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Chan

The thought of Chan is a clear current in humanity that is free, subtle, flexible, spacious, open, bright and clear. The life of Chan is a way of settling the mind, which is vigorous, at ease, simple, unadorned, and self-contained. The vision of Chan is to teach us that we must first learn to put down selfishness, self-deception, self-disparagement, self-conceit, and self-fettering. Only then can we have an open, liberated spirit to soar freely in the boundless sky. Chan teaches us that we must first practice to know ourselves, affirm ourselves, and further dissolve self-centeredness; only then will the state of enlightenment be revealed to us.

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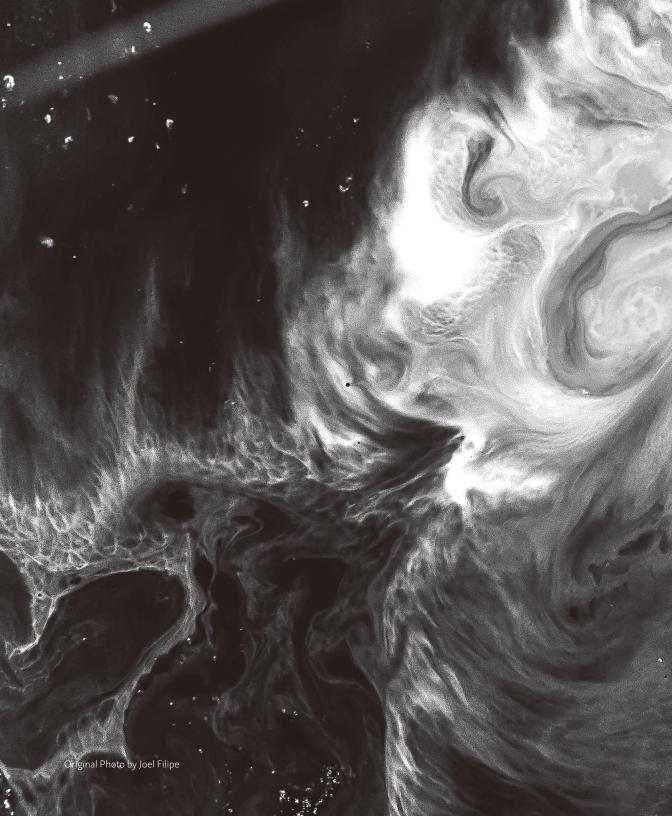
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Talking about Dreams While in Dreams

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CHAN MASTER SHENG YEN

Helt dreams to be real and existent.

his article is from a talk given at Nung Chan Monastery in Taiwan on August 17, 1986. It was edited by Ven. Chang Wu and Ernie Heau and is included in the book Chan and Enlightenment《禪與悟》(Chan Yu Wu, Dharma Drum Publishing, 2014). Interested readers might also enjoy Master Sheng Yen's account of his own personal dream published in the Spring 2014 issue of Chan Magazine, Volume 34, Number 2.

Today I will talk about dreams – dreams of sentient beings, and dreams of the buddhas. As a matter of fact, the buddhas themselves have no dreams; rather, they come into the dreams of sentient beings in order to respond to their needs. Before achieving buddhahood, sentient beings remain in the dream state without being aware of it. Therefore, to the buddhas, the dreams of sentient beings are like flowers in the sky and the reflected moon in the water, neither of which are real. Sentient beings dream without knowing they are dreaming, taking their dreams to be real and existent.

The Dreams of Sentient Beings

Before they learn about Buddhism, the dreams of sentient beings are all illusory; after they learn Buddhism, their dreams are half-awake and half-illusory. What ordinary people dream mostly falls within the following scope:

The dream is clear and distinct, and remains clear after one awakens; it lingers in the mind without being forgotten for a long time.

The dream is seemingly clear and yet vague; it seems clear while one dreams but is elusive after one wakes up.

The dream is vague and messy; it requires strenuous effort, and when the dreamer wakes up he feels physically and mentally fatigued, knowing he had a dream but unable to recall it.

The dream is a premonition of something that will happen in the future. Those who dream premonitions are more or less oversensitive; there is nothing wrong with being oversensitive, but it is easy for such people to receive responses from some paranormal powers. If they overemphasize the presages of dreams, they will have troubles in their life. Since not many dreams are premonitions, there is no need to fuss over them and seek an interpretation. Just be prudent with everything, often harbor virtuous thoughts, and diligently recite the holy name of Amitabha Buddha or Guanyin Bodhisattva, and that will be fine.

In terms of the Consciousness-Only doctrine of the Yogachara school, dreaming is one of the activities of the "independently arising thought consciousness" (mano), which, together with the five sense consciousnesses, makes it the sixth consciousness, and its function is thinking. According to Yogachara, consciousness has eight aspects. Those related to the senses of the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and body;

with their respective functions, are the five base consciousnesses. The function that corresponds to the brain's central nerves, and which forms thoughts, is the sixth consciousness. The function of storing the karmic seeds and reactivating them in a new birth is the eighth, or "store consciousness" (Sanskrit *alaya*). That which takes the store consciousness to be the "permanent" self is the seventh consciousness.

If the sixth consciousness generates functions concomitantly with the first five consciousnesses, it is called the "thinking consciousness that arises in tandem with the five (sense) consciousnesses." If the sixth consciousness does not correspond with the first five consciousnesses but acts independently, it is called the "independently arising thinking consciousness." The thinking consciousness that arises while one dreams is called "independently arising in a dream," and the thinking consciousness that arises while one is in samadhi, "independently arising in samadhi." Therefore, if a dream results from pressure on parts of the body, or from certain muscles being stimulated, then it is not the independently arising thinking consciousness; rather, it is the function of the thinking consciousness that arises with the five sense consciousnesses.

Categories of Dreams

Most people's dreams roughly fall into four groups:

When one has enough sleep but is not yet fully awake, it is easy to dream, and because the body is fully rested, the dream is clearer and more distinct.

When one has just begun to sleep but not yet soundly, and the body has not fully rested yet, a dream may be chaotic, or half-muddled and half-clear.

When one is woken up but dawdles in bed, turning around and covering up to sleep again, it is also easy to have a dream. When a spirit or a paranormal force appears in one's dream to foretell something, what one sees and hears comes from communicating with the paranormal force from outside.

As mentioned above, not everyone has premonitions; when this occurs, it is usually very clear. However, according to general experience, most dreams that occur in the first half of the night will not come true; after one has had a full, sound sleep, the rate of dreams coming true is higher. The followers of Buddhism, especially Chan practitioners, will treat dreams as delusions or illusions; even if they actually have an apparent premonition, they will not be troubled by it.

One who dreams a premonition learns in advance of what has not yet happened but has been foretold. For instance, rats know beforehand that there will be a fire, and ants know beforehand that it will rain. Legend has it that in Taiwan, a certain kind of broad-leaved grass can foretell a typhoon, that some dogs can forecast a disastrous incident, and

the like. This is all because before an incident takes place, the karmic forces have already been activated, the causes and conditions are already existent, and the cause and effect have already ripened; so it is impossible to avoid it. In terms of the phenomena, they are all things that have not occurred yet; in terms of their potentiality, that has already been completed. For those with the predictive power, or those whose consciousness is more sensitive, or those who have special karmic relations with a given incident, they would see in their dreams the circumstances of the incident that is about to take place.

