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We should face our own faults at all times, realizing our faults and hoping we will not have any more shortcomings from now on. Maybe next time we may still have faults but that is another issue. At least in this present moment, we can return to the state without fault. If one is able to do so in the process of practice, then one is making progress at all times.



CHAN MASTER SHENG YEN

*Liberated in Stillness and Motion, 1998*

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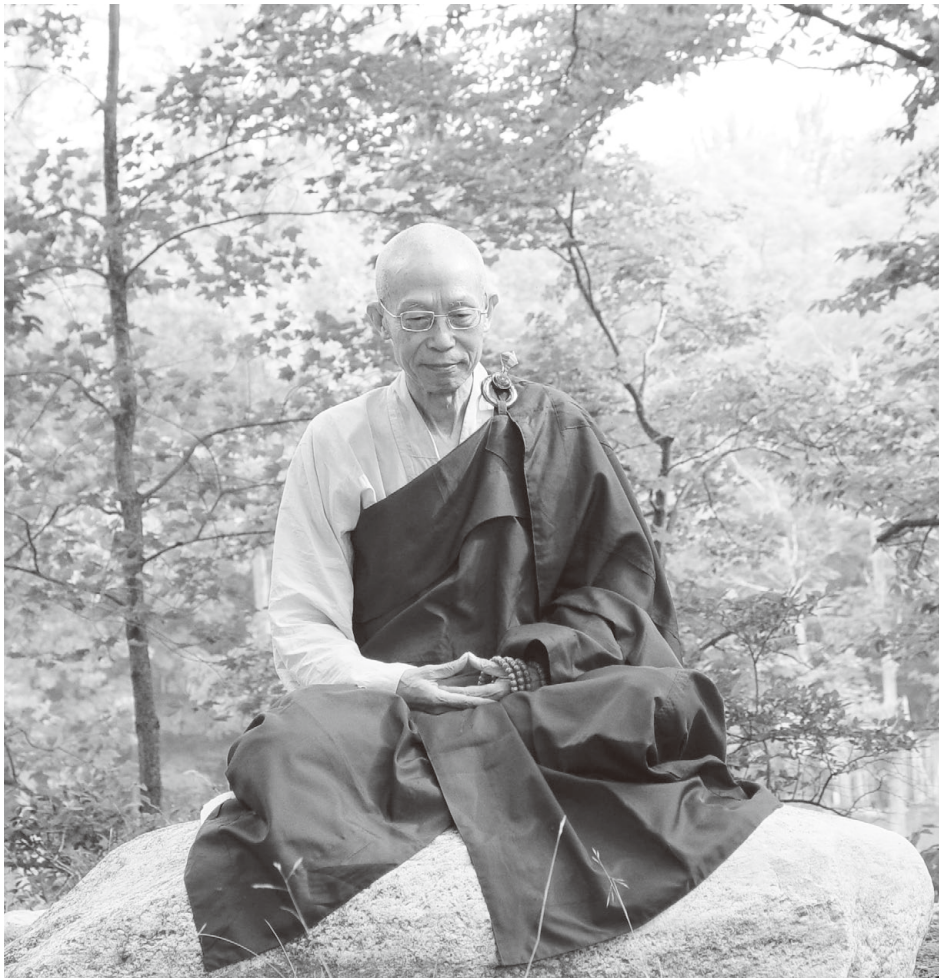
# *Faultless*

— BY —

CHAN MASTER SHENG YEN

Photo by Tomoko Uji

This article is from a talk given at the DDM Chan Meditation Camp, January 20, 1996. It is excerpted from Master Sheng Yen's book, *Liberated in Stillness and Motion*, originally published in 1998 as “動靜皆自在” (*Dongjing Jie Zizai*). It is one of a selected number of books from the Master's “Complete Works,” and was translated under the auspices of the Cultural Center of Dharma Drum Mountain, Taiwan. Translation by Ven. Changluo, and editing by Ven. Changwu and Ernest Heau.



Chan Master Sheng Yen DDM Archive Photo



RECENTLY A FAMOUS CELEBRITY DECLARED that, in terms of morality, he was beyond reproach – faultless. This stimulated much public discussion. My thought was that this kind of declaration can be viewed from various perspectives. There is no need to disbelieve that this person has not done anything illegal in his life, and need not feel guilt towards others. He seems to have a clear conscience. Therefore, there is nothing wrong with saying that he has no faults. However, from the Chan perspective, everyone has faults. There is no need to be afraid of having faults, because knowing we have them can help us to improve. If you considered yourself perfect, would you still want to practice meditation? Therefore, from the perspective of practice, to hope to have no faults is to realize that you do have faults, and that in itself is to be faultless. Not being aware of your own faults is the greatest fault. But if you are aware and make adjustments immediately, you can then be faultless at any time and everywhere.

It is rare to have no regrets throughout the course of one's life, from youth to old age, but the greatest regret is to feel remorse, yet fail to repent. If one has no regrets and no need to repent, then one is a natural-born sage; but in our world of samsara, there are probably few such sages. Out of religious faith, the followers of Jesus and Shakyamuni Buddha perceive them as being faultless; otherwise they would not be considered great saints. However, in terms of mentality, concepts, and actions, were Jesus and Shakyamuni without fault since birth? That depends on one's perspective.

From youth to buddhahood, Shakyamuni progressed through practice from an ordinary person to a buddha. When Shakyamuni sat under the bodhi tree prior to his enlightenment, he encountered many obstacles. Even before he left home to practice the path, he encountered difficulties. From the viewpoint

of faith, these were only manifestations of his being a bodhisattva rather than real difficulties. However, from the standpoint of practice, I believe he really did have some difficulties.

During an international conference, Master Cheng Yi from Taiwan met the Panchen Lama, and he asked the lama, "People refer to you as a living buddha. Are you a buddha?" The Panchen Lama said, "People may consider me a living buddha, but I am the same as everyone else." Is there any contradiction in the Panchen Lama's response? The fact is that from their perspective as believers, people see the Panchen Lama as a living buddha.

Buddhism believes that every human being, and in fact all sentient beings, have buddha-nature; this means we can all become buddhas. This is Buddhist faith and Buddhist belief. But if you tell someone who isn't a Buddhist that even cats, dogs, mosquitoes, and flies have buddha-nature, would they believe you? Certainly not! If you tell them, "You have the nature of a buddha and will become a buddha," would they believe that? They will probably shake their head and say, "Don't joke with me. I'm only an ordinary person; I'm not interested in becoming a buddha." However, after learning Buddhism, one knows that this is faith, and believes one has buddha-nature and can become a buddha.

Therefore, it is possible to feel that one has no faults. Why? Because after discovering that one's ideas and behaviors are imperfect, if one always immediately corrects them, this is maintaining a state of faultlessness. We should face our own faults at all times, realizing our faults and hoping we will not have any more shortcomings from now on. Maybe next time we may still have faults but that is another issue. At least in this present moment, we can return to the state without fault. If one is able to do so in the process of practice, then one is making progress at all times.

