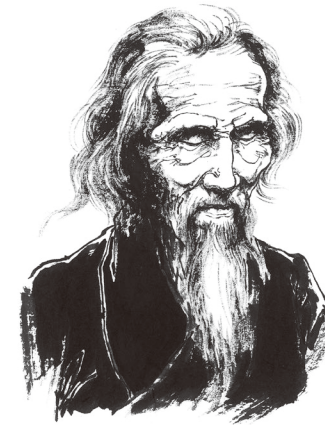


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CHAN MAGAZINE

WINTER 2019





Chan Master Xuyun
Portrait by Chien-Chih Liu

WHEN PRACTICING, ONE NEEDS to have a bold and persevering mind like your parents have died. If you want to investigate Chan, then this is the only way. If you don't want to do it this way, then don't investigate Chan. One has to have this bold and persevering mind, like a single person fighting off ten thousand enemies – going straight forward without retreat and without letting loose.

”

CHAN MASTER XUYUN (EMPTY CLOUD)
Seven-Day Winter Retreat, 1947

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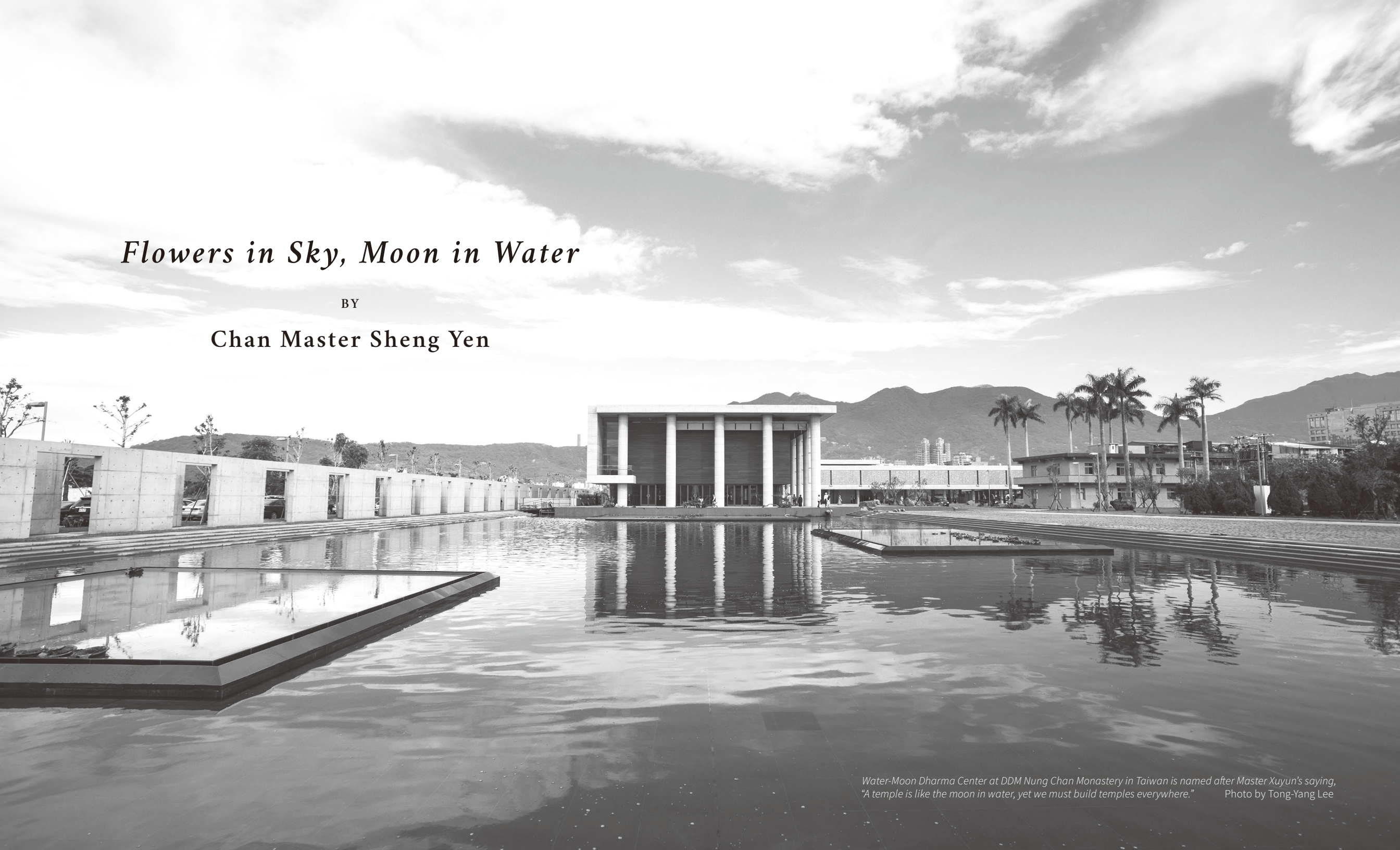
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Flowers in Sky, Moon in Water

BY

Chan Master Sheng Yen

Water-Moon Dharma Center at DDM Nung Chan Monastery in Taiwan is named after Master Xuyun's saying, "A temple is like the moon in water, yet we must build temples everywhere." Photo by Tong-Yang Lee

A book by Master Sheng Yen entitled *Sheng Yen on Chan Phrases* was published in Chinese as “聖嚴說禪” (sheng yen shuo chan) in 1996. The best way to describe the book is to let Master Sheng Yen speak for himself, from his preface: “This compilation of essays is not a manual on how to practice Chan; rather, it uses one hundred Chan stories and sayings from the past to illustrate the meaning of Chan, so that readers may comprehend the correct state of mind of a Chan practitioner. Therefore, when you are in dire straits, please use these stories as a safe harbor; when perplexed with pain, use them as cool and refreshing medicine; when confronted with no options and feeling hopeless, use them as temporary shelter; when depressed and desperate, use them as the encouragements from teachers and good friends; when carried away with success, use them as a brakes to soften a possible collision.”

In 2017, the Chung-Hwa Institute of Buddhist Culture undertook the English translation of *Sheng Yen on Chan Phrases* as part of an extensive effort to translate and publish selected books from the Master’s complete works. The English edition of the book, tentatively titled *Chan Speaks*, is to be published by Dharma Drum Corp. at a yet to be determined date. The text was translated by Dr. Jerry Wang, bilingually reviewed by Ven. Chang Chwen (“Sister Jinho”), and edited by Ernest Heau. *Chan Magazine* is pleased to publish one brief chapter from the book, a talk by Master Sheng Yen on Master Xuyun (“Empty Cloud”) (1840–1959).



Chan Master Sheng Yen DDM Archive Photo

QUESTION: Grandmaster Xuyun (1840–1959) said, “Buddhist rites are like flowers in the sky, yet we need to conduct them at all times; a temple is like the moon in water, yet we must build temples everywhere.” Flowers in the sky and the moon reflected in water are illusory phenomena. From the apparent meaning of Master Xuyun’s words, Buddhist rites are like flowers in the sky and Buddhist temples are like the moon in the water; therefore, conducting rituals is the same as not conducting them, and building temples is the same as not building them. Nevertheless Master Xuyun said that we should always conduct Buddhist rites, and we should build temples everywhere. What is his meaning?

MASTER SHENG YEN: These words of Master Xuyun are very positive, not negative. Many people misunderstand the word “emptiness” in Buddhism as meaning “hollow and illusory;” in the same way the name Xuyun (Empty Cloud) might make people feel

empty and barely visible, irrelevant. However, Master Xuyun himself was like a cloud in a clear sky, going where water is needed or providing shade.

The Buddhist rites are performed to beseech the Buddha to deliver sentient beings; temples are places and occasions for people to practice the way to buddhahood. Under normal circumstances flowers do not exist in the sky, so how could there be flowers in the sky? In one case, when a person who spreads the Dharma is very accomplished in practice, the heavenly devas may be moved to drop flowers from the sky; this would be a miracle. In another case, when the eyes are under some kind of pressure, some people will see optical illusions like flowers floating in space. There are also medical disorders where the person sees images or colors within their own eyes.

Hence flowers in the sky are mere illusions, and the moon in the water is merely a reflection. Similarly, in their quest for fame, wealth, power and influence, sentient beings spend their lives busy fishing for the moon in the water. It is the vanity of possessing the moon and many other unrealistic things. In the end they find themselves mired and buried in the five desires [of wealth, sex, food, fame, and sleep]. Grandmaster Xuyun’s words have a very proactive and positive usefulness, for while the Buddhist rites are illusory, and Buddhist temples are mostly empty, their purpose is still different from the satisfaction of the five desires – indeed, they are the opposite.

