others, and so they find it difficult to take part fully in such a practice and cannot benefit from it. Westerners generally find it normal to share such details with others, even if the situation is embarrassing or shameful, and so this technique is not only acceptable to them but also welcome and powerful.

There are several more important rules and guidance on the conduct of the communication exercise. It is important that it is done correctly and we advise that it should not be undertaken outside of the context of a WZR supervised by a leader trained in this process. One risk is simply that it might be undertaken ineffectively and those doing it outside of retreat undervalue it because they have not experienced it properly. But it also may work powerfully, releasing energy and emotion which may need the help of an experienced WZR leader.

During this retreat the participants each have interviews with the teacher most days. This again serves the function of keeping the practitioner engaged with the practice. It gives an opportunity to clarify their understanding and application of the method. It also gives an opportunity to help them overcome obstructions to their practice. Typically someone may become stuck in a thought pattern or rumination on some aspect of their life, which may be a real current problem in their life or may be something from their past. Instead of telling them to drop it, which is often impossible for them to do, we may explore it with them and they may come to realize what is making it difficult to move on. This

enables them to re-enter the practice. It may also help them to act more skillfully in relation to this matter in their everyday lives.

We recommend this retreat for newcomers to practice. We also recommend it for experienced practitioners. For newcomers it is very useful that they encounter the investigation aspect of practice early on – it makes it less likely that they will lapse into quietism, and we observe that people who have attended WZR usually understand the illumination/ investigation of silent illumination practice much more readily. For experienced practitioners it can be a very useful retreat for penetrating obstructions that have not yet cleared – the more dynamic and active nature of the WZR practice can release them from stuckness that they may not even have realized was present.

As a Dharma heir of Master Sheng Yen, you have passed on the Dharma lineage to next generation. Could you share your views regarding the meaning, purpose, and significance of transmitting the Dharma lineage in the west? How do you choose the Dharma heirs? What requirements should they possess? How do you systematically train and nurture talent who are able to help spread and share Chan Buddhism?

When Shifu passed on the lineage to John Crook the ceremony was recorded and the transcript was published³. Shifu spoke of his approach to transmission, and he included the following:

Firstly, you must have the correct understanding of the principles of the Dharma. Secondly, you must have your own experience of practice. Thirdly, the right conditions must exist in space and time. That is to say that the circumstances must be appropriate. Fourthly, help must be given to all people wishing to learn.

Shifu developed these points further in his book *Chan Comes West*.⁴ [Editor's Note: Shifu's chapter from *Chan Comes West*, "My Practice and Transmission," was reprinted in *Chan Magazine* Summer 2017, Volume 37, Number 3.]

My own transmission ceremony was held, together with the ceremony for Max Kälin, in private in the interview room at the Dharma Drum Retreat Center in New York state, and was not recorded. On that occasion Shifu made similar comments, and furthermore he was quite forceful in emphasizing the importance of training others and finding Dharma Heirs of my own to ensure that the lineage continues and future generations can benefit from the practice.

In fact Shifu said it would be shameful to fail to ensure the continuation of the lineage, and this made a big impression on me. But this is not a simple matter and I knew it would also be shameful to make an inappropriate or failed transmission. Finding and training people who can fulfil all the requirements is not straightforward.

For someone to receive the lineage they must have had personal experience of "seeing the nature," an enlightenment experience, and they should pass the lineage only to those who also have had that experience. Without that personal experience they could not reliably confirm that experience in another person and they would be liable to make errors and thereby weaken the lineage.

Such experiences do not arise so often even in serious practitioners, and when they do arise they may be shallow and not transform the person sufficiently, for example their personality may still be unstable and too selfish. Even if someone has a deeper experience they still need to continue practicing to stabilize their insight and to continue to grind away residual self-concerned attitudes and behaviors, and this is even more important for those with shallower experiences.