## Methods for Returning to the Faultless State

I have described the concept of returning to a faultless state; here are the methods. If our mind is disturbed, tempted, influenced, and provoked by the environment, we seldom think it is our own problem, so we blame the outside world. For example, if someone provokes us we say he is being unreasonable; if someone tempts us we may think he is disturbing us. But exactly who is being provoked, disturbed, and tempted? It's us! But why should we be disturbed, annoyed, and tempted? Therefore, we should constantly turn our thoughts inward to see why we are disturbed. If we fail to look inwards, then we certainly will be disturbed, tempted, and provoked by the environment; our emotions will fluctuate between excitement, happiness, anger, and agony. Whether it is delight or agony, it is our own reaction that arises from being stimulated or disturbed by the environment.

Recently, I had a hundred short articles that were serialized in Taiwan's *United Daily News*. Mr. Zhu De Yong drew cartoons to accompany the series. In one picture, he drew a turkey whose body was grossly fat with many sores, its head and eyes were infected with disease, and its legs were in the shape of two very big mouths. This picture, which depicted greed, was very painful to look at. A mind of greed is a mind that suffers – after getting what one lusts for, one still suffers for fear of losing it; and one suffers even more if one cannot get what one wants. Endless greed is itself a poison, a kind

of abnormal state, and the same is also true for anger and ignorance. The antidote is to realize that these poisons are addictive to the mind, and that one should return to the practice method. Do not allow yourself be deterred or affected by these poisons.

When you suffer because you cannot get what you desire, or get enough of it, tell yourself that this is a poison that is making you ill, and that you should adjust your mindset to be happier, more relaxed and at ease. Do not be moved by these thoughts and vexatious attitudes; instead, realize that they are caused by your mind being influenced by the environment. Know that as long as your mind is not moved by the environment, you can always and anywhere return to a faultless condition.

When suffering from vexations, first realize that they arise because of our addiction to the poisons of the mind – greed, anger, and ignorance. These addicting poisons have been there since time without beginning. Therefore, it is not easy to eliminate them. It is very difficult to remove an addiction to mind-altering drugs, and even harder to remove habits that one has



Photo by Arifur Rahman

had since time without beginning. But as long as one has the heart to do it, with hard work on the methods of practice it is still possible to remove these poisons.

A follower who used to enjoy eating meat and has since stopped eating it, asked me, “What else should I give up?” I said, “Due to our many habits, there are so many things we should give up, that I cannot tell you what you should give up next. But you can come to our meditation camp, and afterwards you will know what to give up!”

When troubles and confusion arise out of vexations, just return to zero – the method. Remind yourself that this is not what you should have, not what you should accept, and not what you should be moved by. Once you notice a thought that you shouldn’t have (“I noticed it!”), immediately return to zero. Train your mind to recognize when an unwholesome thought comes up, then immediately return to the method, and keep on doing this. This is the method of Chan: “Do not be concerned about wandering thoughts; simply return to the method.”

## Repentance, Not Remorse

Some people try to conceal their mistakes or avoid guilt by defending themselves; others claim innocence while blaming others; and then there are those who feel constant remorse for what they have done. During a Chan retreat one of the participants could not stop crying and could no longer meditate after I spoke about repentance.

He said, “I cannot meditate anymore, I am going home!”

I asked, “Why?”

He said, “People like me probably cannot practice. How can anyone as bad as me practice? I feel I should die and not live in this world. I am so bad I cannot practice, and I cannot succeed in my practice.”

I told him, “There is a saying from the sutras, ‘As soon as the butcher puts down his cleaver, he immediately becomes a buddha.’” That is the attitude we should have in our practice. Putting down the cleaver means to have a mind of repentance and to make amends. As long as we realize and admit our mis-

takes, let them go and make corrections immediately, this is practice.

I asked him, “Are you killing, robbing, setting things on fire in the Chan hall?”

He said, “No!”

I said, “When did you do those bad things?”

He said, “Very long ago.

I just remember doing many bad things, so I feel very guilty.”

I told him later, “In practice, we should repent rather than have remorse. To repent is not to feel remorse, but to face one’s faults, realizing they are faults, and try one’s best not to make the same mistake again. If one does that, one is already making amends. Remorse is walking into a pit of fire, and repentance is walking out of the pit of fire.” He felt happy after hearing this and did not cry anymore, and felt that he did quite well in the Chan retreat. In the past, his psychiatrist always helped him analyze his problems. I advised him to rely on himself to discover his own faults, to face and understand them and to let them go. Facing your problems, accepting them, dealing with them, and then letting them go is the best method to return to a faultless state. 🌿

FACING YOUR PROBLEMS,  
ACCEPTING THEM,  
DEALING WITH THEM,  
AND LETTING THEM GO.

# *All Sentient Beings Have Buddha-Nature*

BY

VENERABLE GUO GOANG

Venerable Guo Goang became a bhikṣuṇī in 1990. She received transmission from our late Master Sheng Yen and became one of his Dharma Heirs in 2005, when she was the executive vice-provost of Dharma Drum Mountain (DDM) in Taiwan. From 2006 to 2013 Ven. Guo Goang served as the provost of DDM, then from 2013 to 2019 she took a six-year solitary retreat. Currently Ven. Guo Goang is the Vice-abbot of DDM and serves as a senior teacher at the Chan Meditation Center in Queens, NY. This article is the first of a series of talks on The Principles and Stages of Chinese Chan Practice. Translated by Anny Sun; edited by Anny Sun and Buffe Maggie Laffey.





## Chan Buddhism

**P**RESENTLY, THERE ARE THREE MAIN STRANDS of Buddhism circulating around the world: Theravada, primarily taught in southeast Asia, Mahayana in the Chinese regions, and Tibetan Buddhism. Buddhism was first introduced to China from India during the Han dynasty (202 BC–9 AD, 25–220 AD) and it has propagated for over two thousand years since. During this process, Buddhism came into direct contact with the mainstream thinking of the time, such as Confucianism and Daoism, and after undergoing a series of adaptations, became a strand of Buddhism in its own right: Chinese Buddhism. Chinese Buddhism was at its peak during the Tang dynasty (618–690, 705–907) and Song dynasty (960–1279), with the Tang dynasty witnessing the establishment of the eight schools of Chinese Buddhism. Among these eight schools, the Chan school can be considered most

representative of Chinese Buddhism. It flourished in the Chinese regions, and spread further into many countries in Asia.

You may have heard these Chan school sayings: “the transmission of teaching does not occur through the study of doctrine” and “teaching does not rely on words and letters” and “all sentient beings possess buddha nature.” There are three collections and twelve divisions of profound teaching in the Buddhist canon, yet why does the Chan school downplay the importance of the doctrines and promote “special transmission outside of the doctrine, that does not rely on words and letters?” This is because the Chan school places emphasis on actual meditative practice, and when you are actively engaged in meditative practice, all the doctrines and texts are set aside temporarily. Consequently, the Chan school is often misunderstood as consisting only of teachings on meditation methods and techniques, and lacking in a holistic doctrinal foundation.

Contrary to that misconception, we can glean from the scriptures (e.g., sutras, recordings of Chan patriarchs' teaching, the Mahayana texts, and the *Āgama Sūtras* of Buddha's early teaching) that there is indeed a systematic and rigorous adherence of Buddhadharma within the Chan school, despite the popular slogan<sup>1</sup>. All the while the Chan school is quick to adapt to its contemporary contexts with innovations. In other words, while placing great emphasis on actual practice, the Chan school remains truthful to the fundamental doctrines and theories. It tracks proper Buddhadharma lineage, while being rife with innovative techniques of practice.