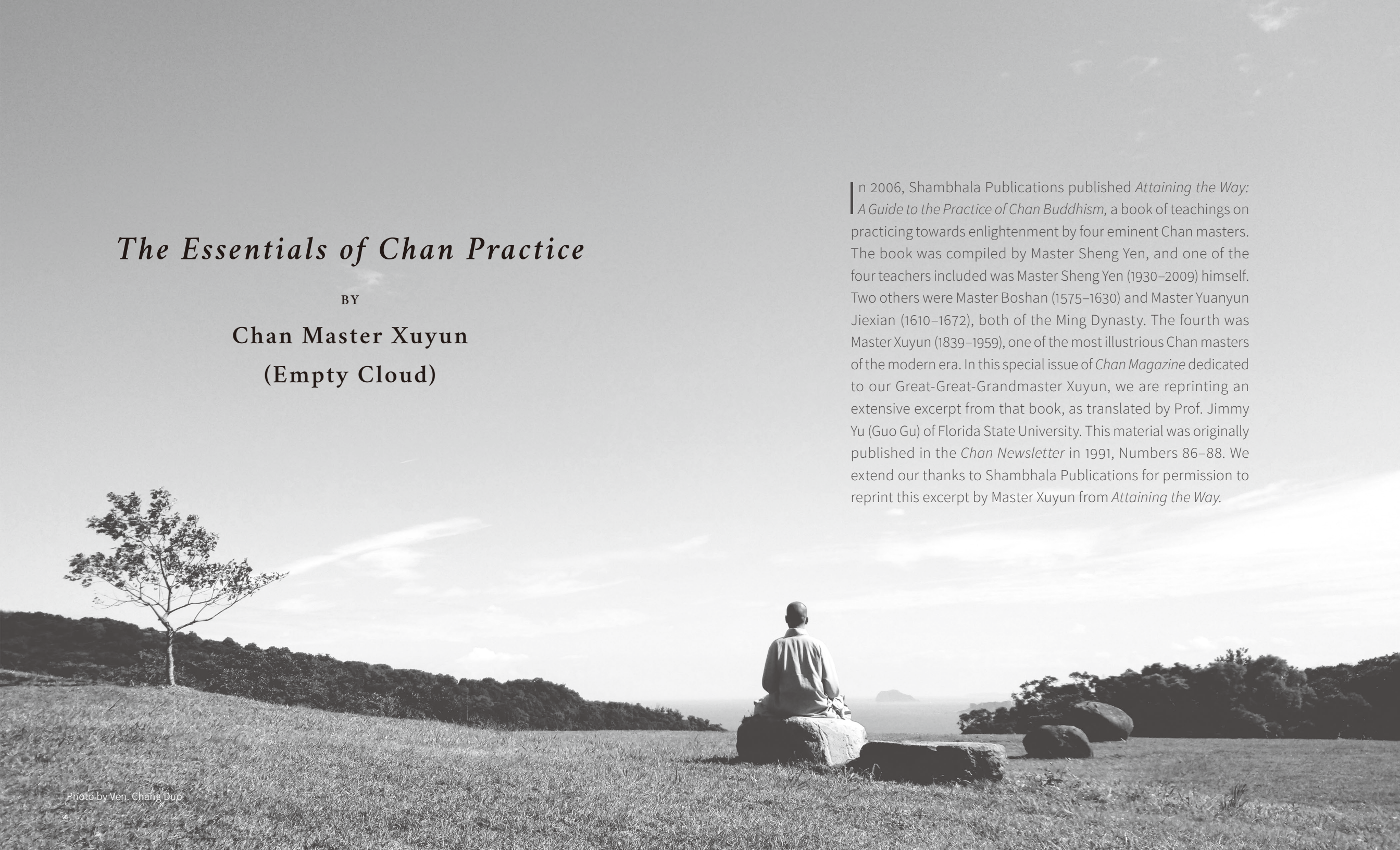
To conduct Buddhist rites is to use Buddha-dharma to help people both present at the ritual and elsewhere. Whatever language, scriptures, or implements are used, their purpose is to uplift the character, intelligence, morality, and inner wisdom of humanity; their purpose is also to cultivate blessings which will enable sentient beings to leave suffering, attain happiness, and depart



Nanhua Temple, Guangdong, China, 1928, before Chan Master Xuyun’s renovation. Master Xuyun helped to restore more than ten ruined old temples in his life. In 1934, he renovated the Nanhua Temple. Chan Master Huineng (638–713), the Sixth Patriarch of Chan Buddhism, once lived and taught there.

Photo by Kiyoshi Tatsuie

from vexation. Buddhist monasteries and temples are very well-defined and structured venues for practice; so whenever conditions allowed, Elder Xuyun helped to rebuild run down temples that he came across in his travels, thus helping sentient beings everywhere. In this manner, during his life he helped to restore more than ten ruined old temples. To him, conducting Buddhist rites and building Buddhist temples are the fundamental responsibilities of monastics to benefit sentient beings and purify the human world. ☸



The Essentials of Chan Practice

BY

Chan Master Xuyun
(Empty Cloud)

In 2006, Shambhala Publications published *Attaining the Way: A Guide to the Practice of Chan Buddhism*, a book of teachings on practicing towards enlightenment by four eminent Chan masters. The book was compiled by Master Sheng Yen, and one of the four teachers included was Master Sheng Yen (1930–2009) himself. Two others were Master Boshan (1575–1630) and Master Yuanyun Jiexian (1610–1672), both of the Ming Dynasty. The fourth was Master Xuyun (1839–1959), one of the most illustrious Chan masters of the modern era. In this special issue of *Chan Magazine* dedicated to our Great-Great-Grandmaster Xuyun, we are reprinting an extensive excerpt from that book, as translated by Prof. Jimmy Yu (Guo Gu) of Florida State University. This material was originally published in the *Chan Newsletter* in 1991, Numbers 86–88. We extend our thanks to Shambhala Publications for permission to reprint this excerpt by Master Xuyun from *Attaining the Way*.

PART ONE

Prerequisites for Beginning Chan Practice

The Purpose of Investigating Chan

THE PURPOSE OF INVESTIGATING CHAN is to illuminate the mind and see your self-nature.¹ You must eradicate the mind's impurities so as to personally perceive the true face of your self-nature. The mind's impurities are wandering thoughts and



Chan Master Xuyun DDM Archive Photo

attachments; self-nature is the wisdom and virtue of the Tathagata. Sentient beings are replete with the wisdom and virtue of buddhas; they are not-two and not separated from one another. If you can leave behind wandering thoughts and attachments, then you will attain this wisdom and virtue that is within you. This is buddhahood. Otherwise, you remain an ordinary sentient being.

It is because you and I have been, for limitless kalpas, wallowing in birth and death, defiled for a long time, and unable to immediately cast off wandering thoughts that we cannot perceive our intrinsic nature. For these reasons, the first prerequisite of investigating Chan is to eradicate wandering thought.

How do we eradicate wandering thoughts? Shakyamuni Buddha had taught much on this subject. His simplest and most direct teaching is the word “stop” from the expression “Stopping is bodhi.” From the time when Bodhidharma transmitted Chan teachings to our eastern land, after the sixth patriarch [Huineng], the winds of Chan have blown far and wide, shaking and illuminating the world. Among the many things that Bodhidharma and the Sixth Patriarch taught to those who came to study with them, none is more valuable than the saying, “Put down the myriad entangling conditions; let not one thought arise.” Putting down the myriad entangling conditions simply means to put down *all* conditions. So this phrase “Put down all conditions and let not one thought arise” is actually the foremost prerequisite of a Chan practitioner. If you cannot fulfill this requirement, then not only will you fail to attain the ultimate goal of Chan practice, but you will not even be able to enter the gate of Chan. How can you speak of practicing Chan if you are entangled by worldly phenomena, wallowing in the arising and passing of your thoughts?

Put Down the Myriad Entangling Conditions

“Put down all conditions and let not one thought arise” is a prerequisite for the practice of investigating Chan. Now that we know this, how do we accomplish it? The best practitioner, one of superior abilities, can in an instant put to rest all deluded thoughts forever, arrive directly at the realization of the unborn, and instantly experience bodhi, without being entangled by anything.

The next best kind of practitioner uses principle to rid oneself of phenomenal appearance and realizes that self-nature is originally pure; vexation and bodhi, samsara and nirvana – all are false names which have nothing to do with self-nature; all affairs and things are dreams and illusions, like bubbles or reflections.²

My physical body that is composed of the four elements, the mountains, rivers, and all that exists on this great earth are all contained within my self-nature, like bubbles on the surface of the ocean, arising and disappearing, yet never obstructing the ocean's fundamental essence. Do not be captivated by the arising, abiding, changing, and passing away of illusory phenomena and give rise to pleasure and aversion, grasping and rejecting. Give up your whole body as if you were dead, and the six sense faculties, sense objects, and sense consciousness will naturally disperse. Greed, hatred, ignorance, and craving for affection will be destroyed. All the physical sensations of pain, itchiness, agony, and pleasure – hunger, cold, satiation, warmth, glory, insult, birth and death, calamity, prosperity, good and bad luck, praise, blame, gain and loss, safety and danger – will no longer be your concern. Only this can be considered true “putting down all conditions.” When you put everything down forever, this is what is meant by “Put down all conditions.”

When the myriad conditions are renounced, wandering thoughts will disappear by their own accord, discrimination will not arise, and attachment is left far behind. In this instance of nothing arising in mind, the brightness and clarity of your self-nature manifests completely. Only at this time you will have fulfilled the necessary conditions for investigating Chan. Then, further hard work and sincere practice will enable you to illuminate the mind and see into your true nature.

Everyone Instantly Becomes a Buddha

Many Chan practitioners ask questions about the Dharma. The Dharma that is spoken is originally not the true Dharma. As soon as you try to explain things, the true meaning is lost. If you realize that this mind is originally the Buddha, then at that very instance there is nothing more to do. Everything manifests its perfected state. All talk about practice or attainment is demonic deception.

Bodhidharma's “direct pointing at the mind, seeing into one's nature and attaining buddhahood” clearly instructs that all sentient beings are buddhas. Once pure self-nature is recognized, you can harmonize with the environment yet remain undefiled. The mind will remain unified throughout the day, whether walking, standing, sitting, or lying down. This is to manifest that already perfected buddha. At this point there is no need to put forth effort and be diligent, let alone act in a certain way or be pretentious. Nor is there a need to bother with explanations or discursive thinking. Thus, it is said that to become a buddha is the easiest, most natural task. Moreover, it is something you can control, without seeking help from outside. All sentient beings in this vast land can instantly realize buddhahood if only they desire to avoid

transmigration of four forms of birth and the six realms of existence in this long kalpa; tumbling in the sea of suffering without end. Buddhahood can be attained if you desire the four virtues of nirvana (eternity, joy, self, purity) and wholly believe in the sincere words of the Buddha and the patriarchs, renounce everything, and think neither of good or bad. All buddhas, bodhisattvas, and patriarchs have vowed to exhaustively save all beings; this vow is not a boast nor is it groundless, making some sort of grand vow or empty remark.

The Dharma is exactly such. It has been elucidated again and again by the Buddha and the patriarchs. They have exhorted us with the truth, and do not deceive us. Unfortunately, sentient beings are confused and for limitless kalpas they have been wallowing in birth and death in the ocean of suffering, reborn here and reborn there, without any control of their endless transmigration. Confused with inverted views, they turn their backs on awakening and embrace the worldly dust of their senses, like pure gold in a cesspool. Because of the severity of the problem and the degree of their defilement, the Buddha had compassionately, without any choice, expounded eighty-four thousand Dharma doors (methods) to accord with the varying karmic roots of sentient beings, so that sentient beings may use these methods to cure themselves of eighty-four thousand habits and illnesses, which include greed, hatred, ignorance, and craving for affection.

Investigating Chan and Contemplating Mind

Our sect focuses on investigating Chan. And the purpose of investigating Chan is to “illuminate the mind and see one’s own self-nature,” which means to thoroughly investigate and comprehend our original face. This investigation is also called “clearly

realizing one’s mind and thoroughly perceiving one’s intrinsic nature.”