Mental Power and High Sensitivity

By means of meditation, one may also derive the power of knowing, feeling, or seeing something in advance. When in the course of meditation your mind becomes so clear and lucid, with only few wandering thoughts, you may foresee a sound or a sight before it comes about. This is not a miraculous

power, but a high sensitivity. When Venerable Chi Chern of Malaysia attended a seven-day Chan retreat at the Chung Hwa Institute of Buddhist Culture in Beitou, he already heard the sound of the hand-chime before the time-keeper struck it to mark the end of one sitting session, as if time had flowed backward, with the sequence of events reversed; he was very amazed about it. If we can explain presages in this manner, there is no need to explain them with mystifying stories or tales about ghosts and deities; otherwise, we would be fostering superstition. Indeed, ghosts and spirits do exist, and those with more sensitive nerves would



certainly have a sharp receptivity, so it is easy for them to receive the powers sent forth from ghosts and deities. However, the presages and premonitions are not always furnished by ghosts and spirits; as long as one has a stronger mental power, one could generate this kind of power, too. Therefore, in the dreams of ordinary people, both distinct and premonitory dreams are mostly phenomena manifested by their own physical and mental reactions.

The dreams of most people as mentioned above are the long night dark dreams made within the dream of samsara. Those who have not transcended the three realms have the "dream of sectional birth and death," while those who have transcended the three realms but have not achieved buddhahood have the "dream of transformational birth and death." For example, the Song of Enlightenment by eminent Master Yongjia says, "In dreams there are clearly six paths for sentient beings; upon awakening one sees that the great chiliocosm is completely empty." This dream mainly refers to the dream of vexations in the sectional birth and death. In other words, sentient beings amidst the vexations of samsara are dreaming at all times and all places. Since time without beginning, if they do not go beyond samsara, they will have to transmigrate among the six destinies of existence, as if remaining in a long, dark night that drags on and on, in which they dream one horrible dream after another.

Beautiful Dreams Are Always Short

Of course, amidst the three realms, one would also have happy dreams occasionally, such as taking birth in the heavens or abiding in meditative concentration. However, "a pleasant night in spring is always too short;" happy dreams are transient and one wakes up in no time. After one's blessings are



Photo by Aarn Giri

exhausted or the power of meditative concentration has subsided, one will reenter into the interminable nightmare of samsara that drags on and on. For instance, Zhuang Zhou's dream of himself being a butterfly, and the dream of enjoying a wealthy, glorious life in the imperial city of Handan, wherein a dreamer experiences fifty years of courtly life in one short dream, are all happy dreams and fantasies. In the records of Chinese Buddhism, we also read about the dreams that revered masters experienced during spiritual practice, such as Venerable Master Xuyun's dream of "ascending to the Tușita Heaven," Hanshan Deqing's dream of "visiting the bathing pool of Mañjuśrī," Yuan Zhongdao's dream of "receiving the invitation from Yuan Zhonglang, my younger brother, to go to the Western Pure Land," and so on. These dreams are all very vivid and clear. Are they real or unreal? We may say they are unreal because all dreams are unreal; we may say also they are real because they represent the practitioners' mental states; however, once we know they are dreams, they have of course already departed from the dream state.

Six Months Dreaming

Recently, a lay follower of mine brought a laywoman to visit me. He told me, "Some time ago, this lady fell sick and was hospitalized. Because the disease was rare, the doctors were at a loss how to treat her, and just tried to keep her alive by giving her injections and infusing fluid nutrition through her nostrils, so much so that they could not find on her body any veins to make injections, and the muscular tissues shriveled like an ant's nest; finally she went into a coma, and was declared by the doctors to be in a vegetative state. So, she lay on the sickbed like this. And after six months, a miracle happened; she came around little by little from the coma, eventually moving her body and speaking softly. However, she had come back from another world, and was not the person born to her parents anymore."

This is the story this lady told me: "As I personally perceived it, those six months were just a short while. I strolled buoyantly and arrived at a carefree and uninhabited world, where there was no dust, no mess, and no noise, and all the grass, flowers, and trees as well as the ground were all made of gold, silver, pearls, and other jewels, which could not be compared to or described with any treasures in the human world; I just felt that they were so solid, pure, and subtle. Then a thought occurred to me: why is there no mud at this place? I would like to pluck a flower and take it back. Then I had a second thought: since everything is so perfect, it is superfluous to

pluck the flowers. So I withdrew my hand. In that uninhabited world, I felt an indescribable happiness in my mind. Soon after, I left that world of flowers and trees, and came to a hill. On top of the hill, I came across a couple, a man and a woman. The woman walked in front, and was apparently pregnant. Somehow she suddenly stumbled and fell, so I rushed forward to help her up. In the meantime the man had caught up on us, so I left the pregnant woman to the care of the man. In the next moment, I floated down the hill idly and woke up. After regaining consciousness, my family told me what has happened. Only then did I know I had remained unconscious for six months; nevertheless, it was just a short while in my conscious mind. The dream was so brief; why was it already six months when I came round? I remained puzzled despite much thought. And so, Master, I purposely came to ask you to tell me in which realm was my dream after all."

I said, "I'm unable to interpret dreams; however, according what I read in the sutras, your situation was similar to that of the birth from a womb in the border region described in the Infinite Life Sutra (Skt. Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra), taking the lotus womb of spontaneous birth as the palace, the small one of which is one hundred yojanas (about seven or nine miles) in diameter, and the large one, five hundred yojanas in diameter. In this big palace, for five hundred years in the time of the Western Pure Land, one does not see the Buddha, hear the Dharma, or see any bodhisattvas or shravaka sages. The reason for this is that although one makes a vow to be born in Amitabha's Pure Land, one still harbors a doubt in one's mind. As a result, one is born in this lonely palace."

Why was this lady able to go there and return again? Mostly likely, she had too much hindrance from her attachment to affections. Although she cultivated meritorious deeds by engaging in giving and charity, she does not understand Buddhadharma, and was unable to cut off her attachments. Therefore, being unwilling to part with her husband and children, she had come back to the human world. Then she said that, after the recovery, she did give birth to a quite healthy boy for her husband.

The Interminable Dream of Sentient Beings

From this instance, we see that with a very brief time fleeting by in a dream, six months had elapsed in the human realm. This shows that pleasant dreams are always transient. However, there is also a situation where a short time in the human realm turns into a long period of time, such as the dream of enjoying a wealthy and glorious life in Handan. The reason is this: usually the standard of time is calculated on the basis of sunrise and sunset as well as the body's biological working; under the dual restriction of the

tangible body and environment, we establish a common standard. Once we depart from the tangible physical body and the world it relies on, time will have no fixed standard, but can be long or short depending on the perception of one's own thoughts. When there are many active thoughts, one feels that time is long, and when there are very few active thoughts, one feels that time is short.

Therefore, we beginners on the Buddhist path have been immersed in a long, interminable dream for eons – since time without beginning – and enduring it with a lot of suffering. As the sagely, liberated buddhas and bodhisattvas look at it, they do not perceive time at all. This is because the tathagata always remains in concentration, without a moment outside of concentration; since there are no delusive actions in concentration, there is naturally no perceivable time. Sentient beings perceive time as long or short exactly because they are having dreams within the dream of samsara.





Yesterday, a disciple of mine came with a sorrowful look to give me advice, saying, "Master! You should take good care of yourself, because last night I dreamed that you died. Thinking that the master was not old enough and should not leave us so early, I was so upset that I cried out loud, 'How could the master have died?' Then I woke up weeping."

I said, "How ignorant you are! The master in your dream died, but the master outside of your dream isn't dead. I have nothing to do with your dream at all."