## Buddha-Nature

The concept of "all sentient beings possess buddha-nature" is in complete unison with the core principles of Buddhadharma. In the Mahayana scriptures, such as in the *Nirvana Sūtra*, there are many references to this concept. Here is an excerpt from the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*: "All sentient beings possess buddha-nature. We are not cognizant of it because it has been covered by affliction. Therefore, we should practice diligently to extinguish the affliction. The buddha-nature will then manifest naturally."

Buddha-nature is an essential concept in Mahayana Buddhism which has been given multiple names in different contexts. True suchness is one term, meaning the true suchness of the *tathagata*. Other terms are *dharmadhātu*, dharma-nature, the non-deluded nature, unchangeable nature, and the nature of undifferentiated/universal equality, among many more. We see these various terms in the sutras all referring to the same thing. It's similar to how a woman is called different names in different settings; to her children, she is a mother. To her husband, she is a wife. To her parents-in-law, she's the daughter-in-law.

She might also have other titles at the workplace. The same logic applies to the various names we have for buddha-nature.

Master Sheng Yen commented in his books that this Mahayana concept of "all sentient beings possess buddha-nature" is immensely encouraging for our practice; all sentient beings now have the hope to become a buddha. In the earlier scriptures, we do not see the term buddha-nature. In the later Mahayana scriptures, there are many references to the buddha-nature, but the concept of "all sentient beings possess buddha-nature" was not explicitly stated. It isn't until we get to the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* that the phrase is articulated. Why did the Buddha teach this? It's so that everyone of us can know that we indeed possess buddha-nature, and that this buddha-nature can be uncovered through diligent practice. Buddha-nature is unseen only because it is covered by affliction, but it is there, and we all have the potential to become a buddha. This knowledge can be very helpful in bolstering our confidence in cultivation.

## Dependent Origination

Some people may wonder that perhaps this concept of "all sentient beings possess buddha-nature" is only meant to entice people to practice; that it's merely an expedient teaching. Maybe it's only meant to be an encouragement; after all, the concept was not found in the early scriptures, nor in many of the later Mahayana teachings. Could it only be an expedient teaching? Let's turn our attention to this question, and we shall see that "all sentient beings possess buddha-nature" can indeed be traced back to the early teaching, all the way up to the Mahayana scriptures. Let's start by exploring the earliest scripture, the *Āgama Sūtras*, and see what evidence we can find relating to the concept of buddha-nature.

The *Āgamas* are a record of the Buddha's teaching. They are considered to be the Buddha's earliest teaching, ripe with doctrines and instruction on actual practice. We can characterize the *Āgamas* as encompassing the myriads and as profound as the sea. Therefore, it is a viable approach to try to penetrate the core of Buddhadharmā by studying the *Āgamas Sūtras*. In the *Āgamas*, the Buddha's teaching was motivated by the concept of dependent origination. This concept grew out of the Buddha's initial quest, searching for a method to end the suffering of aging and death, once and for all. He left home in search of an answer, and at the end he realized the principle of dependent origination. Birth-and-aging and birth-and-death are directly related to this well-known principle, which can be detailed into the twelve links<sup>2</sup> of dependent origination. By tracing these links, we can see how the Buddha came to understand the origin of aging and death, and from that origin, he expounded all the Buddhadharmā.

## Name-and-Form

The Buddha realized the principle of dependent origination when he sat in meditation under the bodhi tree. The basis of his realization was his investigation of life in reality. He starting by asking, why is there aging and death? He realized that it is because of birth. Then why is there birth? Birth exists because of becoming, which is what fuels rebirth. Then why is there becoming? Because there is attachment. Why is there attachment? Because there is craving. Step by step, the Buddha investigated and made deductions. At the end, he arrived at name-and-form, (or body-and-mind), which refers to our five-aggregates, or skandhas. Name-and-form is the composite of our five physical and mental aggregates, and it exists because of consciousness. In trying to investigate beyond consciousness, the Buddha realized that consciousness is a turning point. According to

the sūtras, consciousness turns around to grasp name-and-form, creating an interdependent loop, which sets forth the links of dependent-origination. Based on this investigation, the root cause of life is the mutual grasping of consciousness and name-and-form. This is the origin of aging and death. In other words, this is the source of suffering.

## Consciousness

Why does consciousness grasp name-and-form? This is another pivotal point in the investigation. In the sūtras we see that the Buddha tried to further his investigation and understand why consciousness exists. He then saw that consciousness grasps name-and-form and vice versa, and this is why the process is called dependent origination. But why does consciousness grasp name-and-form? It's because of ignorance. In the twelve links of dependent origination, ignorance and formation are separately listed to help us see more clearly that the reason why consciousness would grasp name-and-form is due to ignorance. Therefore, once consciousness ceases to grasp name-and-form, then the suffering from aging and death would be resolved and cease to exist. This is what Buddha discovered as the source of suffering and the way to liberation. Hence, if we can solve the conundrum at the juncture of consciousness and name-and-form, then the issue of aging and death can be resolved.

## Four Noble Truths

The links of dependent origination are the core teaching in Buddhadharmā, cinching doctrine and practice. The four noble truths were born out of this. The four noble truths of Buddhadharmā are: the noble truth of suffering, the noble truth of the cause of suffering, the noble truth of the path to end suffering, and the



noble truth of the cessation of suffering. These four noble truths are the foundation of Buddhadharma. Whether it is teachings from the early periods, or from the later Mahayana times, all the doctrines and practice methods grew out of the four noble truths. The noble truth of the cause of suffering refers to dependent origination, explaining the source behind the cycle of birth-and-death. By understanding the links of dependent origination, we can end the root suffering of aging and death. The way to resolve the suffering is called the eightfold noble path. Ultimately, bringing the link of consciousness grasps name-and-form to an end is called the noble truth of cessation.

## Path of Liberation

Next, we'll discuss reversing and ceasing the loop of consciousness and name-and-form. I've just explained how the loop came into being. If suffering is the outcome of this loop, then the reversal and extinction of the links of dependent origination will lead to the reversal and extinction of suffering. This path of realization and awakening is also called the path of liberation. The path explains how when name-and-form ceases, consciousness will also cease and vice versa. Name-and-form is the so-called five aggregates. How do we extinguish these? When we are no longer attached to the five aggregates, they will cease to arise. Then name-and-form ceases and consciousness ceases. When consciousness ceases, name-and-form ceases as well. In the links of dependent origination, consciousness and name-and-form are interdependent. They are the perceptual object of the six spheres of sensory contact.



By understanding this process, it becomes evident that the nexus of Buddhadharma is consciousness and name-and-form. If name-and-form ceases, then consciousness ceases and vice versa. When name-and-form ceases, then the six-fold sphere of sensory contacts ceases. And when that happens, the remaining links (contact, sensation, craving, grasping, becoming, birth, old age and death) will all cease. These are the twelve links of dependent origination, which explain the origin of suffering. Once we can resolve the source of suffering, then the links can be reversed and ended,

and so end aging and death. This is the ultimate way to alleviate suffering.