Since the time when the Buddha held up a flower and Mahakasyapa realized awakening, and Bodhidharma came to the East, the methods for entry into this Dharma door have continually evolved. Most Chan adepts before the Tang and Song dynasties became enlightened after hearing a word or phrase of the Dharma, and Dharma transmission from master to disciple was merely a convergence of mind to mind; there was no actual Dharma. Further, questions and answers in daily life were only extemporaneous occasions to untie entanglements, much like prescribing the right medicine for the right illness.

After the Song dynasty, however, people did not have such good karmic capacities as their predecessors. They could not carry out what had been said. For example, practitioners were taught to “put down everything” and “not think about good and evil,” but they could not put down everything; if they weren’t thinking about good, they were thinking about evil. Under these circumstances, the patriarchs had no choice but to use poison against poison, and taught practitioners to investigate *gong’an* and *huatou*.³

When you begin observing a *huatou*, even if you must begin with a lifeless phrase, you must grasp it tightly, without letting go of it even for an instant like a mouse trying to gnaw its way out of a coffin. The mouse must focus on one area and it must not stop until it gnaws through the coffin. In terms of *huatou*, the objective is to use a single thought to eradicate ten thousand thoughts. This method is really a last resort. Just as if someone had been severely poisoned and there’s no other way to get the poison out and cure the patient except to open up the body.

The ancients had numerous *gong’an*s, but later on practitioners started using *huatous*. Some *huatous* are: “Who is observing this corpse?” “What



Photo by Shane Kell

is my original face before my parents gave birth to me?” In recent times, many use “Who is reciting buddha’s name?”

In fact, all *huatous* follow the same format. There is nothing uncommon, strange, or special about them. If you wanted to, you could observe: “Who is reciting the sutras?” “Who is reciting the mantras?” “Who is prostrating to the buddha?” “Who is eating?” “Who is wearing these clothes?” “Who is walking?” “Who is sleeping?”

They’re all the same. The answer to the word “who” derives from one’s mind; mind is the source of all words. Thoughts arise from the mind; the mind is the source of all thoughts. Innumerable dharmas⁴ are born out of the mind; mind is the source of all dharmas. In fact, *huatou* literally means, “source of words;” the source of thoughts. And the source of

thoughts is the mind. To put it directly, the state of mind before the any thought arises is *huatou*.

Hence, we should know that observing *huatou* is contemplating mind. Your “original face” before your parents gave birth to you is the mind; and observing the *huatou*, “What is my original face before my parents gave birth to me” is contemplating mind.

Self-nature is mind. When one “turns inward to hear one’s self-nature,” one is turning inward to contemplate mind. In the phrase, “perfectly illuminating pure awareness,” the “pure awareness” is mind and “illumination” is contemplation. Mind is Buddha. When one recites Buddha’s name one contemplates Buddha. And contemplating Buddha is contemplating mind.

Thus, observing the *huatou*, such as observing “Who is reciting Buddha’s name?” is contemplating mind. That is, “illuminating the pure awareness” of your mind, or illuminating the buddha of your self-nature. Mind is nature, is pure awareness, and is Buddha. It has no form, no characteristics, no fixed location; it cannot be grasped and as such it intrinsically pure. It pervades all Dharma realms; it does not exist or enter; it does not come or go. The mind is the intrinsically, self-manifested, pure Dharmakaya Buddha.

You practitioners should first shut down all six sense faculties and observe the place where thoughts arise, and take care of this “source of words” or *huatou*; observe it until you perceive your pure mind separated from all thoughts. Advancing further, your practice must be seamless without any interruption, and your mind must be refined, quiescent, and luminous. Continue until the five skandhas⁵ are empty, and your body and mind become quiescent. There will be nothing for you to do. From that point onwards, activities of walking, standing, sitting, and lying are all performed in stillness. In time, your practice will deepen and you will see your

self-nature and become a buddha. Suffering will be extinguished. Master Gaofeng (1238–1295) once said: “You must observe the huatou like a sinking roof tile plummeting down into a pond ten thousand feet deep. If in seven days you are not enlightened, you have permission to chop off my head!” Fellow practitioners, these are the words of one who has already reached to the other shore. His words are true; they are not boasting words that deceive us!

Still, why is it that in our modern times although there are many practicing huatou but few actually reach enlightenment? This is because practitioners today have inferior karmic capabilities than practitioners of the past. Also, practitioners today are unclear about the principle and path of huatou practice. Some practitioners sojourn from east to west and north to south to practice under different masters until they die, but still haven’t penetrated even one huatou. They don’t know the meaning of huatou, and are unsure what would be considered “observe the huatou.” All their lives, they only attach to the words and labels, exerting their efforts not on the “source” of words but at the tail end of words.

Huatou is precisely the one-mind. This one-mind that is within you and me is not inside, outside, or in the middle. And at the same time *it is* inside, outside, and in the middle. Like the stillness of empty space, it pervades every where.

When using the huatou, you should not raise it upward (i.e., focusing on it in your head region) or suppress it downward (i.e., psychologically forcing the huatou to sink to the lower body). If you raise it upward, you will arouse scattered mind. If you suppress it you will drift into drowsiness. These approaches are contrary to your mind’s original nature, and are not in accordance with the middle way.

Practitioners are distressed by wandering thoughts. They believe it is difficult to subdue wandering thoughts. Let me state it clearly: don’t be afraid of wandering thoughts, and do not waste your energy subduing them. All you have to do is recognize them. Don’t attach to them, don’t follow them, and don’t try to get rid of them. As long as you do not continue wallowing in them, wandering thoughts will naturally depart by themselves.



Chan Master Xuyun’s calligraphy “Without abiding anywhere or in anything” in DDM Chan Hall Photo by Ven.Chang Duo

PART TWO

Lectures on the Methods of Practice in the Chan Hall

Introduction

All of you come to ask me for guidance. This makes me feel ashamed. Everyone works so hard – splitting firewood, hoeing the fields, carrying soil, moving bricks – and yet from morning to night you have not forgotten the thought of cultivating the way. Such determination for the path is touching. I, Xuyun, am ashamed for my inadequacy on the way and my lack of virtue. What I say cannot really be called “instructions;” I will use only a few sayings from the ancients in response to your questions. As for cultivating the way, there are four prerequisites:

- 1. Deep conviction in the law of cause and effect
- 2. Strict observance of precepts
- 3. Immovable confidence
- 4. Commitment to a Dharma door (method)

Necessary Knowledge in Chan Sitting

All activities of everyday life should be subsumed within the practice of the way. Is there anywhere that is not a place for practicing the way? Originally there is no such need for a Chan Hall. And “seated meditation” is, of course, not necessarily Chan. So-called “Chan Hall” and “Chan sitting” are designed for us sentient beings with deep karmic obstructions and shallow wisdom.

When one sits in meditation, one must first know how to attune your body and mind. If they are not

well regulated, then a small problem will turn into an illness and a big problem will result in demonic entanglements. This would be most pitiable! Walking and sitting meditation in the Chan Hall are designed to harmonize your body and mind. Aside from these there are other ways to attune the body and mind. I will briefly elaborate them.

When you sit in the cross-legged position, you should sit naturally and upright. Do not intentionally push the waist forward. Doing so will raise your inner heat, which later on may result in having sand in the corner of your eyes, bad breath, uneasy breathing, loss of appetite, and in the worst case, vomiting blood. Nor should you arch your back and lower your head. Doing so can easily cause drowsiness and dullness. Especially do not lean your back on something (in meditation), which can cause you to vomit blood later on.

If you are aware of the onset of drowsiness or dullness, keep your eyes wide open, straighten your lower back and gently move your buttocks from side to side. Drowsiness and dullness will naturally vanish.

Exerting too much effort in your practice, when you discover that you have become agitated, you should put everything down, including your efforts to practice. Rest for a few minutes and gradually after you feel more comfortable, you may take up your method and practice again. If you don’t do this, then as time goes on you will develop an anxious and hot-tempered character, or, in the worst case, you could go insane or fall into demonic states.

There are many states one may encounter in Chan sitting, which are too many to speak of here. But as long as you do not attach to any of them, they will not obstruct you. There is a secular saying: “If one is not astonished by the weird, the weird will vanish of its own accord.” Even if you encounter or perceive an unpleasant state, do not concern

yourself with it and have no fear. If you experience something pleasant, do not concern yourself with it and do not give rise to fondness. The *Surangama Sūtra* says: “If one does not entertain the idea that one has attained a holy state, then whatever state one has experienced is a good state. On the other hand, if one interprets what is experienced as something holy, that will attract demons.”⁶

Approaching the Practice and Discerning the Host from the Guest

How should one approach practice? In the *Surangama Sūtra*, the honored one Kaundinya spoke to the assembly the words “host” and “guest.” This is where beginners like us must start our practice. He said, “A traveler who stops at an inn may stay overnight or get something to eat. When he is finished or rested, he packs and continues his journey, for he does not have time to stay longer. If he were the host, he would have no place to go. Thus, I reason, he who does not stay is called a ‘guest’ because not staying is the essence of being a guest. He who stays is called a ‘host.’ Again, on a clear day, when the sun rises and the sunlight enters a dark room through an opening, one can see dust floating in empty space. The dust is moving but the space is still. That which is clear and still is called ‘space’ and that which is moving is called ‘dust’ because moving is the essence of being dust.”⁷ Guest and dust refer to deluded thoughts, whereas host and space refer to self-nature. That the permanent host does not follow the guest in his comings and goings illustrates that permanent self-nature does not follow the sudden arising and perishing of deluded thoughts. Therefore it is said that with no-mind to encounter the myriad things, how can one be obstructed by the surrounding myriad things? The nature of dust is to move on

its own accord, but it does not obstruct the still empty space; this is likened to deluded thoughts that rise and fall by themselves, but do not hinder the “suchness” of self-nature. Thus it is said that if one’s mind does not arise, there will be no problems with the myriad things. In such a state of mind, the “guest” naturally will not follow deluded thinking. If you understand “space” and “dust,” deluded thoughts will no longer be hindrances. It is said that when one recognizes the problem, there will be no resentment. If you can approach and try to understand the practice in this way, it will be unlikely that you will make serious mistakes on the path.