Another disciple asked, "There are many people who have dreamed that the master taught them and helped them in their dream. Did it have nothing to do with you, Master?"

I replied, "It's true that they did dream such a dream, and it's truly me while they're dreaming, yet it's their own business, something within their own mind. Even those who have never seen me may dream of me. I do not need to enter into their dreams, but I could still be a part of their dreams."

Likewise, the buddhas, bodhisattvas, and those who have attained liberation know that sentient beings suffer when living in the dream of samsara. Sentient beings also perceive the buddhas and bodhisattvas entering the ocean of samsara to fulfill universal deliverance. Yet there is no need for the buddhas and bodhisattvas to become trapped in the sentient beings' ocean of samsara and suffer together with them, so they have already departed from suffering. As far as the buddhas and bodhisattvas are concerned, though sentient beings exist in the ocean of the pure nature of the buddhas and bodhisattvas, their existence amounts to non-existence. As far as sentient beings are concerned, though the buddhas

and bodhisattvas do not really appear in the interminable dream of sentient beings, sentient beings perceive buddhas as real.

Who Awakens First from the Interminable Dream?

When sentient beings - especially Chan practitioners - practice Buddhadharma after hearing it, it is easy for them to be aware that they are dreaming amidst samsara. Once they know they are in an endless dream of samsara, they are already on the threshold of leaving behind such a dream. Why? Because when they gain the power of Chan concentration, it is easy for them to reflect that in the past, their minds have been deluded, scattered, muddled, and vague, like dreaming an illusory dream. Therefore, as long as they derive some benefits from practicing Buddhadharma, they will see the life of practice more clearly, and enable themselves to practice diligently. If this is coupled with the guidance of the Buddhist principles of no-self, impermanence, and emptiness of self-nature, etc., they will be able to waken themselves from their illusory dream.

If one knows for sure that one is dreaming an endless dream of samsara, one should try to find a way to get out of it. And one should not only get out of the dreams of suffering but also of happiness, because it is easiest for happy times to flee by, whereas difficult and painful time will last endlessly.

I read about a government official at the minister rank, whose three generations of ancestors were all in high government positions. Someone said, "This minister differs from the mass of people. He was born with a silver spoon in his mouth, having strong backing and superior background; therefore, he has a smooth sailing career and a meteoric rise, getting promoted to higher and higher posts quickly." Most

people think that blue-blooded young people from wealthy, noble families lead a luxurious, easy life since their childhood, doing whatever they want, having a fortunate life that many people dream of. However, this minister himself perceives it differently. In an interview, he said that he was not born to be a minister. Although he had ample food and clothing and did not suffer from hunger and cold, born of a prominent family, he had to bear the pressure from the family and society, and the sense of duty to exert all effort. He worked hard for his education; learning - from primary school to earning a doctorate from abroad - was by no means easy. After returning to Taiwan, he went through various trials, and had to remain vigilant and careful at all times and places. These stressful, demanding situations are not something that outsiders can understand.

This shows that the dream of wealth and glory is not necessarily a pleasant one. Even if it is, when one awakes from the dream, there will be nothing left. Nevertheless, we still should not be careless or absent-minded before we awaken. If we wish to not dream bad dreams, of course we should endeavor to engage in virtuous deeds, such as giving. If we wish to have the happy dreams of a prosperous life and ascend to heaven, we must first cultivate the five precepts and ten virtues, and even the mundane meditative concentration. If we wish to wake up from the dream of samsara in the three realms, we must further develop selfless wisdom. Therefore, before waking up from the dream, we should first perform the "Buddhist work in the dream" well. If we can in everyday life avoid doing bad deeds, speaking bad words, or harboring unwholesome thoughts, we can be sure that we will not have bad dreams at night or have bad luck in the daytime, and that the day for us to awaken from the dream of samsara will not be in the endless future. 🔊

Human Beings, Not Human Doings

— BY ———

VENERABLE CHANG JI

enerable Chang Ji served as the International Affairs Special Assistant to the late Chan Master Sheng Yen. As Dharma Drum's representative to the United Nations, she has participated in many international conferences, including the World Economic Forum, the World Bank, and meetings on climate change. She is committed to teaching the tenets of contemplative action to young adults worldwide, and facilitates programs for young leaders in conflict and post-conflict areas. This article is taken from a Dharma talk presented during the Stillness in Motion Seven-Day Online Retreat, held in March 2021. Edited by Buffe Maggie Laffey.



OW IS EVERYONE DOING? THANK YOU FOR your commitment and taking the time to engage in retreat practice even though it's a virtual Chan hall. This is day six of the retreat; each day you've been given quotes to contemplate from Master Sheng Yen's book Zen Wisdom: Conversations on Buddhism. Today's quote is:

Do not do anything that will make you feel tense, tired, or miserable. If you whip yourself all the time, you will be of no use to others or to yourself. Be as mindful as you can. With meditation as a supporting discipline and Buddhadharma as your guideline, compassion will grow naturally. Do the best you can, but do not push too hard.

What I find interesting are these phrases:

"whip yourself all the time"

"be mindful"

"compassion will grow naturally"

"do the best you can but don't push too hard"

It feels like it's an equation for something, so we'll examine each of these.

Whip Yourself All the Time

Why are you hard on yourself? Maybe you are thinking: "I have to make the method work. I'm in a retreat, I have to be in a Chan state of mind. The method is supposed to be a formula; I'm not getting the expected outcome. The teachers have taught various methods, I should be there already. I should get it. My mind is too distracted. I can't focus. I'm wasting my time. I can't do this. Maybe I will do it when the center resumes in-person retreats again – it just isn't working for me now."

Sound familiar? Instead of just allowing the mind to settle and awareness to expand, instead of just

experiencing how our mind is agitated in the present moment and having faith it will gradually settle, we create suffering. And when we feel unease we whip ourselves over feeling that, too. This is our entrenched habit of dissatisfaction, *duḥkha*. Resisting what IS, the disorderly and chaotic reality of suchness. It is this resistance that creates suffering. A frenzy of justifications, blaming and victimization. Then the next question comes: how can anything good come from pain and suffering? Why am I doing this?

Everyone experiences pain and suffering in life. It's part of being human. However, suffering is optional. Many are so uncomfortable with suffering that they engage in a lot of aversion. We're very good at whipping ourselves and others with this denial and aversion. However, we could instead respond with openness or compassion.

I would like to draw your attention to the thinking brain, to our thoughts. Over-thinking is the best way to remain trapped in your head. This is because our heads dictate reason and logic. The brain tends to rationalize our desires and reactions. Over-reasoning, as many of us have probably felt, creates resistance as well as the urge to control every aspect of our lives. We get in the habit of identifying with the brain chatter that attaches us to the details of daily living. As René Descartes said, "I think, therefore I am." But we are not our thoughts or our heads, we are not the cerebral and analytic commentary that talks to us constantly.

The Head

Don't get me wrong, the head is not a bad thing. The positive attributes of headspace are: focus, organization, concentration, memory. It is solutions-oriented. These are all excellent qualities for executing action. When we want to do something, we need our heads

to organize our actions for accomplishing what we set out to do. We get into trouble only when the head becomes the judge and the censor, when it limits us rather than serves us. That's the part that gets in the way and excels at whipping us and the objects of our blame.