In the *Āgamas*, we can see that the Buddha had his priority on showing us the path out of suffering. He also focused on methods of practice that really would help practitioners depart from suffering and obtain peace and joy. Therefore, in the *Āgamas*, the Buddha stops short at the teaching of ending suffering. He spoke very little about the states beyond the alleviation of suffering. In the four noble truths, the reversal and ending of suffering is the noble truth of cessation. In other words, the early teachings contained in the *Āgamas* addressed the noble truth of cessation of suffering and the teaching stopped at reaching that goal. On the other hand, Mahayana Buddhism went beyond that goal; this is a clear distinction between the earlier and later scriptures. There is yet another important question here: Once the twelve links of dependent origination are reverted and ended, along with consciousness, name-and-form, all the way up to aging and death, is there nothing left?



Consciousness refers to our mind. Name-and-form refers to the five aggregates: form, sensations, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. Our physical body is form. What is name then? Name is mental-dharma, so is form.

## Liberation and Rebirth

Some people call consciousness “the soul.” We don’t use the term soul in Buddhism. Consciousness in Buddhism undergoes constant change, depending on what we are differentially attached to. Consciousness changes, whereas the soul is permanent and unchanging. This is the distinction between consciousness and soul.

Buddhadharma uses the concept of consciousness. Consciousness grasps name-and-form. Therefore, in the cycle of life, consciousness is the main character, grasping name-and-form, etc. up to the link of aging and death. As long as our afflictions persist, at the end of this life, consciousness becomes life-binding consciousness. It will grasp a new instance

of name-and-form in the next life, perpetuating the cycle of life. Yet, once consciousness becomes liberated, the cycle of life stops. Does it mean consciousness vanishes as well? Is name-and-form all gone?

To answer these questions, we need to look into recordings of Buddha’s teaching from the early scriptures. In Buddha’s time, there was a disciple named Vatsa, who asked Shakyamuni Buddha, “Liberated one, will the people who have been liberated be reborn? Or will they not be reborn?”

Vatsa asked, “Where will the liberated bhikkhus be reborn to?” Shakyamuni Buddha replied, “You asked will the people who have been liberated be reborn? Or will they not be reborn? Or where the liberated practitioners will be reborn to? Such questions are inappropriate. Neither is the way.” Vatsa further asked, “You said using the term reborn is not suitable. Then do you mean not-reborn?” The Buddha replied, “You asked about not-reborn. Not-reborn is also not suitable.”

Why is it unsuitable? We feel puzzled by the Buddha’s answer. Don’t the liberated bhikkhus enter nirvana? Doesn’t the exact meaning of nirvana mean not to be reborn? Then why does the Buddha say that not-reborn is also inappropriate?

So Vatsa continued to question, “If this is the case, then are the liberated ones simultaneously both reborn and not-reborn?” Shakyamuni Buddha answered, “Simultaneous reborn and not-reborn is also inapt.” Vatsa kept asking, “If this is the case, then are they neither reborn nor not-reborn?” Shakyamuni Buddha replied, “Neither reborn nor not-reborn is also an unsuitable question.” Vatsa then said, “If this is the case, then I am thoroughly puzzled and have fallen into state of confusion and chaos. I have tried asking the question this way and that way, trying all the different combinations. But the Buddha has refuted them all. If this is so, then I really don’t know what it is. Consequently I feel I’ve lost my faith in the Buddhadharma.”

## Beyond Liberation

At this point, the Buddha said to Vatsa, “You are asking about the state beyond liberation. What kind of state that might be is truly incomprehensible to us ordinary, unliberated beings. It’s natural that you would be confused and lost.” What is the real answer? Shakyamuni Buddha said, “Dependent origination

is truly profound, incomprehensible and inconceivable. The liberated state of the liberated ones is also profound, incomprehensible and inconceivable. It is absolutely quiescent and wondrous. The state of nirvana transcends logical analysis. It cannot be imagined or deduced via language. Only the holy ones can understand it through true realization. No matter what method you use, it would still be incomprehensible. One cannot comprehend it without realization.”

Then the Buddha used an analogy to try to make things clearer to Vatsa. There are many analogies in the sutras to help practitioners understand better. Analogies use real-life concepts to illustrate a point. It’s mentioned in the sutras that wise people would try to understand Buddhadharma through analogy. So here, Shakyamuni Buddha used burning fire as an analogy. He asked Vatsa, “If there’s a fire burning in front of you, would you know it?” Vatsa answered, “Of course I would know. If there’s a fire burning in front of me, I would certainly know.” Then the Buddha asked, “Why does the fire in front of you burn?” Vatsa replied, “The fire burning in front of me burns because there’s grass and fuel. That’s why it burns.”

The Buddha continued to ask, “If the fire in front of you goes out, would you know it has gone out?” Vatsa answered, “Of course I’d know the fire has gone out.” The Buddha kept asking, “When the fire in front of you goes out, where has it gone? Has it gone to the east, the west, the south, or the north? If I ask you this question, how would you answer?” Vatsa replied, “Shakyamuni Buddha, your questions doesn’t seem to be quite appropriate. Fire burns because there’s grass and fuel for it to burn. When the fuel is exhausted, then the fire naturally goes out. Why would you ask me where the fire has gone?” Over here, the Buddha is already guiding Vatsa to see the inappropriacy of his own questions. Vatsa said the Buddha’s questions are ill founded. Yet he himself had just asked the Buddha

about where the liberated sages would go after their lives have ended. Such a question is similar to Buddha's asking about the fire, asking where the fire goes after it's out. The logic is the same.

At this point, the Buddha said, "The Buddha tathagata, the liberated sages, and the holy disciples of the Buddha have all become liberated from name-and-form. They have obtained liberation from the five aggregates. This is profound and immeasurable and inconceivable. Therefore, when Vatsa asked whether the Buddha will exist after his physical body has ceased to exist, the questions are ill-fitted. It is not fitting to say "does not exist," or "not exist and not not-exist." The questions asked are simply unsuitable. Why is that? Because the sages who are liberated from the five aggregates are immeasurable, profound and inconceivable from the perspective of ordinary beings.

## Physical Body and Dharma Body

The Buddha used fire as an analogy to demonstrate that our physical body is a composite of the five aggregates. The Buddha tried to explain to Vatsa that the five aggregates are our physical body. Some people think that, while the Buddha was living, the five-aggregates physical body was the Buddha. Once the physical-bodied Buddha entered nirvana, then they question whether the Buddha still existed. Shakyamuni Buddha thus said to Vatsa, "From the perspective of the five-aggregates, once the Buddha enters nirvana, the five aggregates will be cut off and will not be reborn. There will no longer be the five aggregates." Why is that? This is because the fuel for the five aggregates is exhausted. Just as in the fire-analogy, when the fuel is used up, the fire will no longer burn, and the five aggregates will not be reborn.

Once the five aggregates stop being reborn, is it like the extinguishing of fire, that nothing is left? At

this point, Vatsa realized the truism in the Buddha's teaching. He then said, "It is actually like a great big tree." We all know that, from the perspective of a human, everything in this world undergoes birth, aging, and death. All phenomena and all objects undergo becoming, decaying and changing. This process is inevitable. Buddhadharma simply captures this process with the term "impermanence." Because everything undergoes changes, it can be damaged. It's just like a tree; after the leaves, branches, and bark gradually fall off, there remains a pure core of the tree. This is an analogy. From this analogy, we can understand that, once a sage enters nirvana, they will not be reborn out of the five aggregates. But it doesn't mean nothing is left. The Mahayana scriptures say that when the Buddha's physical body is gone, his dharma body remains. It's the same principle. We see parallel explanation in other scriptures as well, that even though the physical bodies of the Buddha and sages are gone and they are no longer reborn out of the five aggregates, still their dharma bodies. In this story, the pure core of a tree is used as an analogy to explain the liberated sages.