Huatou and the Doubt Sensation

The old ancestral masters pointed directly at mind and revealed that seeing the nature is attaining buddhahood, like the first ancestor, Bodhidharma’s “calming of mind” and sixth ancestor Huineng’s exclusive teaching on “seeing self-nature.” All that was necessary was the direct seizing and acceptance of mind, nothing else. There was no such method as observing the huatou. More recently, however, masters saw that practitioners would not throw themselves into practice with total dedication and could not perceive and actualize their self-nature. Instead, these people only play games, mouthing words of Chan, showing off other people’s treasure and imagining it was their own. For this reason, later patriarchs were compelled to set up Dharma doors and cloisters and devise specific expedients to help practitioners, hence the method of observing the huatou.

There are many huatous, such as “All dharmas return to one, where does this one return to?” “What is my original face before my parents gave birth to me?” and so on. The most common one, however, is “Who is reciting the Buddha’s name?”

What is meant by huatou? “*Hua*” means the spoken word[s]; “*tou*” means the head or source, so huatou means that which is before the spoken word[s]. For example, in the huatou “Amitabha Buddha,” the *hua* consists of the words, and the huatou is that which precedes the conception of these words. So the huatou is that moment before a single thought arises. Once the thought arises, it is already the “tail-end” of the *hua* (not its “source”). That moment before thought arises is “non-arising.” The state when your mind is not distracted, not dull, not attached to quiescence, or has not fallen into an experience of nothingness, is called “non-perishing.” From one moment to the next, single-mindedly and uninterruptedly, turning inward and illuminating this state of non-arising and non-perishing is called “observing the huatou,” or taking care of the huatou.

To observe the huatou, you must first generate the “doubt sensation,” which is like a walking cane for observing the huatou. What is meant by the doubt sensation? For example, you may ask, “Who is reciting the Buddha’s name?” Of course, everyone knows that it is oneself who is reciting the name, but do you use your mouth or mind to recite? If it is your mouth, then after you die and your mouth is still there, how come you are unable to recite Buddha’s name? If it is your mind, then what is the mind like? It cannot be comprehended or apprehended. Thus, because you don’t know, you give rise to a subtle questioning mind centered on this “who?” In fact, this questioning mind should never be coarse; the subtler the better. At all times and in all places, you should single-mindedly take care of this thought of questioning, and maintain it continuously like a fine stream of water. Do not give rise to a second thought. When this thought of doubt is present, do not disturb it. When this doubt is not present, gently bring it forth again. Beginners will find that it is more effective to gain strength from this method

when you’re sitting than moving about; but you should never make such discriminations between stillness and activity. Regardless of whether your practice is effective or not or whether you are still or active, just whole-heartedly and single-mindedly use your the method.

In the huatou, “Who is reciting the Buddha’s name,” the emphasis is on the word, “who.” The other words serve to provide a general context, just like in asking, “Who is dressing or eating?” “Who is moving their bowels and who is urinating?” “Who is trying to rid this ignorance and who’s arguing with others?” “Who is it that’s aware and having feelings?” This “who” is the most immediate and easiest way to arouse the doubt sensation, regardless of whether you are walking, standing, sitting, or reclining. There’s no need for further conceptualization, speculation, or contrivance. Hence, huatous involving the word “who” are wonderful methods for investigating Chan. However, you should not take the huatou, “Who is reciting Buddha’s name,” and merely recite it like a buddha’s name; nor is it right to use reasoning to find some kind of answer to the question, thinking that this is what is meant by the doubt sensation. Some people uninterruptedly recite the phrase, “Who is reciting the Buddha’s name?” but they would gain more merit by reciting Amitabha Buddha’s name!⁸ Others let their minds wander, speculating this and that, believing that this is the doubt sensation. Little do they know, these people will only end up with more deluded thinking. This is like desiring to go upwards but ending up going downwards instead. You must be aware of this problem.

The doubt that is generated by a beginning practitioner tends to be coarse, intermittent, and irregular, which does not truly qualify as a state of doubt sensation. It can only be called thoughts. Only after the wild mind is gradually tamed and one has more control over one’s thoughts

can the process be called *can* (pronounced: *ts'an*), which means to investigate or look into. As one's practice matures, when the questioning naturally continues without effort and one is not conscious of one's sitting or aware of the existence of a body or mind or environment, continuing like this without interruption, only then can it be called the "doubt sensation." Realistically speaking, the initial stage where you are using the method alongside of engaging in wandering thoughts cannot be considered cultivation. Only when true doubt arises can your practice be called genuine cultivation. This moment is a crucial juncture, and it is easy for the practitioner to deviate from the right path:

At this moment your mind may be clear and pure, experiencing an unlimited sense of lightness and ease. However, if you lose the clear illumination of mind – clarity without confusion is wisdom; undisturbed illumination is stillness – you will fall into a subtle state of mental dullness. If there is a clear-eyed person⁹ around, he will be able to tell right away whether the practitioner is in this state and hit them with the incense stick,¹⁰ dispersing all the practitioner's clouds and fog. Many people become enlightened this way.

At this moment the mind may be clear and pure, empty and vacuous. If the doubt disappears, then you may fall into a state of oblivion." This is what is meant by the expressions, "the precipice of withered trees" or "a rock soaking in cold water." When you reach these states, it is crucial to bring forth your awareness and illumination of the doubt. However, this is different from the initial stage of your practice where the doubt was coarse. Now it has to be extremely fine – a single thought, subtle and unassuming, clear and quiescent; at the same time it should be still, aware, and ever knowing. Like the smoke from a fire that is about to go out, it is a narrow stream without interruption. And when your

practice reaches this point, it is necessary to have a diamond eye; there will be no need to purposefully bring forth or generate awareness and illumination anymore. To do so would be like putting a head on top of your head.

Once a monk asked Chan Master Zhaozhou (778–897), "What should one do when not one thing comes?" Zhaozhou replied, "Put it down!" The monk asked, "If not a single thing comes, what does one put down?" Zhaozhou replied, "If you cannot put it down, then take it up." This dialogue refers precisely to this kind of situation. The true flavor of this state, however, cannot be described. Like someone drinking water, only he knows how cool or warm it is. If a person reaches this state, he will naturally understand. If he is not at this state, no explanation will be adequate. Like the saying, "To a sword master you should offer a sword; do not bother showing your poetry to someone who is not a poet."

Taking Care of Huatou and Turning Inward to Hear One's Own Self-Nature

Someone might ask, "How is Guanyin (Avalokitesvara) Bodhisattva's method of turning inward to hear self-nature considered investigating Chan?" I have previously explained that taking care of huatou is to simply and single-mindedly, from one moment to the next moment, shine the mind's light inward and illuminate "that which is not born and not destroyed." To turn inward is to illuminate; "that which is not born and not destroyed" is the self-nature. When "hearing" and "illuminating" follow sound and form in the worldly stream, hearing does not go beyond sound and seeing does not go beyond form. However, when one turns inward and contemplates self-nature against the worldly stream, and does not pursue sound and form then he or she becomes pure and



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clear. At that time "hearing" and "illuminating" are not two different things.

Thus we should know that taking care of the huatou and turning inward to hear self-nature does not mean using our eyes to see and our ears to hear. If we use our ears to hear or our eyes to see, then we are chasing sound and form. As a result we will be affected by them. This is called flowing with the worldly stream. If we practice with a single thought of abiding in that which is not born and not destroyed, not chasing after sound and form, with no wandering thoughts, then we are going against the stream. This is also called taking care of the huatou or turning inward to hear one's self-nature. This is not to say you should shut your eyes tightly or plug up your ears. Just do not generate a mind of seeking after sound and form.

Earnestness About Leaving Birth and Death and Generating a Persevering Mind

When investigating Chan, the most important thing is to be earnest with regards to the question of birth and death and to generate a persevering mind. If there is no earnestness to leave birth and death, then one cannot generate the great doubt and practice will not be effective. If there is no perseverance in one's mind, the result will be laziness, like a man who practices for one day and rests for ten. The practice will not be pervasive. If you can generate perseverance, when great doubt arises, all the dust-like vexations will come to an end by themselves. When the time comes, the melon will naturally ripen and drop from the vine.

I will tell you a story. During the Qing dynasty in the year of Gengzi (1900) when the eight world powers sent their armies to Beijing, the Emperor Guang Xu (reigning period: 1875–1908) fled westward from Beijing to Shanxi Province. Every day he traveled tens of miles. For several days he had no food to eat. On the road, a peasant offered him sweet potato stems. After he ate them, he asked the peasant what they were because they tasted so good. Think about the emperor's usual awe-inspiring demeanor and his arrogance! How long do you think he could continue to maintain his imperial attitude after so long a journey on foot? Do you think he had ever gone hungry? Do you think he ever had to eat sweet potato stems? At that time he gave up all of his airs. After all, he had walked quite a distance and had eaten stems to keep from starving. Why was he able to "put down" everything at that time? Because the allied armies wanted his life and his only thought was to save his life! But when peace prevailed and he returned to Beijing, once again he became proud and arrogant. He didn't have to run anymore. He

no longer had to eat any food that might displease him. Why was he unable to “put down” everything at that time? It was because the allied armies no longer wanted his life. If the emperor always had an attitude of running for his life and if he could turn such an attitude toward the practice of the way, there would be nothing he could not accomplish. It’s a pity he did not have a persevering mind. When favorable circumstances returned, so did his former habits.

Fellow practitioners! Time waits for no one; once it passes it will never return. It is constantly looking to take our lives, so it is more frightening than the allied armies. Time will never compromise or make peace with us. Let us generate a mind of perseverance immediately in order to escape from birth and death! Master Gaofeng Yuanmiao (1238–1295) once said, “Concerning the practice, one should act like a stone dropping into the deepest part of the pool – ten thousand feet deep – continuously and persistently dropping without interruption toward the bottom. If one can practice like this without stopping, continuously for seven days and still be unable to cut off one’s wandering, illusory thoughts and vexations, may I, Gaofeng, plunge into Avici Hell and stay there forever.”¹² He continued by saying, “When one investigates Chan, one should set out a certain time for success, like a man who has fallen into a pit a thousand feet deep. All his tens of thousands of thoughts are reduced to one – to escape from the pit. If one can really practice from morning to dusk and from night to day without a second thought, and if he or she does not attain complete enlightenment within three, five, or seven days, I shall be committing a great lie for which I shall have my tongue pulled out for cows to plow on forever.”¹³ This old master had great compassion. Knowing that we would probably be unable to generate such a persevering mind, he made these great vows to guarantee our success.