The head is the logical voice that tends to dictate our day-to-day lives. The key words here are "I, me, mine, our." The head creates a sense of separation. It creates the silo – a duality of I versus them. The head speaks to us from a particular and individual set of beliefs that we have accumulated from childhood, life experiences, education, the media, social culture, and so forth. When we stop and listen it can be surprising how the head speaks to us. Our own head may not be telling us the truth; the reality of suchness. Our head could be distorting reality with justifications

that revolve around the ego self; this censoring judge is the part of the practice we seek to be aware of but not be attached to. We need to see it for what it is: a thought, and discharge its energy.

The Heart

The heart is expansive, intuitive, and creative. It's the place we are open to when we feel overcome with gratitude, joy, or passion. When we are open to our heart, our head suspends its commentary. We simply BE in openness, not rushing towards something, but resting in the state of allowing suchness. The heart transcends linear time and space. When we're deeply touched we experience expansion, beauty and peace. This state can be a powerful resource to us if we can



Photo by Tom Swinnen

quiet the head, and not be distracted by its insistent chatter, judging and censoring.

Each one of us is a vast energy source, connected to unlimited knowledge, peace and well-being. The heart often speaks to us quietly and with common sense. But we define who we are based on the narrow habits of the headspace, the part that's dictated by our society. The head is a great servant, but the head is a terrible master.

Fear of the Great Unknown

Let me give you an example of when judging and censoring in our headspace hijacks our being: the single greatest threat we face is actually the fear of failure. Humanity is at a critical time when we have



created a perfect storm of crises: climate change, the pandemic, polarization between social groups, the militarization of many of the institutions and social platforms that we had trusted to protect our interests. These crises are here now and we have to navigate them all at once. There are very strong emotions associated with this, massive grief and fear.

As I considered these crises I thought "I can't let this happen! I've got to do something." Then my ego self said "You can't do anything, you're nobody. Nothing you could do will ever work." I had a dialogue screaming inside me between these two parts of myself, light saying "Do something," and shadow saying "You can't do anything." I realized then that I have been taught that being visible was physically dangerous. My programming was: stay smaller at any cost to stay safe. In my nervous system, the fight or flight instinct is basically saying "You do that, and you die," while my heart is saying "If you don't do that

we're all going to die." So I lived in this place of being completely confronted by my neuroticism, my fear, my lack of belief and the fact that I was knowingly letting that win. I felt the insecurity of who we are, our illusory comfort zones, in relationship to what we are called to be, our potential, the black hole of the great unknown.

We grow our potential when we heed our hearts, the compassion that we have within us for all sentient beings. But our society and our heads tell us that this is absolutely impossible. We must not let the psychology of fear take over our hearts. Under the guise of fear of failure is shame. It's an interpretation of someone who is to be blamed for inactions or failures. Shame is a very difficult emotion to deal with. Our society doesn't cope with it well, and we as individuals do not cope with it well. We tend to use any word other than shame. We would prefer embarrassment or guilt.

Four Different Directions

So what do we do to avoid feeling that shame? In a sense we could go in four different directions. The first one is, we attack the other, the object that is preventing me from reaching my goal, and going against my way: they are wrong. The second direction is defending yourself which is the same thing; it's about making ME right. In the third direction, we attack ourselves; sometimes we whip ourselves before others whip us. It's a defense strategy – the fight response has this aggression towards others and towards ourselves. The fourth direction is alienation and apathy, the flight response. We run away and hide, we hide from other people, we hide from ourselves, in the end we hide away from life itself.

These four directions map a compass of shame avoidance. You've got on one side a fighting stance of aggression and violence, and on the other side a flight/denial stance of depression, self-harm, and isolation. Hiding from yourself through all kinds of addictions and distractions. These aggressions and depressions, in short represent all the major social crises we face within and without, with the avoidance of shame sitting absolutely at its core, as judge and censor. Now if we're going to deal with that, in terms of ways forward, we have to bring down that ego self with its sense of isolation and shame.

Cancel Culture

Another manifestation of how we whip ourselves is how we write off and dismiss the adversary. When something is written off it's nulled, ended, voided, done. Criticism seeks to correct, but writing-off seeks to punish. The person who is written off must be made to suffer. We have seen in shame avoidance that it could be others or ourself. Unlike criticism.

writing-off seeks to silence the adversary, the other that is keeping me from my goals. So the mere act of just disagreeing is viewed as a threat to my safety, or even an act of violence towards me. As a result we create a climate of fear by promoting guilt-byassociation, moral grandstanding, threatening the same punitive actions towards the target or anyone who comes to their defense, through demonizing attacks, extreme rhetoric and exaggerated displays of indignation. Over time this created "reality" becomes our worldview that we defend with great possessiveness. Whereas critiques are concerned for accuracy, when we engage in writing-off we're willing to assert inaccuracies, distortions, and falsehoods, and we will stick with them even after they are demonstrated to be untrue. So surprisingly this attachment is also a form of whipping ourselves.

The good news is, you can get over the fear of failure by calling everything you do an experiment. because you can't fail an experiment; you can only learn by understanding what it was going on. Discern without judging, allowing what arises, to arise. When it goes, let it go. Understand that the head is goal oriented, it's a good servant in getting things done. But it's a bad master when it plays judge and censor, and it's super-duper good at whipping us and our perceived adversaries.

Be Mindful Without Whipping

The next part of the quote: Be mindful. How do we practice mindfulness without whipping ourselves? We've heard some good advice from the other teachers in the previous day's talks. Rebecca Li spoke about the importance of maintaining a beginner's mind. Don't assume you already know what is going to happen. Every moment is fresh with new causes and conditions. Everything is interconnected like a

dance, like looking at the sunlight coming into your room. You don't really see the sun rays, what you see are the tiny particles of dust. They don't fight or compete with each other, they just be. Flowing into the vacant space that another dust mote left, flowing away and allowing another to take its place. Smooth, fluid movement.

Simon Child talked about awareness: pay attention to this moment and look into our minds now. See how our sense of self protects and defends against criticism. But do it with an attitude of openness; an unbiased mind that is neither grasping nor averting.

Chang Wu Fashi talked about being with emotion, experiencing the emotion as a tactile feeling. We're not using our brains to think about feeling emotional; instead notice how it unfolds within your body and mind, but in a relaxed way. Don't ignore it, don't suppress it if it comes, but when it goes, don't hold onto it either. Feeling and experiencing it will



help us realize that it is a fleeting thing that in essence has no substance or permanence.

Gilbert Gutierrez taught that it is difficult to contemplate what is arising around us in our daily lives. It is easier when we are sitting on the cushion – our mind is watching the method; that is contemplation. Take that contemplation to our surroundings. Don't "do" meditation; "doing" engages the head. Instead, "be" meditation – allowing, not grasping. Catching a feather on a fan, letting awareness lightly land.

Mindfulness is Not Reactive

This does not mean we become passive. This does not mean that everything that happens is okay. Rather, it means we develop a practice allowing us to manage seemingly provocative situations without stress or reactivity. It's called resilience. Mindfulness, seen this way, is simply being present with whatever is happening. It's simply seeing things as they really are, without false characterizations and embellishments. It is abiding in conditions without the erroneous assignment of affinities or aversions to what is happening. Without being judge and censor. Anger cannot arise when we are mindful. We can't whip ourselves up.

Being mindful is not the equivalent of inaction. If it is possible to remedy the situation, then of course we should. But to do this we do not need to become stressed, simple awareness is all we need. Instead of reacting with the emotional habit of irritation and annoyance, we should examine the situation patiently. We should not become angry just because things appear not to be going our way; the aim of a mindfulness practice is to break that habit so we can live a calmer, happier and healthier life. If we accept the perceived suffering with a peaceful mind, then the reactive energy will have no opportunity to arise.