## Nirvana

Let's turn to look at the concept of nirvana from some other scriptures. We just said when the five aggregates cease to rise, and when one is no longer born from the five aggregates, then we call it nirvana. Nirvana is obtained when greed, anger, and ignorance are completely exhausted. These three are the fuel for the cycle of birth-and-death. Greed, anger, and ignorance are representative of vexations. When we can completely cut them off, then the five aggregates do not rise again and this is nirvana. So when we talk about nirvana, it doesn't mean that nothing exists at all. Instead, what is gone? Greed, anger, and ignorance are gone. In other words, nirvana is the exhausting of greed, anger and



ignorance. Nirvana is not the disappearance of the dharma body. In the Buddha's era, there is an example of people thinking nothing is left when an arhat died. Such understanding is called an erroneous view, or deviant understanding. Today we know it's not true that there is nothing left when an arhat has died.

## What's Left Behind

The Buddha taught that when consciousness has diminished, then name-and-form is also extinguished. But the nature of consciousness is not extinguished. This pure nature of consciousness is described as the core of the mind, which is what's left behind when all vexations and pollutants are cleared away. When consciousness is gone, the nature of consciousness is not gone. This nature of consciousness is precisely the buddha-nature that is discussed extensively by the Mahayana school. The buddha-nature does not cease. It is also called the dharma body (*dharmakāya*), which

also does not cease. In the *Āgamas*, the Buddha touched upon the point that this nature does not cease. It would be an erroneous view to think that nothing is left after consciousness and the twelve links have all disintegrated. The nature of consciousness does not cease to exist, and it has been compared with the pure core of the mind in the first analogy.

## The Pure Mind

The nature of consciousness is not exhausted. Greed, anger, and ignorance can be exhausted, but not the nature of consciousness. When the twelve links of dependent arising are reversed and ended, the nature of consciousness is not exhausted. It is the pure mind. The pure buddha-nature is not exhausted. Therefore, in the scripture, nirvana is referring to the extinction of greed, anger, and ignorance. Nirvana does not refer to not-reborn. It does not mean the nature of consciousness is eliminated. The way the Buddha's disciples understood his teaching was that, it would be a devious, erroneous view to think that nothing is left after the twelve links of dependent origination have perished. According to this logic, it means when the twelve links are reverted and disintegrated, when all vexations are eliminated and one enters nirvana, the nature of consciousness still does not perish.

At this juncture, we can arrive at a clear understanding of the Mahayana teaching that "all sentient beings possess buddha-nature. It is not known nor seen only because it is shrouded by vexations." This explains that all sentient beings possess a mind. When our pure mind is buried under affliction, the pure mind is then called consciousness. Consciousness is attached

to name-and-form, resulting a continuous cycle of birth and death. When vexations are eliminated, then buddha-nature manifests. We can also understand this buddha-nature as the nature of consciousness. Buddha-nature does not perish along with the perishing of affliction. This is the rationale behind Mahayana saying that “all sentient beings possess the buddha-nature;” this phrase originates from this core teaching.

## Conclusion

By examining the links of dependent origination, we learn about the root of life, of birth, aging, and death. Once we see the root, then we can try to eliminate suffering from the root. Once the root of suffering is eradicated, so is the suffering of aging and death. To reverse and eliminate suffering depends on the reversing and ending of consciousness and name-and-form. Once this is completed, the remaining links will also disintegrate, revealing the pure, undeluded mind. Consciousness is the mind deluded, contaminated by ignorance. Through practice, we can cut off and clear away ignorance and vexations; then consciousness becomes wisdom, or the so-called pure-mind. Such a mind is unpolluted and pure. The Mahayana school calls the pure-mind buddha-nature.

“All sentient beings possess buddha-nature” is a fact. This fact can be understood through practice, by going through the process of unhinging the links of dependent origination. As long as we practice diligently, we can eliminate the shrouding affliction and then the pure buddha-nature will manifest. The nature of consciousness exists and remains once all vexations are eliminated. We also call this a process



where “consciousness is transformed into wisdom.” The nature of consciousness is then revealed as compassion and wisdom.

This is the purpose of practice. We need to practice diligently. With the knowledge that all sentient beings possess buddha-nature, we know we can slowly and gradually eliminate all vexations and manifest our compassion and wisdom. Why is that possible? Because of buddha-nature. We possess pure nature of the mind, buried under ignorance and vexations. But ignorance can indeed be cut off and eliminated. 🌿

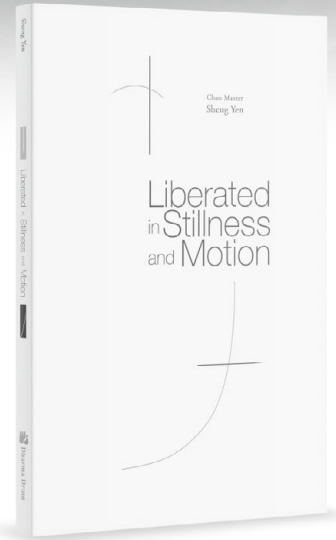
- 
1. “The transmission of teaching does not occur through the study of doctrine” and “[it] does not rely on words and letters.”
  2. Twelve links of dependent origination: (1) ignorance, (2) formation, (3) consciousness, (4) name-and-form, (5) six sense bases, (6) contact, (7) sensation, (8) craving, (9) grasping, (10) becoming, (11) birth, (12) aging and death.

## Liberated in Stillness and Motion

### Chan Master Sheng Yen

“Correct Chan does not use miracles or the summoning of spirits as its appeal, nor does it emphasize other-worldly phenomena. Chan takes simple normal living as its basis, lessening afflictions as its purpose, being relaxed and at ease. One does not regret the past; rather, one actively prepares for the future, moving steadily ahead while being fully in the present. Although I introduce Chan in contemporary language and words, my perspective does not deviate from the teachings of the Buddha and the lineage masters.”

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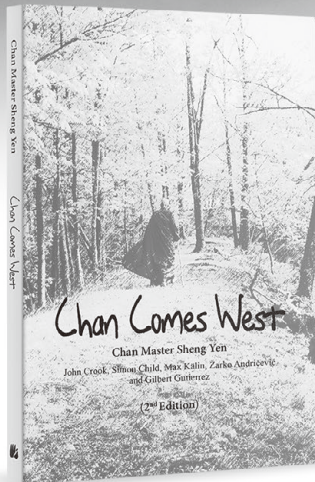
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John Crook, Simon Child, Max Kälin,  
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The Ten Characteristics  
*of the*  
**TRUE MIND**

— BY —  
VENERABLE GUO XING



Venerable Guo Xing is one of the Dharma heirs of Chan Master Sheng Yen. He ordained as a monk in 1986 and for twenty years he assisted Master Sheng Yen in leading at least fifty meditation retreats in Taiwan, Southeast Asia, and the United States. He has served in various posts and offices in the Dharma Drum Mountain organization, including abbot of the Dharma Drum Retreat Center at Pine Bush, New York, meditation counselor at Nung Chan Monastery in Taiwan, guiding instructor at Dharma Drum Sangha University, and director of Dharma Drum Mountain's Chan Hall. This article is taken from Venerable Guo Xing's Chinese book “楞嚴禪心” (*Leng Yen Chan Xin*; English: *The Mind of Chan as Illustrated in the Śūraṅgama Sutra*), published in 2020 by Dharma Drum Publishing. Translated by Jenni Kuo and Anny Sun. Edited by Victor Lapuszynski.