Enlightenment and Practice

Master Hanshan [of the Ming dynasty] (1546–1623), once said:

There are practitioners who get enlightened first and then start their cultivation, and those who practice first and then get enlightened. However, there are two kinds of “enlightenment”: through understanding and through experience. If a person realizes mind by following the teachings of the Buddha and the patriarchs, it is considered insight through understanding. One with such an experience will only have a conceptual understanding. In all circumstances she or he will still be powerless. The mind of the practitioner and the environment are divided and are not one. Therefore, she or he may experience many obstructions. It is called simulated *prajna* and does not come from genuine practice.

On the other hand, those who become enlightened through practice stick to their methods in a straightforward manner until they force themselves into a place where “the mountains and rivers have completely exhausted.” Suddenly, their last thought drops away and they thoroughly realize mind. It is like seeing your own father at a crossroad – there is no doubt as to whom he is. It is also like drinking water; only the person drinking knows if it is warm or cold. There is no way to express it to other. This is real practice and enlightenment. Afterward, the practitioner will still have to, on the basis of her or his experience, merge his mind with the external environment. He will still have to get rid of strong karmic barriers of this life and deluded thinking and emotional attachments, leaving only the true mind of a single taste.¹⁴ This is enlightenment by experience.

Concerning true enlightenment experiences, there are deep and shallow ones. If one works on the root of the problem, destroys the nest of the eighth consciousness and overturns the dark caves of ignorance, then one heads directly for enlightenment, without relying on any other Dharma. Those who achieve this have extremely sharp karmic roots and experience deep enlightenment. Those who practice gradually experience shallow enlightenment. The worst case is when someone attains little and is satisfied. One should not take illusions, like shadows created by light, for enlightenment. Why? This is because they have not destroyed the root of the eighth consciousness, and their actions will be contrived. The experiences these people have are manifestations of their own consciousness. Believing such an illusory state to be real is like mistaking a thief for your son. An ancient said, “Because cultivators of the way do not recognize the real and have taken old consciousness as real, they transmigrate through innumerable *kalpas* of birth and death. Ignorant people take consciousness for their true selves.”¹⁵ Therefore, you must pass through this barrier. On the other hand, there are those who experience sudden enlightenment and cultivate gradually. Although these people have experienced deep enlightenment, they still have not suddenly purified their habitual tendencies. At this point, it is necessary to, on the principle of one’s enlightenment experience, generate the power of introspective illumination to experience the environment and check their mind. If they can fuse with one percent of external appearances, then they will have gained one percent of their Dharmakaya. By eliminating one percent of their deluded thoughts, one percent of their fundamental wisdom will

manifest. All of this will depend on the strength of your practice, which must be seamless and without gap. To practice in the midst of activities is to derive power from it.¹⁶

We can see that whether we are enlightened or not, or whether our enlightenment is through understanding or experience, we have to continue our practice and sincerely follow it through. The difference is that those who are enlightened first and then cultivate are like old horses that do not go down the wrong road; it is much easier than those who cultivate first and then get enlightened. Those who are enlightened through experience are grounded and are unlike those who gain insight through understanding, which is shaky and superficial. It is just that those who are enlightened through experience are more likely to derive power from their practice. The elder master Zhaozhou (778–897), at the age of eighty, began his sojourn visiting various teachers. For forty years, he applied himself wholeheartedly, without any scattered mind, observing the word, “*wu*” (nothingness). He is a great model for us all. Do you doubt that this elder master had yet experienced enlightenment in all those years? His example reminds us not to be satisfied with little accomplishments and not to be so proud of ourselves.

There are those who, after reading a few sutras or Chan discourse records, say things like, “Mind is buddha!” and “The mind exhausts the three periods and ten directions.” Yet, their words have nothing to do with their own personal lot. They firmly believe that they are ancient buddhas who have come back again. When they meet people, they praise themselves and say that they have attained complete, thorough enlightenment. Blind followers will even brag for them. This is like mistaking fish eyes for pearls! They do not know the difference between the real and the false. They mix things up and cause havoc for everyone. It not only makes people lose faith; it also

gives rise to criticism of the Dharma. The reason that the Chan School is not flourishing in recent years is mainly due to the faults of these unruly people. I hope you all can genuinely put forth your efforts in the practice. Do not be pretentious. Do not speak about Chan with empty words. Your task is to genuinely investigate Chan and attain solid enlightenment. In the future you can propagate the Dharma like “dragons and elephants,”¹⁷ and shoulder the burden of spreading teachings of Chan!

Investigating Chan and Reciting Buddha’s Name

Those who recite Buddha’s name often criticize those who investigate Chan; and those who investigate Chan often slander those who recite Buddha’s name. They seem to oppose each other like enemies, as if wishing the other would die. This, indeed, is a terrible phenomenon in Buddhism. There is a secular saying which goes something like this: “A family in harmony will succeed in everything, whereas a family in decline is sure to argue.” When there is fighting among brothers, is it no wonder that others laugh at us and look down at us?

Investigating Chan, reciting the Buddha’s name, and other methods are all teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha. Originally, the way is not-two. It is only because of the different conditions and karmic dispositions of sentient beings, like giving different antidotes for the different illnesses, that various methods and Dharma doors are taught. Later on, many great masters divided the Buddha’s teaching into different sects according to different interpretations. But all this was because the needs of people differ at different times that masters propagated the Dharma in different ways.

If an individual practices a method that fits his character, then that method would be the wondrous



Dharma door that can lead him to the way. Actually, there are no superior and inferior Dharma doors. Furthermore, Dharma doors are interconnected, all are perfect and without obstruction. For example, when you recite Buddha’s name to the point of single-mindedness, without any distractions, is this not investigating Chan? When you investigate Chan to the point of no separation between the investigator and that which is being investigated, is this not reciting the true characteristic of the Buddha? Chan is not other than the Chan of purity; and so-called “pure” land is not other than the purity within Chan. Chan and Pure Land are mutually enriching, and they function together. However, there are people who are biased and attached, giving rise to sectarian views, which can unfortunately lead to praising oneself and slandering others. Such people are like fire and water; they cannot exist

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together. They have misunderstood the profound meaning of the patriarchs who divided the Dharma into different schools and teachings. These people have unintentionally transgressed the heavy offense of slandering and endangering the Dharma. Is this not sad and pitiable? I hope that all of us, no matter which Dharma door we practice, understand the buddhas and patriarchs in their principle of non-discrimination and non-opposition, and refrain from divisiveness. We should have the mind of helping one another so that we may save this ship which floats amidst dangerous and violent waves.

The Two Kinds of Difficulty and Ease Which Practitioners’ Experience

Those who cultivate the way, according to the depth and shallowness of their practice, have two kinds of difficulty and ease. The first kind of difficulty and ease is associated with beginners, while the second kind corresponds to advanced practitioners.

Difficulties for Beginning Practitioners

The common symptoms of the beginner’s disease are: the inability to put down wandering thoughts and habitual tendencies; the depth of their ignorance; the obstruction of arrogance and jealousy; the tendency of greed, anger, stupidity and craving; the laziness for work but craving for food; the liking for stirring up right and wrong between self and other. All these fill their big bellies. How can beginners come in accordance with the way?

There are other kinds of people who are born into wealthy and noble families. Unable to forget their habits and stains from the world, they cannot endure the least bit of difficulty or withstand any hardship. How can these people practice the way? They have not considered the status of our original

teacher, Shakyamuni Buddha, prior to leaving the household life.

Then there are those who are somewhat well read, but do not understand that the problems posed in the discourse records of ancient worthies are actually for testing practitioners’ levels of understanding. These people think they are smart. Every day scrutinizing the recorded sayings and writings, mouthing about mind and Buddha, interpreting the words and letters of the ancients, talking about food but not eating it, counting the treasure of others but not owning it themselves, they think they are extraordinary people, and become incredibly arrogant. But when these people become seriously ill, they will cry out for help; and at the end of their lives they will panic and become bewildered. At that time, what they have learned and understood will be useless, and it will be too late to regret.

There are other people who misunderstand the saying, “Originally we are buddhas.” These people say that the original self is already complete and that there is no need for practice. All day long they loaf about with nothing to do, following their whim, wasting their time. These people call themselves “one who is beyond models and forms” and follow only “causes and conditions.” In the future these people will suffer greatly.

Then there are people who do have their minds set on the way, but who do not know how to exert themselves in practice; they are afraid of wandering thoughts and since they are unable to “get rid” of them, day in and day out, they are vexed, complaining about and lamenting their heavy karmic obstructions. Because of this, their minds set on the way backslide. Or there are those people who want to battle till death with their wandering thoughts. Furiously, they tense up their fists and push out their chests and eyes. It seems like they are involved in something big. Ready to die in battle against their deluded thinking, they

not only cannot defeat deluded thinking, but end up vomiting blood or going insane.

There are those who fear falling into emptiness. Little do they know that demons have already arisen in their minds; they can neither empty their minds nor get enlightened. And there are those who seek after enlightenment, not knowing that seeking enlightenment and wanting to attain buddhahood are all grave deluded thinking. One cannot cook sand hoping to eat rice. They can seek until the year of the donkey¹⁸ and they still won't get enlightened. Sometimes people become elated when occasionally they sit through a couple of peaceful sittings. These situations are like a blind turtle whose head happens to pass through a small hole in a piece of wood floating in the middle of the ocean. It is not the result of real practice (but mere luck)! In their elation these people have added another layer of obstructions.

There are those who dwell in false purity during meditation and enjoy themselves there. Since they cannot maintain a peaceful mind within activity, they avoid noisy places and spend their days soaking in "stale water." There are numerous examples of this. For beginners, it is very difficult to find entrance to the way. If there is illumination without awareness, then it's like sitting in stale water waiting to die.

Even though this practice is hard, once you find entrance to the way, it becomes easier. What is the easiest way for beginners? There is nothing special other than being able to "put it down." Put what down? Put down all those vexations that arise from ignorance. Fellow practitioners, once this body of ours stops breathing, it becomes a corpse. The main reason we cannot put it down is because we place too much importance on it. Because of this, we give rise to the idea of self and other, right and wrong, love and hate, gain and loss. If we can have a firm belief that this body of ours is like a corpse, not to cherish it or look upon it as being ourselves, then what is

there that we cannot put down? If we can put it down, then anywhere and anytime, whether walking, standing, sitting or sleeping, whether in motion or still, whether resting or active, then internally and externally all will be cold and still, with nothing else but a single doubt of the huatou. And if we peacefully and uninterruptedly continue without a moment of extraneous thought, then like a long sword extending into the sky, if anything comes in contact with the sharp edge, our doubt will extinguish it without a trace or sound. Why would there be fear of wandering thoughts? What could disturb you? Who will be there to distinguish between movement and stillness? Who would be attached to existence or emptiness? If there are fears of wandering thoughts, then you have already added another layer of wandering thought. If you feel you are pure, then you are already defiled. If you are afraid of falling into emptiness, then you are already dwelling in existence. If you want to become a buddha, then you have already entered the demon's path. Therefore, if you know how to practice, then carrying water and gathering firewood are not separate from the wonderful way; and hoeing and planting fields are all Chan opportunities (*chan ji*). Practicing the way is not limited to sitting cross-legged throughout the day.