Unfortunately it can happen that following such an experience the practitioner can become more self-centered, imagining themselves to be fully enlightened and not needing to practice nor even to keep the precepts. It is understandable that this can happen, given the glorification of such an experience both in popular culture and in the Chan and Zen literature, but it can become a very big obstacle to further progress in practice and of course such a person is not suitable to receive the lineage.

Even if someone has clear experience and continues to practice and has a stable personality there are still other factors which are important. To have seen the nature is not in itself sufficient basis to receive the lineage. The person must have a wish and ability to share the Dharma. They must have the ability to teach, both in terms of their articulacy and their own knowledge of the Dharma. Their life situation should provide some scope for teaching, which is not always easy for a householder practitioner, and they need to be able to interest people in hearing their teaching and applying it in practice or else their transmission will be ineffective. Ultimately it is a matter of trust – do I trust this person to uphold the Dharma and do their best to transmit it to future generations.

It is clear that it is not easy to find a suitable candidate. I have been fortunate to find two candidates who meet these criteria and I have passed the lineage to these two women both of whom I have known very well for many years. Both have always had great dedication, giving a lot of time to the Dharma and to sharing it with others, both are committed practitioners with deep experience and very good knowledge of the Dharma, and both are engaging teachers.

Fiona Nuttall I have known for about twenty-five years since she first started attending a meditation group that I had set up in my home town. We live



Rebecca Li, Simon Child, and Fiona Nuttall Photo by David Slaymaker

close together and we have met most weeks (for the weekly meditation group, and on other occasions too) during those twenty-five years. She has also been a regular attendee at our retreats and in recent years has been one of those leading retreats for the Western Chan Fellowship. She is widely experienced in the Dharma having also had teachings and practice in other traditions, as well as practicing with John Crook, with Shifu, and with myself.

Rebecca Li I've known nearly twenty years, initially as a retreatant on retreats led by John Crook and myself at Dharma Drum Retreat Center in New York state, and also as Shifu's dedicated and hard-working interpreter for many years. In more recent years she trained with me to lead retreats and give

interviews. She has also had extensive training in the Dharma, not only from hearing so many of Shifu's talks and attending so many of his retreats but also by being one of the small group of Dharma teacher trainees to whom Shifu gave extra teachings whenever he was in United States.

In a sense they are not only my heirs, as I and they would acknowledge their benefit from training with both Shifu and John Crook as well as with me. In passing on the lineage to these two women I have shared with them the burden of responsibility that Shifu passed to me: to share the Dharma willingly and effectively and accurately,

and to hope to identify candidates to whom the lineage can be passed so that the lineage can continue into the future and maintain the legacy of Shifu and all the ancestors. ☸

1. John Crook published his retreat reports from his retreats with Shifu and they are available at <https://www.westernchanfellowship.org/dharma/dharma-library/dharma-article/1999/working-with-a-master/>
2. Transcript of the ceremony is available at <https://www.westernchanfellowship.org/about-the-western-chan-fellowship/lineage-of-the-teachers/chan-master-john-crook/>
3. <https://www.westernchanfellowship.org/about-the-western-chan-fellowship/lineage-of-the-teachers/chan-master-john-crook/>
4. Chan Master Sheng Yen et al., *Chan Comes West*, 2nd Edition (New York: Dharma Drum Publications, 2016).



Monastic Retreat Report

BY

Venerable Chang Hu

DDRC Chan Hall Photo by Ven. Chang Hu

ON JUNE 5, 2005, the concluding day of a ten-day silent illumination retreat at the Dharma Drum Retreat Center (DDRC), Master Sheng Yen in his Dharma talk suggested that DDRC hold a retreat specifically for monastics, and send invitations to other monasteries, so that more monastics can experience what our retreats are like. Fourteen years later, causes and conditions ripened and his wishes finally became reality. Before this, DDRC had conducted monastic retreats, but only for members within the Sangha of Dharma Drum Mountain (DDM). But such a wonderful opportunity should be open to more people. Therefore, when planning the 2019 schedule, we decided to add this sixteen-day monastic retreat. When it was posted on DDRC's

website it immediately drew enthusiastic responses, three of which were from monasteries outside of DDM.