## Excerpt from *The Śūraṅgama Sutra*\*

THEN THE THUS-COME ONE Poured forth resplendent light from the symbol of purity on his chest. The brilliant light, radiant with hundreds of thousands of colors, shone all throughout the ten directions simultaneously to illuminate buddha-lands as many as motes of dust, and it shone upon the crowns of the heads of the Thus-Come Ones in every one of those radiant buddha-lands. Then the light returned to shine upon the great assembly – upon Ānanda and all the others.

Thereupon the Buddha said to Ānanda, I now will raise for all of you a great Dharma-banner so that all beings in all ten directions can gain access to what is wondrous, subtle, and hidden – the pure and luminous mind that understands, so that they can open their clear-seeing eyes.

Ānanda, a moment ago you said you saw my fist send forth light. What caused my fist to send forth light? How did I make the fist? And what were you seeing it with?

Ānanda replied, The Buddha's body is the color of crimson-tinted gold from the River Jambu. His body is like a mountain of precious stones. It sends forth light because it is born of purity. With my own eyes I saw his hand when he held it up for us and made a fist by curling his wheel-imprinted fingers.

The Buddha said to Ānanda, Now the Thus-Come One will demonstrate a truth for you. Following the wise, who use analogies as aids to understanding, Ānanda, let us use my fist as an analogy. Without a hand, I couldn't make a fist. Without your eyes, would you be able to see? Are these two situations similar?

Ānanda replied, They are, World-Honored One, because without my eyes, I couldn't see. Therefore the Thus-Come One's making a fist can be compared to my using my eyes.

The Buddha said to Ānanda, You said they are comparable; however, they are not. Why? A person with no hands will never make a fist. But one whose eyes do not function will not be entirely unable to see. Why? If you asked a blind man on the street, "Do you see anything?" he would no doubt reply, "All that I see in front of me is darkness – nothing more." Reflect upon what that might mean. Although the blind man sees only darkness, his visual awareness is itself intact.

Ānanda replied, It's true that all a blind man sees before his eyes is darkness, but can that really be what we call "seeing"?

The Buddha said to Ānanda, Is there any difference between the darkness seen by the one who is blind and the darkness seen by sighted people when they are in a completely darkened room?

No, World-Honored One, there is no difference between the darkness seen by sighted people in a completely dark room and the darkness seen by the blind.

Then suppose, Ānanda, that the blind person, who has been seeing only darkness, now sees before him a variety of objects because suddenly he has regained his sight. In such a case, you would say it is his eyes that see. Therefore, when a sighted person who has been seeing only darkness in the darkened room now sees before him a variety of objects because someone has suddenly lit a lamp, you'd have to say, by analogy, that it is the lamp that sees. Now if a lamp could see, it would no longer be what we call a lamp. Moreover, if it were the lamp that sees, what would that have to do with that sighted person?

Thus you should know that, in the analogy, the lamplight simply reveals visible objects; it is the eyes that see, not the lamp. In actuality, the eyes themselves simply reveal visible objects; it is the mind that sees, not the eyes.

## True Mind as Visual Awareness

The true mind – along with nirvana, the buddha nature, the enlightened nature (the nature of awareness), the nature of emptiness, dharma body, prajñā, true suchness, tathāgatagarbha, and the true person with no position – are all terms that are identical in essence. They only differ in name, and these different names are intended to explain the different aspects, states, characteristics, and functions of the true mind. For instance, nirvana denotes a state that is neither arising nor perishing. The nature of awareness and the buddha nature speak to its functions of cognition and awareness. The nature of emptiness describes a state devoid of any objects and characteristics. Prajñā highlights its function when the dualistic mindset of subject and object is completely eliminated. Dharma body refers to its pervasive characteristics, which is also called “the boundless dharma body” or “the dharma body is simultaneously formless and non-formless.”

In the *Śūraṅgama Sutra*, Buddha laid out ten characteristics of the true mind in its aspect as visual awareness. They are:

- It is the mind that sees.
- Visual awareness does not move.
- Visual awareness does not perish.
- The true nature of visual awareness is not lost.
- Visual awareness is not dependent upon conditions.
- Visual awareness is not a perceived object.
- Visual awareness has neither shape nor extension.
- Visual awareness is both separate and not separate from objects.
- Visual awareness arises neither on its own nor from causes.
- Visual awareness exists neither through inhering nor in conjoining.

## It Is the Mind That Sees

The first characteristic of the true mind is “it is the mind that sees,” not the eye. We generally think it’s the eye that does the seeing, while the mind presides inside the body. For instance, isn’t it the case that you feel you are using your eyes to read this text right now? Or that you are using your ears to hear the sounds around you? Based on our common experience, most of us rely on our physical body as the reference point when we come in contact with the world. Then, through the eyes, we look outward, resulting in the perception that all phenomena are external to the eye, to the body, and to the mind.

From a medical perspective, all the shapes and forms the eyes perceive are the results of light passing through the optic nerves, reaching the visual center in the brain, forming interpretable images. The same process applies to our sense of hearing as well, that audio-stimuli pass through the nerves to reach the aural



center in the brain, becoming interpretable sound. Similarly, other stimuli perceived by other sensory organs are transmitted through the nervous system, reaching the central cognitive system, and becoming various symbols and notions. The five sensory organs are part of the physical body. Most people rely on these five physical sensory organs to perceive stimuli in the environment, consequently deriving a relative sense of direction based on the physical body. The only exception is when we fall asleep, where we stop being aware of the physical body and its derivative notion that the mind presides within the body. Another exception is, during meditation practice, we may experience unification of the body and mind, of the internal and external. The sensation of the physical body disappears. Then too we can be freed from the perception that the mind is inside the body.

While the five sensory organs – eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and body – are part of the body, they are merely tools. When we perceive our surrounding through these five sensory organs, the mind arises and perishes along the perceived objects, and is thus bounded. This is called the “conscious mind.” It is also called the “deluded mind,” the “clinging mind,” or the “conditional mind.”

## The Conscious Mind

This conscious mind is habituated to attend and cling onto conditional objects. It not only attends to and cognizes external forms, internally it is also attracted to and cognizes perceptions, experiences, and thoughts. Back and forth, back and forth, the conscious-mind wanders like so. It behaves this way during the day, in the night while dreaming, and even into the after-life. That is why the *Śūraṅgama Sutra* says that there are two fundamental errors that perpetuate sentient beings’ endless cycle of birth-and-death. They are: mistaking

the cognizing-mind as the self, and not knowing the cognizing-mind is merely a deluded function of the true mind. One mistaken activity of the mind gave rise to delusion, consequently setting in motion the cycle of the twelve steps of dependent origination.