Difficulties for Advanced Practitioners

What difficulties are encountered by seasoned practitioners? Although some have practiced until the emergence of genuine doubt and possess both awareness and illumination, they are still bound by birth and death. Those who have neither awareness nor illumination fall into false emptiness. To arrive at either of these situations is truly difficult. After reaching this point, some practitioners cannot release themselves; standing at the "top of a ten thousand foot pole" they are unable to advance. Some people having progressed to this stage and being skilled in

practice, encounter nothing they cannot resolve, so think that they have already severed the fundamental ignorance; they believe that their practice has reached home. Actually, these people are living in the wave of ignorance and do not even know it. When these people encounter a situation that they cannot solve – where they must be their own master but cannot, they just give up. This is a pity.

There are others who reach the genuine doubt sensation, gain a little wisdom from the experience of emptiness, and understand a few ancient gong'an cases; and then they give up the doubt sensation because they think they are completely enlightened. These people compose poems and verses, act arrogantly and call themselves virtuous men of the way. Not only do they fool themselves, they also mislead others. They are creating bad karma.

In other cases there are those who mistake the teaching of Bodhidharma, "To isolate from external conditions, to internally still the mind, make the mind like a wall – this is the method to enter the way." Or the Sixth Patriarch's, "Not thinking of good or evil, at this time what is your original face?" They think that meditating like a withered log and a large boulder is the ultimate principle. These people take the illusory city as their treasured palace,¹⁹ the temporary guest house as their home. This is the reason behind the gong'an case of the old woman who burned down the hut to reprimand the monk.²⁰

What is the easy way for these advanced practitioners? Do not be proud and never give up the practice. Your practice should be seamless without any gap. In the midst of this subtle, seamless practice, you have to be even subtler; while practicing in a cautious and attentive manner, you have to be more careful. When the time comes, the bottom of the barrel will naturally drop off.²¹ If you cannot do this, then find a virtuous teacher to pry off the nails of the barrel and pull out the joints!

The great Hanshan²² of the Tang once wrote:

*On the peak of the highest mountain,
The four directions expand to infinity.
Sitting in silence, no one knows him.
The solitary moon illuminates the cold spring.
In the spring there is no moon.
The moon is high in the sky.
Though I'm humming this song,
In the song there is no Chan.*

The first two lines of this song reveal that the appearance of real nature does not belong to anything. The whole world is filled with bright and pure luminosity without any obstructions. The third line speaks of the essence of true suchness. Surely, ordinary people cannot comprehend this. Even the buddhas of the three periods do not know where I abide. Therefore, no one can know the path. The three lines beginning with, "The solitary moon illuminates the cold spring," is an expedient example of the level of Master Hanshan's practice. The last two lines are mentioned because he is afraid that we will "mistake the finger for the moon." Thus he especially warns us that words and language are not Chan.

Conclusion

I have said too much and have interrupted your practice. These words are like entangling vines (the more one pulls, the more they tangle together). Whenever words are spoken, genuine meaning is absent. When the ancient worthies received their students, they either used sticks on them or scolded them. There were not so many words! However, the present time cannot be compared with the past. One has no choice but to point a finger strenuously at the moon. Still, who is it that points? Who is the moon? Investigate! ☯

1. “See your self-nature,” that is, to have an experience of enlightenment, typically referring to the first time one has the experience. “Self-nature,” refers to bodhi, or buddha-nature.
2. This is an allusion to a passage in the *Diamond Sūtra*. A. F. Price and Wong Mou-lam, trans., *The Diamond Sutra and the Sutra of Hui-neng*. (Boston: Shambala Publications, 1990).
3. *Gong’an*: Lit. “public case,” as in a law case. A Chan method of meditation in which the practitioner energetically and single-mindedly pursues the answer to an enigmatic question either posed by the master, or one that arises spontaneously. The question can be answered only by abandoning logic and reasoning, through directly generating and breaking through the “doubt sensation” under natural causes and conditions. Famous gong’an encounters were recorded and used by masters to test their disciples’ understanding, or they served as a catalyst for enlightenment. The term gong’an is often used interchangeably with *huatou*.
Huatou: Lit. “the source of words (before they are uttered),” a method used in Chan to arouse the doubt sensation. The practitioner meditates on such baffling questions as: “What is Nothingness?” “Where am I?” or “Who is reciting the Buddha’s name?” One does not rely on experience, logic, or reasoning. Often, these phrases are taken from gong’ans, or in Zen, koans. At other times they are spontaneously generated by the practitioner. In Zen, the term for huatou is wato, and is often used interchangeably with *koan* or *gong’an*.
4. The use of lower case *dharma* here refers to phenomena, as opposed to *Dharma*, the teachings of the Buddha.
5. *Five Skandhas*: The five skandhas, or aggregates, are the constituents of the sentient being’s experience of the world. They are form, sensation, perception, volition, and consciousness. The first skandha, form, is the material component; the other four are mental in nature. Operating together, the five skandhas create the illusion of separate existence and the notion of self or ego.
6. See the Buddhist Canon, *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* (hereafter as T.), no. 945, vol. 19: 147c7.
7. T. no. 945, vol. 19: 109c7.
8. This is a reference to the Pure Land practice of reciting the name of Amitabha, the Buddha of the western paradise. This practice does not require the effort of raising the doubt sensation.
9. In Chan context, a “clear-eyed person” is one who is already enlightened.
10. *Incense stick*: An incense stick, or incense board, is a thin wooden stick that is used to strike meditating practitioners on the shoulders to wake them from drowsiness or to spur them on to greater effort. Nowadays, the use of the incense stick is mostly at the request of the sitter. In Zen the incense stick is called *kyosaku*.
11. “Oblivion” is a rendering for the term, *wuji*, which also connotes absent-mindedness.
12. See the Extended Buddhist Canon, *Xuzang jing* (hereafter as X.), no. 1400, vol. 70: 686c13. There is a slight discrepancy between what’s quoted by Xuyun and what is in the version we have in the canon; Xuyun cites him as saying that “may my tongue be pulled out for cows to plow on forever,” which is a repeated in the next quote. The translator has translated according to the version in the canon.
13. See X., no. 1400, vol. 70: 696c06.
14. A “single taste” is a Chan expression referring to how an enlightened mind operates in daily life, where everything is experienced as the Dharma. In the *Lotus Sūtra* the Dharma is said to be of a single taste, the taste of liberation. See T. no., 262, vol. 9: 19b7.
15. This is a verse that appears in case number twelve of the famous Chan book, *The Gateless Gate*, a collection of stories of *gong’an*. The master who said this was Yanhuan (d.u.). See T. no., 2005, vol. 48: 294b26.
16. This passage appears in Hanshan’s *Journal of Dream Roaming*. See X. no., 1456, vol., 73: 469b08.
17. This Chinese expression, “dragons and elephants,” is often used for outstanding monastics within Buddhist circles. The Chinese conceive of these two animals as the most powerful creatures in water and on land. The Chinese also tend to use the word “dragon,” for its mystical powers and strength, as an adjective to describe the amazing speed of an animal such as a “dragon horse.” According to this definition, then, the translation should be “dragon elephants.”
18. In the Chinese traditional years of animals, there is no year of the donkey!
19. This is an allusion to a story in chapter seven of the *Lotus Sūtra* where the Buddha shows that the arhat’s attainment of nirvana is like an illusory city, a temporary rest stop, and that they must go on to the bodhisattva path.
20. This is reference to a *gong’an* case in the *Transmission of the Lamp in the Jingde Era* in which an old lady burned down the hut of the monk whom she supported for twenty years. The story goes that one day in order to test the monk, the old lady asked her daughter to hug the monk when she brings his meal. She did that, and the next day the old lady asked the monk how he felt when her daughter hugged him. He replied that it was like “a withered log leaning on a cold cliff.” Upon hearing this, the old lady regretted that she has been supporting this monk and chased him out of the hut. After which she burned it down.
21. This is an expression for experiencing the moment of enlightenment.
22. Hanshan, the Tang dynasty poet, not Hanshan Deqing, the Ming Dynasty master.

A Poem in Winter

by Abbot Guo Yuan



Quiet Winter morning
Mist pervading everywhere
Sun rising behind silver screen
Like white moon in a bright day
Sitting quietly, meditate in the contemplation hall

Photo by Abbot Guo Yuan

There Is Not a Thing That Cannot Be Accomplished

BY

Chan Master Lingyuan

Master Lingyuan Hongmiao (1902–1988) was a lineage disciple of the legendary Master Xuyun. He was also an important teacher of our Shifu, Master Sheng Yen. In his autobiography Shifu recounts his first meeting with Master Lingyuan, when they happened to share a bed platform one night while staying at a monastery. After sitting in meditation together, Shifu asked whether he might ask the impressive old monk a question? Shifu at this time was still in the army, and suffering doubt and despair over how he could ever become a monk again. Master Lingyuan listened patiently to Shifu’s many questions. Each time Shifu paused for breath, Master Lingyuan would ask “any more?” Finally, the old master struck the bed platform hard and shouted “PUT IT DOWN!” The shock of this command led to Shifu’s powerful awakening experience.¹ Master Sheng Yen received full transmission in the Linji tradition from Master Lingyuan in 1978.

This article is a dialogue between Master Lingyuan and his teacher, Master Xuyun; a retreat interview from a seven-day winter retreat in 1947. It was recorded by Master Lingyuan, translated by Guo Gu, and previously published in Master Sheng Yen’s book *Attaining the Way*.²



Painting by Chan Master Lingyuan

XUYUN: What method are you using?

LINGYUAN: Reciting Buddha’s name and investigating Chan. Both Chan and Pure Land are practiced.

XUYUN: How can you be investigating Chan when you are reciting Buddha’s name?

LINGYUAN: Although I recite the Buddha’s name, in my consciousness, there is this doubt about who is reciting Buddha’s name. So even though I’m reciting Buddha’s name, I’m also investigating Chan.