What made this retreat special was, not only it was open to members of all monasteries, but also it was a formal retreat free of charge. The purpose was to allow more monastics to experience Master Sheng Yen's Chan teachings. It was also an expedient means to spread Dharma. We received enthusiastic responses from not only monastics with the DDM Sangha, but also two monastics from Buddhist Insights, Ven. Suddhaso, and Ven. Soma (who was just ordained as a novice nun in December, 2018), as well as Ven. Phap Vu from the monastery founded by Master Thích Nhất Hạnh.

To support the retreat, we were grateful for bodhisattva Judy and eighty-plus years old bodhisattva Wei, who did all the cooking. Even though they were not in the best of their health during the retreat, they put in their best efforts, so much so that all retreatants could feel the positive energy in the foods they prepared.

This retreat, from January 4 to January 20, was a silent illumination retreat divided into two eight-day sections. For the first section, we used video recordings of Master Sheng Yen's Dharma talks given on a retreat held in Switzerland in 2004. The main topic of those Dharma talks was Chan Master Hongzhi Zhengjue's (1091–1157) "Lancet of Seated Meditation." For the second section we used video recordings of Master Sheng Yen's Dharma talks from a retreat held at DDRC in November 2004. The main topic was "Silent Illumination Inscription," also by Master Hongzhi Zhengjue.

Ven. Suddhaso, the founder of Buddhist Insights, put all his heart into practice from the very start of the retreat. Young and gifted, he will surely become a major figure in the Buddhist community. As far as Ven. Soma, probably because she has only been a monastic for a short period of time, was struggling with her legs during sitting meditation. Nevertheless, she studied the method of silent illumination whole-heartedly.

Of the nearly three hundred retreats I have supervised over the years, this one should be counted as one of the best. In North America, there is always a level of difficulty in conducting Chan retreats. This is because, between 1977 and 2006, all the retreats held by DDM in North America were led by Shifu (Master Sheng Yen). The retreatants had been accustomed to Shifu's ability in holding their attention and stabilizing their minds. Once Shifu was no longer around, the retreatants could

not get used to Dharma talks delivered from video recordings. During the three years I have worked at DDRC, video recordings were used for only two retreats. All other retreats were taught by DDRC faculty members. But from my experience of supervising nearly three hundred retreats in Taiwan using Shifu's video recordings, I think the Dharma talks from Shifu's videos still provide more clarity and comprehensiveness. In this retreat, I was very moved by the retreatants' concentration of mind and diligence of practice, and by having a chance to listen to Shifu's Dharma talks again.

DDRC is arguably the best Chan retreat center within the DDM organization for many reasons: its dormitories with single-occupancy rooms, its magnificent Chan Hall with the wooden structure fused into the quietude of the forest, its surrounding scenery ever-changing with the seasons, and its wondrous kitchen with tasty and healthy food every day. However, due to the lack of a structure of regional meditation centers in the United States to train beginners, we at DDRC have to accommodate

beginners in most of our retreats. (In contrast, in Taiwan, DDM has a structure of local and regional meditation centers all over the island whereby beginners can go for one-day to five-day retreats before they move onto seven-day or longer retreats at the DDM Headquarters.)

But this retreat was so different, mainly because it was for monastics only. Its level of intensiveness was so distinct in every respect. Just to name a few: all retreatants arrived early at the Chan Hall at the beginning of every session. Short breaks took only five or six minutes before they all came back to their cushions. During sitting meditations, there was no noise from shifting legs or bodies. One could only hear the sound of air moving. The retreatants paid full attention when listening to Dharma talks. They worked very diligently during their work assignments. When they left the Chan Hall, the cushions and towels were arranged so neatly that it looked as if no one had ever sat there. When they walked in and out of the Chan Hall, their steps were quiet and serene. During the day, sunlight sprinkled

through the windows and onto the retreatants. Their meditation postures were harmonized and fused into the quiescence of the Chan Hall. During walking meditation, the silhouettes of the retreatants inside and the silhouettes of deer outside seemed to have fused together and transformed the scene back to the Deer Park of the Buddha's time. Unlike the summer monastic retreats in DDM Headquarters in Taiwan, where some monastics were assigned to participate, everyone in this retreat came voluntarily, and therefore, everyone especially cherished the opportunity to be able to participate.