When we fail to understand what the true mind is, we mistake the conscious mind as the true mind. Chan Master Changsha Jingcen (788–868) had said, “Learners of the path do not recognize what is true, as we have always identified with the consciousness. The conscious mind is the root of birth-and-death, yet the deluded call it the original body.” The true mind does not ever arise nor perish. Yet we use this non-arising, non-perishing true mind to perform functions that are intermittent and finite. Under the delusion that a subsequent thought is somehow related to its prior thought, we continue to use subsequent thoughts to cognize, make sense, and relate to its preceding thought. This further entrenches the delusion that there is an everlasting-self that passes through space and time, creating a dualistic, opposing concept of the mind versus phenomena and versus others. This loop is perpetuated ceaselessly, and in the scriptures, it is dubbed as “wandering in birth and death.”

Having said that, we should remember that the cognizing mind is never separated from the true mind. The cognizing mind is merely a faulty function of the true mind, and it would never cause the true mind to become dualistic in essence.

## Attachment/Clinging

Chan masters often remind practitioners to “not be attached to any phenomenon.” Practitioners of Buddhadharma frequently talk about no “attachments,” “clinging,” or “grasping” as well. But exactly what do “attachment” or “grasping” mean? What does it mean to have “no attachment”?



A common interpretation of “attachment” is referring to people who lack flexibility and are stubborn with their own views. Say, a person refuses to listen to or agree with our views, then we dub that person as “someone with a lot of attachment.” Actually, “attachment” in Buddhadharma refers to the fundamental attachment to the view that the five aggregates and the physical body are the self.

For example, if you have a million United States dollars, you would not throw it away lightly in normal circumstances. But if there’s someone holding a person at gunpoint, forcing them to choose between life or money, most people would choose to relinquish their money to save their own lives. They do so because life is much more valuable than money. But as soon as life is secured again and the threat is gone, they would probably want to get their money back again. After all, who wouldn’t want to have both life and money!

Survival is our most fundamental need. After that, we seek comfort and avoid discomfort, and so on and so forth. Take sitting meditation as an example: when we experience pains in the legs, we are likely to want to release the legs from the sitting posture to reduce the pain. We fail to see that leg-pains are only phenomena. We think there is an actual “self” that is experiencing the pains. Our attention shifts from breathing to the leg-pains. Then it shifts again from the leg-pains to the thought of releasing the legs. It very quickly rotates through the sequence of the twelve steps of dependent origination – contact, sensation, craving, grasping, and becoming. The reality is, there are only phenomena that are being perceived; these phenomena arise and perish. But experientially, we think there is a “self” that is traversing through these perceived phenomena.

In Chan practice, some people experience a resurfacing of memories. For example, they may remember being harshly punished by their parents when they

were little. Those memories lead to strong emotions that run amok during practice. Similarly, some people have difficulty with prostration practice because it requires practitioners to contemplate and generate a sense of gratitude toward their parents. The inability to feel grateful may also stem from early memories of being inappropriately disciplined by their parents. Those memories continue to bother the practitioners. It's quite common that people can get all entangled by these memories, leading to feelings of regret, worry, fear, or suspicion. What most people do not know is that the root cause of all these entanglements is that, instead of focusing on untangling feelings and memories, we have mistakenly grasped onto the five aggregates as the "self," separating phenomena into self and others.

If we fail to grasp the true meaning of "attachment," even though we may perform benevolent deeds, use benevolent speech, and generate benevolent thoughts, we are still only practicing "relinquishing malevolent phenomena and choosing benevolent phenomena," which corresponds to the realms of deities and humans. Doing this, there is still a "self" performing benevolent deeds, speech, and thoughts for the "others," that are external to the body and mind. Instead, we should elevate our practice from the state of accumulating human and heavenly merits, and engage in unconditional benevolent practices – in the non-substantiality of the three aspects of giving – the giver, the receiver, and

the gift. This would be the ultimate practice. Again, our fundamental attachment lies in our grasping of the five aggregates and using them to form the concept of "self." Only when we understand this delusion, can we disentangle ourselves from all the sufferings triggered by erroneous views, and become liberated.

## Chan Practice

The purpose of engaging in Chan practice is to pierce through phenomena that are composites of the five aggregates, and to see the original nature of emptiness. Guided by the correct view and the correct understanding of the eightfold path of Buddhadharma, we engage in correct conduct that corresponds with this correct view and understanding. Simultaneously, we practice helping sentient beings and cutting off vexations.

"Correct view" means to engage in the contemplation of emptiness. In the midst of rising and falling phenomena, it is to see that everything arises from conditions and is impermanent. Form, sensation, perception, volition, and consciousness are the five



Photo by Matt Artz

aggregates of body and mind. Sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch are the five sensory objects, that set up the internal and external context. All of these are impermanent phenomena that arise and perish. As such, they are objects perceived by the mind, but none of them are the nature of emptiness. The nature of emptiness is non-arising and non-perishing, with the capacity to perform functions of perception and awareness.

“Correct practice” is rooted in the five precepts and ten wholesome deeds. Furthermore, it transcends the five precepts and ten wholesome deeds and goes beyond the kind of wholesome deeds driven by intent and tainted with duality. Correct practice is unconditional practice. Once, while Master Sheng Yen was in the middle of moving some books, he investigated inwardly, “Who is it that’s moving the books?” Instantaneously, he experienced a “dropping of body and mind,” where his attachment to the body and mind were completely gone. Unknowingly, three hours of book-moving went by, where his mind did not come in contact with external phenomenon while his body continued to function. For most of us, rather, whatever we do and wherever we are, we always feel there is an “I” moving from point A to point B. In contrast, unconditional correct practice means you are clear that the body is walking, but there isn’t an “I” moving from one point to another. When the mind is not attached to or not dwelling on any phenomenon, then your practice becomes an embodiment of correct view.

## Subject and Object

When we first embark on the practice of Chan, we generally start with sitting meditation. In the beginning, you have to pay your “dues,” so to speak, which come in the form of leg pains, wandering thoughts, and drowsiness. Not having the proper mindset for

practice, beginners often engage in battles with such phenomena and get entangled with these leg-pains, wandering thoughts, and drowsiness. The harder one fights, the more wandering thoughts or leg-pains one experiences. And when the leg-pains eventually recede, drowsiness and wandering thoughts step up the game and take to the stage. On and on the three rotate.

When the mind cannot stop contacting and cognizing conditions and objects, our wandering thoughts run amok. Shifu described it as “watching the movie of the inner mind, for free!” It takes a long time before we become aware of what our mind is doing in order to return to the method. Some people finally get a good sitting session after long struggles, where their legs are no longer in pain and they taste some “sweet flavors” of sitting. Subsequently, thoughts of greed arise, wishing for another good session. Against one’s wishes, drowsiness, wandering thoughts, and leg-pains quickly return.

Whenever we experience a liking or rejecting of any phenomenon, feeling either anticipatory or antagonistic, we are operating within the dualistic mindset of subject and object. The fundamental mindset for Chan practice is “impartiality” – not anticipating leg-pains nor rejecting leg-pains. If you try to counter leg-pains by diverting attention onto something else, it might work temporarily. But when the leg-pains return, the pains may backfire and become even more intense and unbearable, leading to feelings of rejection, anger, or hatred. At that point, the mind is no longer at ease.