XUYUN: Are there wandering thoughts or not?

LINGYUAN: When the correct thought (i.e., method) is brought forth, often wandering thoughts are there along with it. However, when the correct thought is put down there wondering thoughts are also absent; there’s only a sense of purity and freedom.

XUYUN: This purity and freedom is laziness, like a rock soaking in cold water! If one practices like this even for a thousand years it is still useless. You must bring forth the correct thought with a bold and persevering mind; investigating till the end and really seeing through just who is reciting Buddha’s name. Only then you break through; you must practice with great determination.

LINGYUAN: I have heard that you had entered samadhi for eighteen days in Chungnan Mountain. Was there a mind that entered the samadhi, or no mind that entered that samadhi?

XUYUN: If there is a mind that enters samadhi, then that is not in samadhi. If there’s no mind that enters samadhi then one is like a statue made out of wood or mud. Place the mind at one point, and there’s not a thing that cannot be accomplished.

LINGYUAN: I want to be like you grandmaster, and enter samadhi, please teach me.

XUYUN: Then you must watch the huatou.

LINGYUAN: What do you call this huatou?

XUYUN: *Hua* is just wandering thoughts, like talking to yourself when you’re meditating. So you must

illuminate the state before wandering thoughts arise, and examine what is your original face? This is called observing the huatou. If wandering thoughts have already arisen, you must still bring forth the correct thought and the specious thoughts will perish by themselves. If you follow the wandering thoughts, sitting meditation will be useless. However, if you bring forth the correct thought of using the method but you’re not earnest enough, the huatou will still be powerless; wandering thoughts will surely arise. When practicing, one needs to have a bold and persevering mind like your parents have died. An ancient worthy said, “It’s like guarding the emperor’s palace; closely guarding on the top of the palace wall.” Or, “If you haven’t endured the bone chilling winter, how do you expect to smell the fragrance of plum blossoms?” (*Comment by Lingyuan:* these words are always said by the grandmaster in seven-day retreats.) If there are neither wandering thoughts nor the huatou, then sitting there with an empty mind is like a rock soaking in cold water. One can sit for countless eons and still be useless. If you want to investigate Chan, then this is the only way. If you don’t want to do it this way, then don’t investigate Chan. One has to have this bold and persevering mind, like a single person fighting off ten thousand enemies – going straight forward without retreat and without letting loose. Reciting Buddha’s name should also be like this; reciting mantras should also be like this. The earnestness of your mind of birth and death will increase day by day. If you can be like this, then your practice will progress. ☸

1. Chan Master Sheng Yen, *Footprints in the Snow: The Autobiography of a Chinese Buddhist Monk* (New York, Doubleday Books, 2008), 84–88n.

2. Chan Master Sheng Yen, *Attaining the Way: A Guide to the Practice of Chan Buddhism* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2006).

Great-Great-Grandmaster Empty Cloud

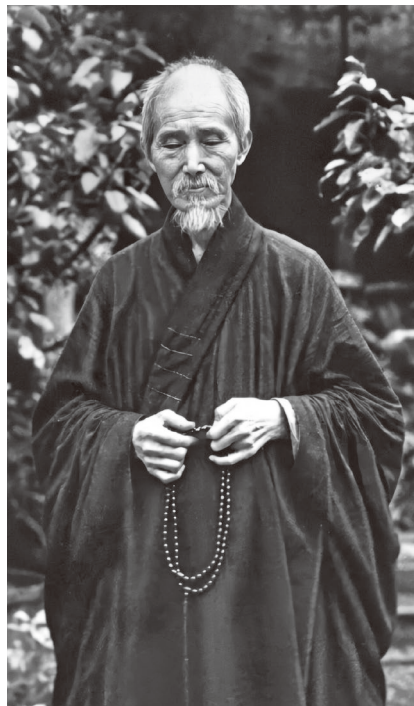
BY

Victor Lapuszynski

The name Xuyun (also spelled Hsu Yun) translates into English as “Empty Cloud.” Master Xuyun (1840–1959) was the grandmaster of Master Lingyuan Hongmiao (1902–1988), who in turn was a lineage master of our own Shifu, Master Sheng Yen (1931–2009). Thus Empty Cloud is a great-great-grandmaster of the current generation of our Dharma Drum lineage. This article highlights some of the more unusual stories from his autobiography.

THE ANCIENT WORTHIES OF THE Chan lineages typically downplayed miracles and unusual events. Everyday life is what is miraculous, they said, but miracles and wonders are just distractions from the real work of spiritual cultivation. Master Huangbo even threatened to break the legs of a companion who walked on the waters of a raging river, so deep was his disgust at such vainglorious display.¹

Even so, in the dim reaches of more than two millennia, Buddhist historians have written about many strange events. The further back in time we go, the stranger the stories, as legends accumulate around our spiritual heroes. The founder of the Chan lineage himself, the revered ancestor Bodhidharma, left his



Chan Master Xuyun DDM Archive Photo

Background Photo by Ven. Chang Duo

meeting with the emperor and crossed the Yangtze River on a reed. It's not recorded what Venerable Huangbo thought of that. When Ming caught up with the Sixth Patriarch and demanded the robe and the bowl of the lineage, he could not lift these items from where they were placed on a rock, although he was a strong, former military officer. Each of the members of Layman Pang's family died at the time of their choosing, simply by an act of will. The great Master Zhaozhou did not even begin to teach until his eightieth year, and then lived to share the Dharma until his one-hundred-and-twentieth.

All this happened a long time in the past, more than a thousand years ago. We tend to see these things as quaint legends which need not be accepted literally.

What then of Master Xuyun, who died within my lifetime, in 1959? He was a lineage holder in both the Caodong and the Linji lines and was very well known all over China and elsewhere, yet he, like Zhaozhou, lived to one hundred and twenty. Because of his longevity, he had hundreds, if not thousands, of disciples, including the translators Charles Luk and John Blofeld, who provided English readers with many important Buddhist texts. One of his Dharma descendants was Master Lingyuan, who gave Dharma transmission to Master Sheng Yen, the founder of the Dharma Drum lineage. Even now, Masters Xuyun and Lingyuan have their photographs hanging on the wall of the Ancestor's Hall at Dharma Drum Retreat Center in upstate New York.

Early Life

Venerable Xuyun even left behind an autobiography, *Empty Cloud*², which Charles Luk rendered into English and Richard Hunn edited. In it, we have a valuable record of travels, events, attitudes, and Chan teachings from a pivotal time of regeneration

of Chinese Buddhism, from the vantage of one of the key figures responsible for its renewal.

His life story, stripped of any uncanny occurrences, is remarkable enough. His family sought to thwart his monastic inclination by marrying him to two young women from prominent families, but he instead preached the Dharma to them and maintained chastity. He ran away from home at age nineteen, to go to Gushan (Mount Gu) and the Yungquan Monastery, where he was ordained and hid from men hired by his father to bring him back to secular life. He spent much of his time as a recluse in a wild area on Gushan, and practiced meditation and austerities, setting patterns he would follow his whole life. At the death of his father, he heard that his two young wives and his stepmother had all taken vows in the women's monastic order, breaking his worldly ties.

After spending some time guided by worthy elders, Xuyun set off on a pilgrimage to Mount Putuo, sacred to Avalokiteshvara, and other Buddhist holy sites. The master commented on his walking, “During the two years gone by, although I traveled ten thousand *li*³, I always walked on foot, the only exception being when crossing the sea by boat. I forded streams and climbed mountains braving rains, gales, frost and snow. The scenery changed every day but my mind was pure like a bright and solitary moon hanging in the sky. My health grew more robust and my steps became rapid. I felt no hardship on this march, but on the contrary, I realized the harmfulness of my former self-indulgence. An ancient rightly said that ‘after reading ten thousand books, one should travel ten thousand miles.’”⁴ Feeling he had not requited his parents, he went on another pilgrimage in his forty-third year, headed for Wutaishan, the mountain sacred to Manjushri. Xuyun vowed to make a full prostration with every third step, while carrying a stick of burning incense. My calculations

with an online map site, if accurate, yielded a distance of 979 miles. After completing his vows, he continued to travel to Tibet, India, and Southeast Asia.

Growing Reputation

His travels and austerities earned him notice. He acquired numerous disciples and benefactors, enabling him to repair many decrepit temples and monasteries. In time, his status was such that the emperor bestowed the imperial edition of the Tripitaka, the entire Chinese Buddhist Canon, on him as a gift to the monastery he restored at Cock’s-Foot Mountain. He was then sixty-seven, in 1907. The immensity of the gift was a problem in itself, and compelled the master to further travel, raising funds. Finally, in his seventieth year, he succeeded in conveying the literature by three hundred packhorses over the mountains between Burma and China to his monastery.

He put his growing reputation to use in repairing temples, but even more importantly, in repairing the monastic sangha and the Buddhism of the laity. Although other masters, like Taixu and Yin Shun, were also instrumental in reviving the Dharma from a long decline, Master Xuyun tends to be the one most associated with it in China and Southeast Asia.

Many more deeds and events have been left out of this brief account, which would make it much longer. This article is about some marvels from his life that modernist readers may find hard to

accept. Expert friends have suggested that the difference in cultural attitudes between him and us make it seem like Master Xuyun is actually talking about extraordinary things, when it’s just a manner of speaking. I think it’s plain that he was speaking about such things in a literal way. One need not believe such things actually happened to benefit from his Dharma teachings, but – these stories are entertaining and interesting in themselves.

Animal Practitioners

Some of them have to do with animals acting precociously. As fellow sentient beings, Buddhists regard all living things as having a spiritual nature, and benefiting them earns merit. As such things develop, there arose the custom of capturing wild animals, just to acquire spiritual merit in setting them free again. Master Xuyun’s autobiography mentions several such incidents.

In the year (1909–10) when he transported the entire Tripitaka, thousands of texts, from Malaysia to Yunnan Province



Art by Chien-Chih Liu

in South China, by means of three hundred pack horses and a thousand laborers, the master was relaxing (presumably) in a monastery and talking with an army officer. Suddenly a cow burst into the hall and knelt, tears streaming from her eyes. She was followed by her owner, a butcher. Xuyun said to the cow, “If you want to [save] your life, you should take refuge in the Triple Gem.”⁵ When the cow nodded, the master recited the three refuges to her and she became completely calm. He helped her to rise and offered money to her owner for her freedom, but the butcher was so moved by what he witnessed that he refused the money and asked to convert to Buddhism. As he dropped his means of livelihood and became a vegetarian, Xuyun’s military friend gave him a recommendation to work in a shop in the town. Perhaps the conversion of the butcher is more noteworthy than the cow taking refuge.