In Buddha's time, the monsoon season in northern India ran from March to August every year. It rained so much that most of the areas were flooded. People had to move to higher ground. For safety reasons, the Sangha took retreats in areas that were not affected by flooding. That became the tradition of "summer retreat." During such an intensive meditation retreat, the most enjoyable hours for the disciples must have been in the afternoons when Buddha gave his Dharma talks.

Twenty six hundred years later, it seems that time and space has warped into DDRC in North America, where January and February are the coldest months of the year. The temperature sometimes goes as low as zero degrees Fahrenheit. Breathing in such a cold weather hurts one's respiratory passageway. Snow from the day before becomes ice after the low temperature overnight, which makes it difficult to walk outdoors. Therefore, activities in DDRC are kept to a minimum. In contrast to summer retreats



Retreatants sharing experiences Photo by Ven. Chang Hu

in India in Buddha's time, at DDRC, winter retreats are the best time for monastics to practice.

In the afternoon just before the end of the first section of the retreat, it was sunny outside. We took a walking meditation in the woods. The wind was blowing and the temperature was close to freezing. The ground was covered by leaves fallen from the trees. As we stepped on the leaves, we could hear the cracking sounds of the thin ice broken under our feet. We walked through the woods, past the narrow wooden bridge over the brook, and finally stopped by the lake. The wind blew up countless ripples on the water surface. As we stood by the lake and contemplated the scenery, our mind remained calm and still, and yet we could perceive even more clearly the impermanence and ever-changing nature of phenomena.

At the end of the retreat, as we shared our experiences, the deep introspection from every retreatant made all of us realize how much we receive from all sentient beings. We should vow to arouse our Bodhi mind and transfer all merits to sentient beings. ☸

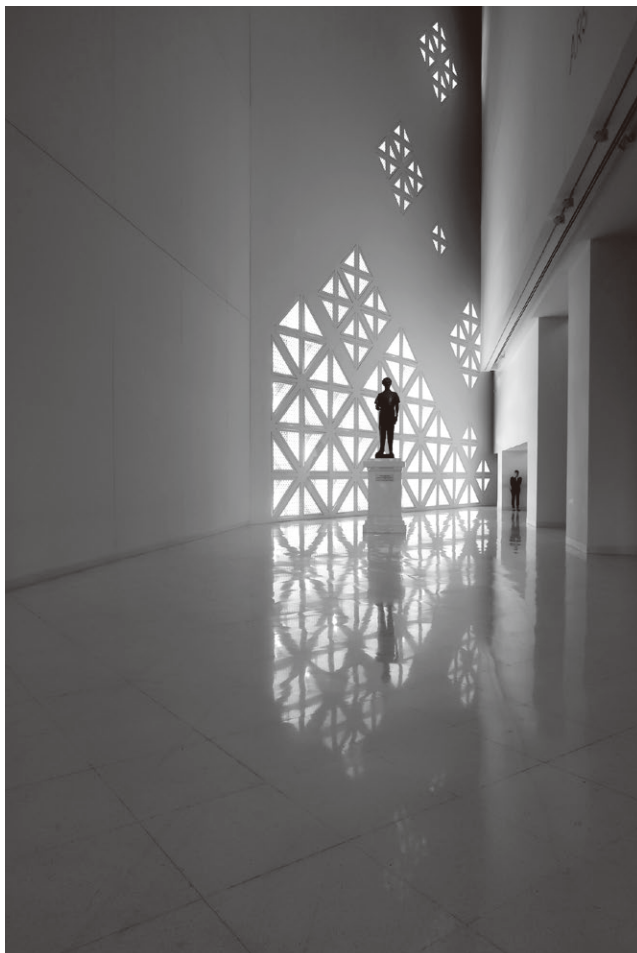


Monastic retreatants Photo by Ven. Chang Hu

Light Is Therefore Colour

A CHAN VIEW

Photos by Venerable Chang Duo



*In darkness, they glow with brightness.
In shadows, they shine with a splendid light.*