Anger and fear will not arise because we are not reactive. Then we will be able to look at frustrating situations through a realistic lens and with clear-sightedness, and free ourselves from unnecessary mental editorializing and suffering.

Lessening and managing anger and fear is not the point. The point is to be patiently present with things as they are, and to let go of all our fabrications of how they ought to be, so that the frustration, stress and anger never arise. Instead of creating anger and fear and then managing it, we simply stop creating it. This is mindfulness.

Human Beings, Not Human Doings

The third phrase from our quote is, "compassion will grow naturally." Cultivate openness when things fall apart or don't go your way. Instead of falling into the habit of dis-satisfaction, we should encourage a balance of compassion and equanimity in our lives. And also in our practice, so we do not whip ourselves when things don't go our way. It's not a failure, remember, it's an experiment. We learn from experiments, and what gets in the way of that? How you are being matters. We have high aspirations for how our lives pan out. Most of the time when we have a desired outcome, we ask ourselves "What do I need to DO to get there?" We are usually focused on the "doing." But as one of my teachers said: we are human beings, not human doings. Therein lies the answer to all of our questions about how we can manifest the very best in life. The answer is being, not doing.

Oftentimes we're conditioned to run and fix a problem, slapping a band-aid on it and calling the problem solved. But our suffering does not need to be solved. The obstacles blocking us from our own Buddha nature do not need to be removed or nullified or written off. If we are looking for a true change that

will provide deep, lifelong, unwavering happiness, we must start with how we are being. The intention must be set on how we can live with integrity, compassion, power, and purpose; that should be first and foremost. In Buddhism we call it "making a vow." Once we've made a commitment towards our intention, the details that the thinking head and the world require will fall into place naturally.

Therefore the antidote to being hard on your-self is: allowing, discovering and experiencing your mind and its un-ease. There is an openness to accepting present reality and not beating up yourself when you fail. Seeing the present moment, as it is, what is here now. Instead of saying, "What is the problem? What is missing?" Because when you say it that way immediately you go into a "doing" space. So let thoughts come in and go through just as that: thoughts. Thoughts are not our reality, it is not "we think therefore we are." Rather, "we BE, therefore we are." Our entrenched thinking, reinforced within the head, makes experiencing that almost impossible.

New Ways of Seeing

We often take the approach: the same old thing but better. But the same old thing does not work, because we have to go beyond the approaches that got us here in the first place. So we go back to the beginner's mind, resting fully in the present moment. Every moment is fresh, searching for the unthinkable, the new ways that we can't see because of our old ways of looking. Don't think; be. Allow. Experience. When our minds are calm and subtle through our practice of meditation, and not agitated and striving, we begin to investigate the mind in a spirit of openness. No judgment. Just discernment.

You will realize that the old world we've come to know will begin to come apart at the seams. Our

internal systems of all kinds of perceptions, of how we relate to ourselves and the world, will begin to break down and continue to do so. You will see their illusory and constructed nature. In response, the Buddhadharma will guide and champion ways of seeing and acting that acknowledge the world as a chaotic, disorderly but deeply interdependent place. It's a place that will not yield to attempts to overpower it, as our brains want to do. Control is an illusion. We must come to understand the nature of complexity, chaos, and interconnectedness so that we can inter-be. We must train ourselves in ways of acting that embrace this unmistakable reality so that we are able to move and adapt in a field of uncertainty.

Don't Push Too Hard

Another phrase from our quote is, "Do the best you can, but don't push too hard." It's good to have a goal to reach. It's like giving rise to a vow in our practice; it's a commitment. But there is no blueprint, no specific order as to how we reach the goal. The more you try to control the progress and the direction, the more they will move and elude you, just like trying to catch a feather on a fan. This dissatisfaction will generate even more agitation when you push too hard. So, doing the best you can is allowing yourself to float towards your goal with a relaxed mental attitude. A feather will land on the fan naturally when the causes and conditions are right. You can't rush it.

What comes to mind for me is the practice of diligence from the six paramitas of the perfections of the bodhisattva path. Diligence is taking joy in what is virtuous, positive or wholesome and engaging with it gladly, without hesitation. This is a mindset that leads to engagement. It is an antidote to laxity or tense pursuit, which are two big afflictions to our practice, especially to meditation. It is practicing in a

way that is neither too loose nor too tight, recognizing that sometimes there's a need to just rest in pure awareness. This is more than an obligatory "just do it;" it's wanting to do it and doing it happily.

Three Kinds of Diligence

Diligence permeates all of the paramitas and invigorates them. Master Sheng Yen talked about three aspects of diligence. The first one is armor-like diligence – this is a joyous engagement that arises from diligent practice and it acts like an armor to protect us against doubt and discouragement. You give rise to the vow of practice, and instead of seeing limitations, you see an opportunity, a journey.

The second kind of diligence is, diligence in action: all my experiences within and without are opportunities to practice. It's like what Gilbert said, "Practice is not only on the cushion but practice is in my life, and my life is practice." Here practice and daily life are not separated and put into individual silos. Practice is experiencing the Dharma in our lives. Every moment is our own personal investigation of the mind, without delay and with enthusiasm.

The third kind of diligence is pervasive and compassionate diligence. To work for the sake of others, not just when it is convenient for me but always using the power of my own practice to benefit sentient beings. Not by imposing ideas onto them, but through helping them find security and ease of mind by the nature of our own practice to inspire – empowering them to engage the practice towards their own liberation. Not giving them the fish, but teaching them HOW to fish.

We practice diligence so that we can persevere and be fearless through our real challenges. Recognize that these challenges are all part of learning and growing. There are no excuses for not going on that



journey. Let me use an analogy: ancient Polynesians were able to navigate across huge oceans in tiny little canoes. How could they have done that without massive cruisers and scientific navigation devices? Their canoes were never screwed or glued together. Instead they were lashed in pieces so that they were flexible and could move with the waves and not break. These Polynesian sailors knew the laws of nature, and used that indigenous knowledge to navigate this huge body of water.

Breakdowns and Breakthroughs

These are our lessons for today: do the best we can, but don't push too hard, so that we're always flexible, and can move with the waves of life and not break to pieces. Even if we used glue for our life canoes, the fact is that the energetic impact of any breakdown is that it releases us from a future we did not want. So any breakdown could be a breakthrough. Although

there is an almost irresistible force to return to the old normal, in that space of release and disruption we tell ourselves "We're not going to take this anymore." It's actually time to create a new set of possibilities, the beginner's mind. One of the things I know is, there is no such thing as a new normal. What we actually have is a continuous series of the next now, and the next now, and the next now. Our life is a journey of possibility. We're continually invited to BE, to allow the unfolding of our lives and to investigate the nature of our minds.