Deep Samadhi

Spiritual adepts often show unusual physical qualities and abilities. Master Xuyun recorded some examples from his own life. Once, spending the winter in a hut near a mountain in Shanxi Province in the north, he described his situation, “The year was nearing its end; all the surrounding mountains were covered with snow and the intense cold penetrated to the bone. I was alone in my hut, but my body and mind felt pure and clean.”⁶ He was preparing some taro root in a pot when he sat in meditation to wait, and went into samadhi. Other monastic recluses lived close enough to socialize and wondered that he had not come around in many days. They decided to come to his place to offer New Year’s greetings. Around his hut were tiger tracks, but no sign of human activity for a while. Inside the hut, they found him in his profoundly concentrated state. The experienced monastics knew just what to do, and roused him with the sound of a special stone instrument. When he reoriented himself to the sensory here-and-now, they asked him if he had eaten. The master replied, “Not yet, but my taro should be done by now.” The leader of the recluse monks lifted the lid of the pot and saw an inch-thick mat of mold-fuzz on the root, and exclaimed, “You must have been in samadhi for half a month!”⁷ The wonder is



Painting by Chan Master Lingyuan

not so much that Xuyun didn’t starve, but that he didn’t freeze to death!

Apparently, samadhi does not always protect one from all physical mishaps. Five years after the incident of the moldy taro, the master was in Thailand, seeking to raise funds to transport the aforementioned Tripitaka to Yunnan. Xuyun took to expounding sutras to the public. After developing an audience numbering hundreds, he again went into samadhi spontaneously while in

meditation posture with crossed legs. He sat silently for nine days, sutra exposition forgotten. News of his samadhi spread; even the king came to witness and pay his respects. When the master finally came out of samadhi, he finished his exposition. The king asked for another lecture at the palace, but after his nine-day samadhi, Master Xuyun had difficulty with walking. Instead of getting better, he became unable even to use chopsticks and depended on others to feed him. Sight and hearing also became a problem. As he said, “When I could no longer speak or see, all the physicians had no further resources. I was, however, indifferent to this and did not feel any suffering, for I had laid down everything. But there was one thing I could not afford to lay down [...] the Tripitaka would fail to be conveyed to Cock’s-Foot Mountain and the hall for keeping it would not be built. How, then, could I bear the heavy karmic burden for this? As I thought of it, I shed tears and silently prayed for Mahakasyapa to protect me.”⁸ He slept and dreamt of Mahakasyapa giving healing advice to himself, and began to recuperate. His illness had lasted about twenty days. Xuyun finished expounding scripture to the king, who rewarded him with funds enough to transport the library.

Paranormal Events

Animals acting precociously, dreams, and yogic feats are intriguing, but not really inexplicable. Some more paranormal happenings are recorded in the master’s autobiography. He and others saw “Buddha-lights” at sacred Mount Emei and his own Cock’s-Foot Mountain, in an era long before electric lighting was developed. As Xuyun offered incense on his first visit to Cock’s-Foot, a loud bell sounded. The local people were very excited and said to the master, “Whenever an enlightened person comes here, the sound of a bell, drum or musical instrument is heard. We have

all heard that of a drum or musical instrument once or twice to date, but so far we have never heard the sound of a large bell. Seeing that you came to pay reverence today, and that the sound of a large bell was heard, that surely means you have attained the Dao?”⁹ Xuyun emphatically denied any such thing!

More elaborate are the occurrences around ceremonies involving the cremation relics of Xuyun’s ordination master, Venerable Miao-lian. The old master passed away at Yongquan Temple on Mount Gu in Fujian Province. Transporting the Tripitaka by boat, Master Xuyun already intended to visit his old teacher when he stopped at the port of Amoy, but the death of the old master prevented him from seeing him alive. He went to join the ceremonies of passing.

It was decided that part of the ashes of the old master would be interred at Mount Gu, and the rest at Xuyun’s monastery at Cock’s-Foot Mountain, where, in an inaccessible cave, the Venerable Mahakasyapa waited in samadhi for Maitreya to come. Master Xuyun describes what happened, “[...] when the stupa (containing ashes) was placed in the pagoda, a hundred tables with vegetarian food were offered on an open platform where the assembly gathered to recite sutras. After offering prayers, when the food-transmuting mantra was being chanted, a whirlwind suddenly raised all the offerings into the air and a bright ray of red light emanated from the stupa and went upwards towards the top of the pagoda. All those present praised the rare occurrence.”¹⁰

In Penang later, where the local monks wished to honor Miao-lian’s relics as well, he relates, “After the recitation of sutras, while the food-transmuting mantra was being chanted, a whirlwind suddenly scattered thousands of floral offerings there. The box of relics emitted a brilliant ray of light which reached the top of the pagoda, two li away.”¹¹

Master Xuyun himself found these things surprising. He said, “The above two remarkable

occurrences took place during my performance of the rituals and were clearly witnessed by me, personally. For this reason, the Buddha said, ‘The response from esoteric rites is mysterious.’ Of the Abbot’s lifetime of self-cultivation, I knew nothing.[...] The events after his passing were indeed very remarkable. [...] I remembered his last words from which it could be inferred that he knew of his death in advance. As it is impossible to make accurate guesses in this respect, I only relate the facts for others who will come after me, thus to draw their own conclusions.”¹² Xuyun suspected his ordination master had done esoteric practice in the years they were apart.

Jade Buddha

When the Tripitaka was transported overland to Yunnan, a large statue of the reclining Buddha¹³ was left behind in Burma to move at a later date. Apparently specialized carriers were needed to take this large jade object, weighing hundreds of pounds, over mountain trails. Master Xuyun had to wait eight years to finish the statue’s journey, but finally eight men were hired and promised payment at journey’s end. However, at some point they began to suspect the statue actually contained further treasures. They set down the statue, claiming it was too heavy to go further, and suggested the master might make it

lighter by paying them many times more the agreed wages. Although Xuyun tried to reason with them, they became hostile and unruly. Of this he said, “I found it was useless trying to reason with them, and seeing a large boulder by the roadside which weighed several hundred catties¹⁴, I smiled and asked them: ‘Which is the heavier, this boulder or the statue?’ In unison, they replied, ‘The boulder is two or three times heavier than the statue.’ Then, with both hands, I raised the boulder over a foot above the ground. Gaping in astonishment, they put out their tongues and said, ‘Old Master, you must be a living Buddha!’ They then stopped arguing and when we reached the Cock’s Foot Mountain, I gave them a substantial reward.” Of this incident, Master Xuyun said, “I know that my own strength could never have raised the boulder and I attributed this to divine assistance.”¹⁵

This is just a fairly random assortment of the more unusual events the extraordinary monk Xuyun chose to recount. His whole life story is worth reading, for the sake of encouraging one’s own practice. I have included the URL¹⁶ for a PDF of his autobiography, which can be downloaded for free (compliments of *thezensite.com*, part of the Zen Buddhism Virtual Library). Further teachings of Master Empty Cloud can be found on the Internet. May the spirit-bell continue to ring at Cock’s-Foot Mountain, and may we hear it. ☸

1. Yuanwu Keqin, *The Blue Cliff Record*, trans. Thomas Cleary and J. C. Cleary (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2005) (An online source for this case can be found here: www.bowzwestchester.org/2016/10/oct-19-25-bcr-11-bos-53.html)
2. Xuyun, *Empty Cloud: The Autobiography of the Chinese Zen Master Xu Yun*, trans. Charles Luk, ed. Richard Hunn (Shaftesbury: Element Books, 1988).
3. One *li* is approximately 1,640 feet.
4. Xuyun, 34.
5. Xuyun, 75.
6. Xuyun, 51.
7. Xuyun, 51.

8. Xuyun, 71–72.
9. Xuyun, 32.
10. Xuyun, 69–70.
11. Xuyun, 70.
12. Xuyun, 70.
13. The jade Buddha had been gifted to Master Xuyun by a layman, at the same time that the Emperor had bestowed the Tripitaka.
14. The catty is traditionally equivalent to around 1½ pound avoirdupois.
15. Xuyun, 96.
16. www.thezensite.com/ZenTeachings/Translations/Empty-Cloud_The_Autobiography_of_Xu_Yun.pdf

Farewell Poem

by Chan Master Xuyun

少小離塵別故鄉，
天涯雲水路茫茫。
百年歲月垂垂老，
幾度滄桑得得忘。
但教群迷登覺岸，
敢辭微命入爐湯。
衆生無盡願無盡，
水月光中又一場。

At a young age, I left the dusty world
and departed from my hometown,
traversing obscure paths
through vast rivers and clouds.
Over one hundred years have passed,
now I'm old and hunched over.
Having faced numerous vicissitudes,
I've nearly forgotten them.
Yet, having taught the confused masses
how to reach the shore of awakening,
I dare send off this miniscule life
into the scorching furnace.
As sentient beings are limitless,
so are my vows.
Like the light of the moon in water,
another episode of life has completed.

Translation by David Listen
Art by Chien-Chih Liu



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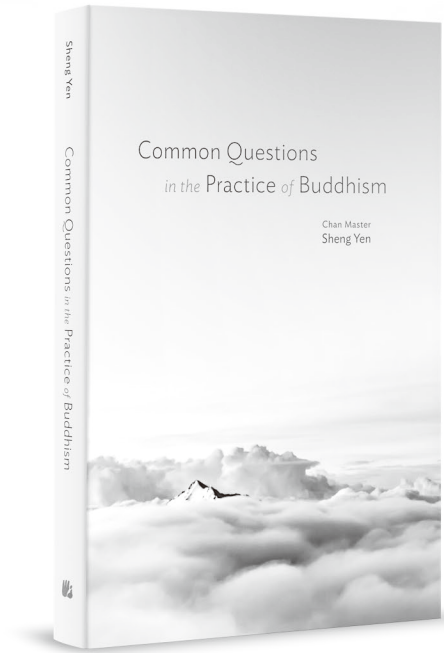
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Common Questions in the Practice of Buddhism

Chan Master Sheng Yen

*If someone believes in and practices Buddhism,
should they also take refuge in the Three Jewels?*

*Is special knowledge and advanced learning required to
practice Buddhism?*

Are there any taboos concerning practicing Buddhism at home?

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

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