”

CHAN MASTER HONGZHI ZHENGJUE
Silent Illumination





Life and Death

by Rikki Asher



Seeing and Being we.
63 times around the Sun.
Old tightly knotted ropes loosen into frayed strands that flow freely in the wind.
No need to hold onto body, breath or mind, since they are here and then gone.

Photo by David Clode

Chan Meditation Retreats

21-Day **Intensive Chan Retreat**

Led by **Ven. Chi Chern**

July 27 – August 17, 2019

Dłużew, Poland

CONTACT budwod@budwod.com.pl
www.czan.eu/en/

7-Day **Intensive Chan Retreat**

Led by **Ven. Chang Wu**

August 26 – September 2, 2019

Hause Tao • Switzerland

CONTACT hthalmann@gmx.net
www.chan-bern.ch/english/retreats

5-Day **Intensive Chan Retreat**

Led by **Guo Gu**

August 29 – September 2, 2019

Tallahassee Chan Center • FL, USA

CONTACT tallahassee.chan@gmail.com
www.tallahasseechan.org

7-Day **Investigating Koans Retreat**

Led by **Simon Child**

December 7 – 14, 2019

Maenllwyd Retreat Centre • Wales, UK

CONTACT admin@westernchanfellowship.org
www.westernchanfellowship.org

Western Zen Retreat

Led by **Simon Child & Rebecca Li & Fiona Nuttall**

October 11 – 16, 2019

Relaxation Retreat

Led by **Abbot Guo Yuan**

October 25 – November 3, 2019

Buddha's Name Recitation Retreat

Led by **Abbot Guo Yuan** with **Master Sheng Yen DVDs**

December 13 – 22, 2019

Dharma Drum Retreat Center • Pine Bush, NY, USA

CONTACT apply@dharmadrumretreat.org
www.dharmadrumretreat.org

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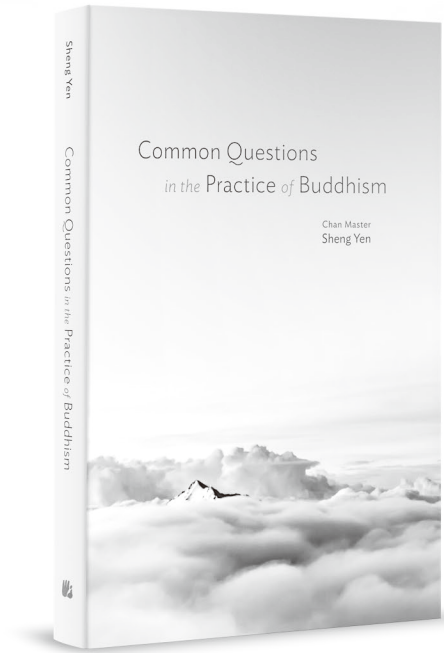
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Common Questions in the Practice of Buddhism

Chan Master Sheng Yen

- If someone believes in and practices Buddhism, should they also take refuge in the Three Jewels?*
- Is special knowledge and advanced learning required to practice Buddhism?*
- Are there any taboos concerning practicing Buddhism at home?*

In *Common Questions in the Practice of Buddhism*, Chan Master Sheng Yen addresses these and many other spiritual and worldly problems in a simple question-and-answer format. He clarifies common areas of confusion about Buddhist beliefs and practices and gives practical advice on leading a life that is “full of wisdom, kindness, radiance, comfort, freshness, and coolness” in the contemporary world.

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