So don't whip yourself all the time. Be open and mindful of our dissatisfaction, and how that manifests and unfolds. It's okay; discern, but don't judge. Compassion will naturally arise when we don't hijack ourselves to be the judge and the censor. Do the best we can, but be careful not to fall back onto old habits of doing and striving according to illusory blueprints in our brains. If not, we fall back into the fear of failure and whip ourselves again, and the cycle continues. %



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DAVID LISTEN

Photo by Ramiro Pianarosa

avid Listen has been sharing Chan/Zen meditation and Buddhist teachings for over 15 years, leading intensive meditation retreats, classes, and activities throughout North America, Europe, and East Asia. Previously known as Venerable Chang Wen (常聞法師), he was one of the few Western monastic disciples of Chan Master Sheng Yen. He had been a monk for over a decade, and has since returned to lay life to share the insights of the Buddha in his own creative way. David is fluent in Mandarin Chinese, and has done extensive work translating the teachings of Chinese Buddhism into English, both on retreat and in published works. He holds a Bachelor's in Environmental Studies, a Master's degree in Mental Health Counseling, and is currently a counselor at a clinic for people suffering from severe mental illness. He also has his own life mentoring/coaching practice, guiding people in their cultivation of wisdom and compassion on an individual basis. This article was written in March 2020, at the start of lockdown, but the teaching remains useful today.

UE TO THE RECENT COVID-19 PANDEMIC, many of us have been instructed to stay at home to prevent further spread of the virus. Here in New York City, it's been a little over one week, and many people have become acutely stressed over dealing with the sudden changes. Some are adapting to the complications of working at home, while simultaneously helping their children adjust to daily life as schools are closed. Others need to assist family members with managing their anxiety, as people with already-existing mental health issues are more deeply shaken by the upheaval. Many people are fearful about the possibility of lack of resources, and are feverishly stocking up on food, in addition to worrying about the health risks of transmitting the virus. Some have been laid off altogether and are facing a complete financial crisis. What can we do to help ourselves deal with these challenges with peace of mind?

We can create peace of mind by addressing three aspects: 1) perspective, 2) attitude, and 3) practical methods. Perspective refers to our conceptual view of the situation – not only including the pandemic but our life in general – especially how we look at our mortality. Attitude is how we face the pains and

vicissitudes of life, and mostly refers to the underlying emotional pattern of response to immediate stimuli. Practical methods are the concrete ways in which we implement our perspective, ease our emotions, and behave in response to the situation.

Perspective

When things are going well, everything seems to be the "same as usual." We have our jobs, our relationships, our wealth, and our health. Without noticing it, we adopt a perspective that makes things seem permanent. The seeming stability of daily life and of our own personality gives us an impression that our "self" and "my world" is constant and unchanging. Only when there are major changes like a death in the family, a loss of career, or a sudden break up of a relationship do we notice the fragility and impermanence of everything. The pandemic is a period where obvious and drastic changes occur that disrupt our sense of stability. During these times of sweeping change we are taken off guard, shocked, and emotionally unsettled. It's hard to face the reality of change and we attempt to hold on to everything for dear life - and end up panicking and hoarding

supplies (toilet paper strangely being among one of those "essential" items for daily living). We can easily forget our neighbors and think mostly of ourselves and those that we feel are important to us. We fight for resources and conflicts occur between people. This creates internal and external turmoil.

There is an option to this perspective and selfcentered behavior: the perspective of impermanence. If we always keep in mind that everything is changing, not stable, and ultimately will pass away - or recycle into something else - we'll be prepared at every moment for the reality of impermanence. If we observe change in the little facets of our daily life - our body's gradual maturation or aging, our developing personality, our increase of knowledge or decrease of memory, the coming together and departing of our daily interpersonal interactions, and the rise and fall of our thoughts and feelings - we'll be ready for anything. We are ready already. We accept the reality of impermanence and without panic or fear, do what needs to be done. A situation like a pandemic is then perceived as a normal result of the change that occurs when populations and human activities develop in an unstable way. We know that illness and death are part of life, while striving to protect life and improve the health and well-being of our self and others. With the view of everything - great and small - as impermanent and subject to being influenced by the conditions around it, we develop a clear and cool mind which is without fear.

Based on this perspective, we see the importance of needing to respond appropriately to crisis. During the pandemic, we don't become apathetic, thinking, "Oh we're all gonna die anyway ... life's impermanent ... enjoy what you can while it lasts." Rather, we learn about what's happening, how to protect ourselves and others, and are careful about not spreading illness. We limit our social engagements,

keep a distance, wash our hands often and avoid touching our eyes, nose, or mouth, etc. We responsibly yet calmly deal with the situation. And with this outlook, we'll be more aware of when our thinking and behavior is either helpful or hurtful. We need to plan and act; we don't need to worry and drown in fear. After we take action, we accept the results. If our original plan didn't work, we make adjustments. However, worrying and then mindlessly looking for things to bring us security doesn't help. "What if this happens... what if that happens... what would we do if.... It will be terrible ... it's the end of the world!" This kind of thinking is useless and harmful. It can spread faster and be more fatal than viruses. The last thing we want during a health crisis is more of us in the hospital due to fear and anxiety. If we adjust our perspective, we'll be able to adjust our thinking, and our emotions will stabilize as well. We'll become clear, calm, rational, and efficient in responding to our challenges.

Attitude

No one likes pain or discomfort – well, at least not many people. It's more accurate to say no one likes to feel something that they don't want to feel. If we want to feel healthy and we are sick, we suffer. If we want to feel warm and we are cold, we suffer. If we want feel relief by purchasing that last item in the market and someone else grabbed it first, we'll suffer. If we want to feel secure knowing that we will have our jobs tomorrow, yet we are not sure and feel anxious, we suffer. In this time of pandemic, many of us are facing the uncertainty of what life will be like tomorrow. The pain of losing a job and dealing with the resulting lack of financial stability is certainly not easy to deal with. Previously having a pantry full of food, and suddenly, having empty shelves and

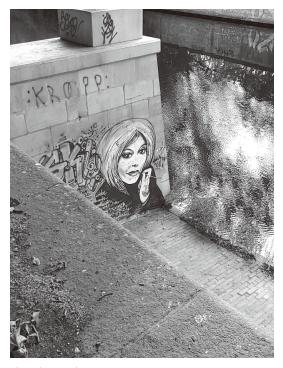


Photo by David Listen

growling stomachs is not pleasant. Habitually, we often resist, worry, or complain about our hardships and feelings. We become angry, afraid, or even apathetic when we are faced with hardship. We arouse our animal responses of fight, flight, or freeze. These responses have less to do with rational thinking and more to do with our perceptions of danger, pleasure or pain, like and dislike, seeking and avoiding. These responses disturb our emotions and cause us to respond hastily and unskillfully. Emotional reaction is the foundation of chaos.

How do we avoid reacting emotionally? How do we not get caught in fear and anxiety? It's important to remind ourselves that resisting discomfort doesn't help. When we resist what is unpleasant, we add another layer of tension and dis-ease on top of it. We

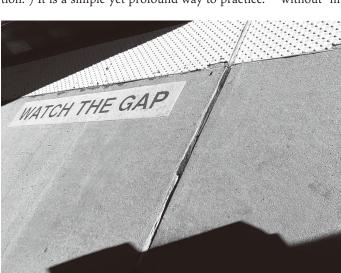
add a stratum of emotional thinking which clouds our mind and disturbs our body. If we remind ourselves to drop our resistance, we relieve ourselves of that extra layer of suffering. Seeking for something out of reach is the same. We often seek emotionally for that which we can't have. We want this situation to be over already, and add a layer of obsessive thinking which also clouds our minds and is a burden to our body. If we remind ourselves that seeking obsessively is harmful, we have the awareness to drop it. We likewise relieve ourselves of the "seeking mind" which is not a healthy intention, but a burdensome emotionally-bound way of thinking. If we can remind ourselves to be aware of and to let go of these two extremes of emotional response, we'll be able to accept the reality of the situation. We'll be able to utilize our realistic perspective mentioned above to deal with the situation properly, with emotional ease. Thus, attitude and perspective are intertwined; our rational and emotional aspects of mind - perception and feeling, respectively - are bound together.