Chan patriarchs have used the analogy of “the sister of merit and the sister of darkness” to point out that merit and darkness are two sides of the same coin, and they coexist simultaneously. By the same token, when there are leg-pains, wandering thoughts, and drowsiness, there also exist the opposing “no leg-pain,” “no wandering thoughts,” and “no drowsiness.” As long as

differentiation continues, there is no impartiality. We need to practice not rejecting leg-pains, not rejecting drowsiness, and not rejecting wandering thoughts. At the same time, we do not anticipate them to diminish. When thoughts of anticipation or rejection arise, there is no need to feel remorseful or get upset, either. Simply “being aware” is good. Let it come. Let it go.

The sixth patriarch’s *Platform Sutra* has pointed out for us that the “burning house of the triple world is the Dharma king.” Vexation is a phenomenon that is a function of the wisdom mind. When people first start practicing sitting meditation, it is challenging to understand and experience that the wisdom mind is precisely this unmoving mind in the present moment. Consequently, we need to rely on expedient methods – first bringing the attention to the body, focusing on relaxation to reduce wandering thoughts. Or we try to extend our sitting time. These are foundational skills in Chan practice. But if we confuse these expedient means with the ultimate goal, then we would lose our direction all together in our Chan practice.

## Living in the Present Moment

We often talk about “living in the present moment.” What does “present moment” mean? If I say, “I’m going back to the Chan hall in a while” or “I’m heading out in twenty minutes,” these thoughts are phenomena that are perceived by the mind at this present moment. But then, why is it that we feel these phenomena are equivalent to “future”?

Most of the time, when we talk about “being in the present moment,” we are using our body as the reference point. Through this body, we perceive

objects with our five sensory organs, which is then called “present.” As to the inner mental objects that arise in the consciousness, such as images and sounds, they are not perceived by the five physical sensory organs, so we understand them as the past or future. In other words, at this present moment, we cannot really perceive the “future” that is “in a while” or “twenty minutes later.” Similarly, at this present moment, we are also incapable of perceiving times in the past, which has already disappeared.

As a matter of fact, the mind is always in the present moment, but we have been using its functions incorrectly. In daily living, most people’s minds are in a scattered state. We are unaware that we are operating out of a dualistic mindset and generating actions, speech, and thoughts that way. As long as the mind continues to select and reject, it cannot be impartial. Consequently, the momentum of karma is perpetuated, and it will not lead to the reversal of dualistic mind, the reversal of ignorance, nor the reversal of karmic momentum. For instance, some Chan practitioners use their mind to work hard while they are sitting on the cushion. After they get off the cushion, though, they are still using their mind and working hard, except they have unknowingly chosen to operate out of the state of scatteredness.

The method of “being in the moment” is not meant to be used at arm’s-length, as if you are gazing at water while still standing on the bank. Instead, it should be like looking at the water while being in the water. You are not trying to change any phenomenon, nor exert any effort. Let the phenomena just come and go, and you only need to be aware of them. If there are any thoughts of the past or future that surface,

SIMPLY  
“BEING AWARE”  
IS GOOD.  
LET IT COME.  
LET IT GO.





remember they are still thoughts of the “present moment.” The only difference is that the content of the thought is related to the past or future. If you treat those thoughts of future as reality, then they may trigger worries or anticipation. If you treat the thought of the past as real, then you may fall into nostalgia or regret. Actually, these are all thoughts of the present moment. Regardless of their content, as soon as the thought triggers successive thoughts and leads you onto a merry-go-round of more thoughts, then you are no longer “living in the present moment.”

The patriarchs said, “Every raising of the arm or moving of the leg is the manifestation of the Dharma-body.” Dharma-body is a term that depicts the function of the mind which does not dwell in anything. In

daily practice, when you hang up clothes to dry, you should do it with full body and mind engaged. Be aware of the whole body, putting the clothes onto the clothes-line, one by one. Relax the body, yet be very clear of every movement. Practice like so, and your awareness will become more and more refined, enabling you to experience the present moment more readily.

All our daily activities – moving, stilling, sitting, laying – are functions of the mind that arise according to causes and conditions. Our speech and actions are ocean-waves that are the manifestations of Buddha nature. Practice being aware of totality, like a mirror, without differential attention or treatment, neither grasping or rejecting, toward any parts. This would be what it means to “live in the present moment.” 🌿

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\* David Rounds and Ronald Epstein, eds., *The Śūraṅgama Sutra: A New Translation with Excerpts from the Commentary by the Venerable Master Hsuan Hua* (Ukiah: Buddhist Text Translation Society, 2012), 103–114.

# *The Hermit*

*by Ernest Heau*

*1*

*How many winters  
since the light first shone  
on his infant body,  
the sound of his wailing  
filling the mountain hut?*

*The young mother  
alone without help,  
biting the cord that  
bonded her to her child,  
staining the tattered sheets.*

*Now a hermit living  
among forest creatures,  
he walks the solitary path  
of ancient sages  
gone but not forgotten.*

*The fractured mirror  
on a bare wall  
reflects his many selves,  
all illusory but one  
seen only by the mind's eye.*

*Time flits by  
in and out of sight  
like flies on the wall,  
the Holy Sutra's yellowed pages  
stained by candle drippings.*

*A small clay Buddha  
sits on the altar,  
waiting for the Dharma  
to be heard and followed  
by grateful ears.*

II

*What does he know,  
old hermit in his leaky hut,  
shivering in wintry storms,  
where the southern wind  
seldom visits, and the geese  
have fled the frozen lake.*

*Was he right to turn his back  
on the world of delusion  
to find solace in the hills?  
The question burns in his mind  
like the pain he once felt  
when sipping hot tea too soon.*

*Putting aside a question  
that he cannot answer,  
he opens the bamboo shutters  
and sits on the wooden floor,  
to bask in the healing warmth  
of the new sun's morning rays.*

III

*Within the deep stillness,  
he feels the pulsing  
of an aging heart,  
even as his spirit awakens  
to his patient coaxing,  
a semblance of warmth  
filling his slender frame.*

*Confident now that  
that the sun will proceed  
obediently from east to west,  
he lets the world meander  
as it must and will,  
himself at the center  
yet nowhere to be found.*

*As darkness recedes,  
daylight fills the barren room.  
He joins his palms  
and softly begins to chant:  
Om mani padme hum,  
Om mani padme hum,  
Om mani padme hum...*

# *Chan Meditation Retreats*

## **Silent Illumination Retreat**

Led by Žarko Andričević

June 28–July 6, 2024

## **Beginner's Mind Retreat**

Led by Rebecca Li

August 23–25, 2024

## **Silent Illumination Retreat**

Led by Abbot Guo Yuan

September 6–14, 2024

## **Western Zen Retreat**

Led by Rebecca Li

October 4–10, 2024

## **Foundation Retreat**


Led by David Listen

October 18–26, 2024

Dharma Drum Retreat Center

[www.dharmadrumretreat.org](http://www.dharmadrumretreat.org)





**Chan Meditation Basics Retreat**

Led by Gilbert Gutierrez

June 28–July 1, 2024

DDM San Francisco Bay Area

[www.ddmbasf.org](http://www.ddmbasf.org)

**Illuminating the Mind**

**7-Night Residential Retreat**

Led by Simon Child

August 17–24, 2024

Shawbottom Farm, UK

[www.westernchanfellowship.org](http://www.westernchanfellowship.org)

**6-Day Intensive Chan Retreat**

Led by Guo Gu

August 3–9, 2024

Tallahassee Chan Center

[www.tallahasseechan.org](http://www.tallahasseechan.org)

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