Yet, in order to be successful in adjusting our perspective and attitude, we need to be keenly aware of our thoughts and feelings. To be aware, doesn't mean simply having an idea, "Oh, I know how I feel ... I know what I'm thinking," and merely reflecting on our thoughts and feelings in the past or future. To be aware means to be fully mindful, or conscious of, the workings of our body-mind in this present moment. To have such a moment-to-moment awareness requires training for most people. Although we are conscious beings - and always aware to some extent - much of the time our awareness is distracted and clouded by our patterns of absent-mindedness. We often lose awareness and are only partially conscious of what's happening within and without. Our minds are clouded like dusty or dirty mirrors; what's reflected in them is not accurate.

Method

The means for us to develop our capacity for mindfulness are manifold. Some methods focus more on stabilizing the emotions and others emphasize seeing into the nature of our experience. To be accurate, those approaches for stilling mental distractedness are described as "calming" methods. Those which function to help one have a penetrating insight into our human condition are described as "insight" methods. This article is by no means the proper way to introduce these approaches in great detail, as that requires a book or even volumes. Better yet, direct instruction from a qualified mentor or teacher is ideal. But here, I will share one Buddhist mindfulness approach which develops both calming and insight, and can help us deal with adversity in a thoroughgoing manner.

A very direct and powerful way to calm and clear our body-mind is through sitting meditation. In the Zen tradition, there is method called "just mind sitting" (in the Chan tradition, it's called "silent reflection.") It is a simple yet profound way to practice.



Simply put, "just mind sitting" is where we sit still and lay all of our mental and physical burdens to rest. We don't think about anything and we don't do anything. However, thoughts still come and go, and impulses to act also come and go. Emotions rise and fall due to habit and our unaware reactive patterns of thought. We still hear, see, and feel, yet we simply sit and observe it all happening. Although we are not actively doing something - as with some meditation methods that require the practitioner to reflect on some topic, silently recite a word, or visualize some image - "just mind sitting" does away with all kinds of mental busy-ness and allows the thinking mind to settle and become silent. It's analogous to when we put a cup filled with dirty water down on the table, in time the sediment will naturally settle to the bottom, and the water will be clear. With "just mind sitting" we just sit, yet we should be clearly aware that we are sitting. We must have a sharp awareness that our body is there, poised upright, relaxed, and stable. Our attitude must also be relaxed, not resisting or seeking anything, while fully alert. Otherwise, if we "just sit" without "minding" ourselves sitting, it's likely that

we'll fall asleep or be in a mental haze – like looking off into fog.

You can try this method at home, by adopting an upright sitting posture (on a chair is fine) that allows you to balance yourself without using muscle to hold your body in place. Then, allow your muscles to relax fully, allowing the structure of your body to support itself. Relax mentally, drop all thinking and be simply aware of your body sitting. Don't focus on your breath or certain parts. Just know your body is there. If you get distracted and realize that

you've been daydreaming - lost in thought then continue to know that you're sitting. No worries, no problem. Most likely you'll often drift away into mindless thinking. But again and again, return to the simple awareness of the act of sitting. In time, drifting thoughts will quiet down, and you'll have a sharp and clear awareness of sitting. You may not even feel your body so much, but you'll know



that you're there sitting, relaxed, and fully aware of what's happening in and around you. At this time, you won't be bothered by anything, yet fully alert and at ease. You feel at peace, while wakefully knowing what's going on. This practice starts with sitting, but can be extended into all aspects of daily activity: walking, eating, cleaning, working, talking, having a meeting, or even dealing with an emergency.

Summary

With the foundation of a relaxed, stable, and clear mind, cultivated through "just mind sitting," you'll be both calm and insightful. Insight refers to the capacity to notice the problematic thinking patterns which interfere with your life. You'll notice the emotional responses that disturb you and others. In the face of adversity, you'll then be able to drop the unskillful thinking and responses and choose wise, healthy ways to think and behave. Regardless if you're in a crisis such as this pandemic, or if it's another

"ordinary" day, you'll be well prepared to deal with any challenge. This is not magic, and the results do not come to complete fruition overnight. It's a practice, and you develop it over time. Yet as soon as you practice, you get results. The moment you are minding yourself sitting, walking, working, eating, talking, or any activity, in that moment you are emotionally calmer and mentally clearer. The more you practice, the more natural it becomes. You'll eventually discover firsthand that self-centered obsessive thinking leads to a host of conflict, whereas societal concern and compassionate action can resolve the worst of crises.

Although the above approach is not a comprehensive means for how to deal with the stress of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is a core practice for dealing wisely and compassionately with all crises – big or small. This is the "better way to be confined:" where we open ourselves to our capacity for mindful awareness and compassion, while confining ourselves to whatever space we must be in. **





Seven-Day Online Retreat

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RIKKI ASHER

ikki Asher is one of Master Sheng Yen's earliest American students; she attended the first meditation classes he gave at the Temple of Enlightenment in the Bronx, in the 1970s. She has a Master of Fine Arts (MFA) in painting from City University of New York (CUNY), and a Doctorate in Art Education (EdD) from Columbia University. Rikki taught college classes for art education training, and though now retired, continues to work with inner-city teenagers and various adult and senior adult groups. In her teaching style Rikki combines her art and education background with meditation, mindfulness and yoga techniques.

Retreat Center (DDRC) often begin informally in the parking lot. People chat and learn about other people's meditation retreat experiences and where they come from. Light conversations and laughter follow into the reception hall where room assignments and linens are distributed. The evening meal is offered in the dining hall. Afterwards, in the Chan hall, participants sit at their assigned seats. Workpractice jobs for the week are given out, such as dish washing, toilet cleaning and sweeping. Next morning, the sound of the wooden boards alerts everyone to be on their cushion by 5:00 AM. All in all, the retreatants will sit for a total of ten hours a day, and hear a Dharma talk by a single Dharma teacher.

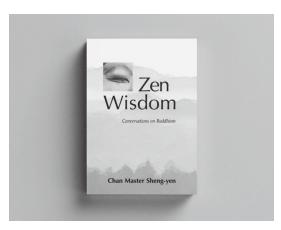
None of the above applied to our seven-day *online* retreat. Rather than meeting informally in a parking lot, or gathering together in the dining hall for silent meals, *Stillness in Motion* participants sat in meditation for three to five times a day in their own homes on their own cushions or chairs. In this way, a virtual sangha was formed.

Traditional ninety-day retreats date back to the time of the Buddha, when monastics practiced together during the long rainy season. Following this model, the New York Zen Center posted an online ad for their version: Commit to Sit - A Ninety-Day Online Practice Period. Intrigued, I signed up. Beginning with the first day, I sensed deep practice emerging from the combined sitting of over one thousand participants. Readings from Master Dogen were posted each morning, with two follow-up questions for contemplation. Every Sunday, a Dharma teacher gave a ninety-minute talk. The teachers were from the United States, Mexico and Japan. The retreat style was very accessible and included three daily sitting meditations. There were long breaks in between sittings and Dharma talks; participants used this free time to go about their daily life activities. At the end of the day, everyone joined break-out groups, which gave us an opportunity to discuss the readings. It was an intimate way to learn from and get to know each other. The participants quickly developed strong bonds.

After this ninety-day program, I visited DDRC and talked with Venerable Guo Yuan about my experience. I was enthusiastic when he reacted positively to my idea of doing something like it at DDRC. He suggested a ninety-day retreat. Knowing how much work goes into planning any event of that length, I suggested seven days, and he agreed. Soon after that, our first meeting was scheduled. We had amazing, competent people on our committee. One of the most important components of an online retreat is a good information technology (IT) team. We recruited excellent folks who made sure that everything worked properly, and who could trouble-shoot when things didn't. Advertising was another essential aspect; after designing an image for the retreat, we publicized the event in several venues. A few months later, we were ready to accept applications.

Originally, we called this event a retreat, but afterwards we reflected on this terminology and decided it was not a retreat. There were no interviews, no slow walking, no moving meditation, and fewer meditation sittings than on a traditional in-person retreat. It is probably better to call an event of this nature a "practice period." Our unique seven-day practice period included:

- An international group of Dharma Drum teachers:
 Ven. Guo Yuan, Ven. Chang Ji, Ven. Chang Wu,
 Simon Child, Žarko Andričević, Gilbert Gutiérrez
 and Rebecca Li.
- Live-streamed Dharma talks from a different teacher each day, followed by a question and



Master Sheng Yen's book Zen Wisdom Archive Photo

answer session, recorded and made available to listen to again.

- Daily morning emails containing a text selected from Master Sheng Yen's book Zen Wisdom, along with two questions about the text for contemplation and later discussion.
- Regular opportunities to sit in our online Chan hall with participants from around the world.

Each morning at 7:30 AM a meditation monitor guided the group through simple head and neck exercises, then led a meditation sitting. While the monitor observed the meditators in a gallery of small windows on their computer screen, on the meditator's screens the monitor appeared full-screen. After a bell signaled the end of the sitting period, the monitor led a gentle body massage. Afterwards, the four great vows were displayed on the screen and recited. There was a break until 1:00 PM when again the monitor led a meditation sitting, followed by the Dharma talk, and then the question and answer session. After that came a second break until the 7:00 PM sitting, the last sitting of the day. This was followed by break-out groups where participants discussed the quote they

had received in that morning's email. We used quotes from Master Sheng Yen's book *Zen Wisdom*, each selection emphasizing practice in daily life.

Through daily online Dharma talks, regular meditation sessions, daily practice emails, group discussion, and reciting vows, we supported ourselves and each other through the wisdom of Dharma as our world begins to heal from a traumatic and challenging year. Here are a few enthusiastic replies from our post-event survey:

Wonderfully clear and uncomplicated, Master Sheng Yen's Zen Wisdom is meant to be studied over many sittings. He combines wisdom cultivated from years of study and practice with knowledge of the contemporary world. The readings contain insights into meditation on life, and how Chan (Zen) and Buddha's teachings are relevant today. The clear and useful guidance through Shifu's answers to student questions re. principles of Chan practice is considered essential teachings for any serious practitioner of Chan. During the week, together, our practice and study of this text clarified our experience of Chan Buddhism and how it relates to and integrates into our lives.

At home was a good amount of time to integrate teachings into my practice.

The sincerity of the practice impacted on me the most. It was the energy received from the compassion of the Dharma teachers and monitors, and the energy from the diligence of participants. Very much grateful to all the causes and conditions that made this happen, and very happy that Shifu's wishes to spread Chan in the West are being realized. Amituofo!

When I registered, I wasn't certain how well the retreat would work out. It worked very well – almost seamlessly – thanks to good organization, a good balance of sitting, lecture variety, and suitable sharing. I and most, if not all, participants think it should be offered annually in addition to on-site retreats. This is because such an online retreat enables participation by meditators who are incapacitated, too distant, taking care of others, etc. It also helps participants stitch their practice into everyday life. I offer my gratitude to the teachers, monitors, technical volunteers – and other participants.

I realized the power of practicing together even if it is virtual

This virtual retreat provided me the opportunity to be able to practice and work daily. Now, I listen to an hour Dharma talk in the morning and 30-mins at night. I also plan to add this practice into an intensive summer program for my students,

so they have the tools to cope with their stress during this difficult time.

After the last day, feelings of delight filled my being. We did it! People loved it! Through every single person involved in planning and attending, strong collective energy emerged. According to our feedback, a deep sense of community evolved through the virtual world of Zoom. People from all over the world (including Dharma teachers) attended. I envision Zoom retreats like this one in the future. Even during the most difficult times during our planning, I never doubted whether or not we could make this happen. I was amazed at how committee members cared about and usually accepted each other's ideas - that was the secret to the success of this retreat. It was a dream I had, and although I was steering the ship sometimes, it took mutual dedication and concentrated effort towards this project to make it happen, and to keep the ship afloat. In my opinion, it is a manifestation of Shifu's desire to bring Chan to the West.



International Dharma Drum teachers share their insights in the virtual world of Zoom.

Archive Photo

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Retreat Report: Seven-Day Online Retreat

by Anonymous

I USED TO THINK THAT SINCE Shifu (Master Sheng Yen) was dead, that the Dharma Drum Retreat Center had no teacher anymore. But after being part of this retreat I realized he is not dead at all. He lives in each of the teachers to which he gave Dharma transmission, and in his writings. The teachers are like the fingers of the hand, each so different but doing the same work, the work of the hand.

I was surprised because the teacher I thought was least, gave me the phrase I used throughout the retreat, "let the method do the work." I spent the last five years at a Korean Buddhist temple so my method was hwadu (Chinese huatou) given to me by my teacher. I didn't have much problem using this method and could relax my body so this retreat was very wonderful.



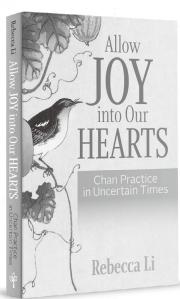
I gleaned different ideas from each teacher. Gilbert used the idea of a knot very tight. During Simon's talk I was interrupted so I watched the YouTube video so I shouldn't miss anything. I loved the talk about anger. I guess we all get angry at birth so it's such an innate part of being human. Like most participants I am in Žarko's fan club. He is so very soft and listens and understands the problems of practice and people and how to explain it clearly to them.

In the daily writings of Master Sheng Yen, I totally loved his clear definitions of our unwhole-some characteristics, greed, anger jealousy etc. I will copy them down as a traffic light for my life. Seeing Venerable Guo Yuan as the monitor in the morning was so extraordinarily wonderful, a true gift. He is the arm of the hand or as I said to my friend, the real thing.

The one part of the retreat I avoided for the most time is the group breakout session. I am naturally shy and it was too much for me, but I forced myself to do it on the next to last day. I couldn't relate and felt uncomfortable but I talked anyway. I remember that Shifu said it is good for me to write a retreat report so I am doing this right away.

To have had this retreat done so very skillfully, in my two-room apartment, is a true miracle. Thank you for all the work that went into making this retreat possible for so many people. **





Allow Joy into Our Hearts

Chan Practice in Uncertain Times

Rebecca Li

When faced with an event that disrupts every aspect of our lives, how do we avoid succumbing to hopelessness, bitterness, and other destructive habits of the mind, and instead find ways to allow joy, kindness, and generosity to fill our hearts in the midst of suffering? Rebecca Li explains how we can, through the cultivation of clear awareness, transform challenging circumstances into fertile soil for wisdom and compassion to grow by facing each moment with tenderness, clarity, and courage.

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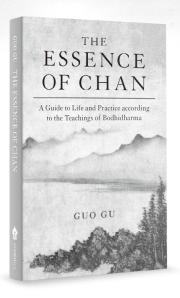
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