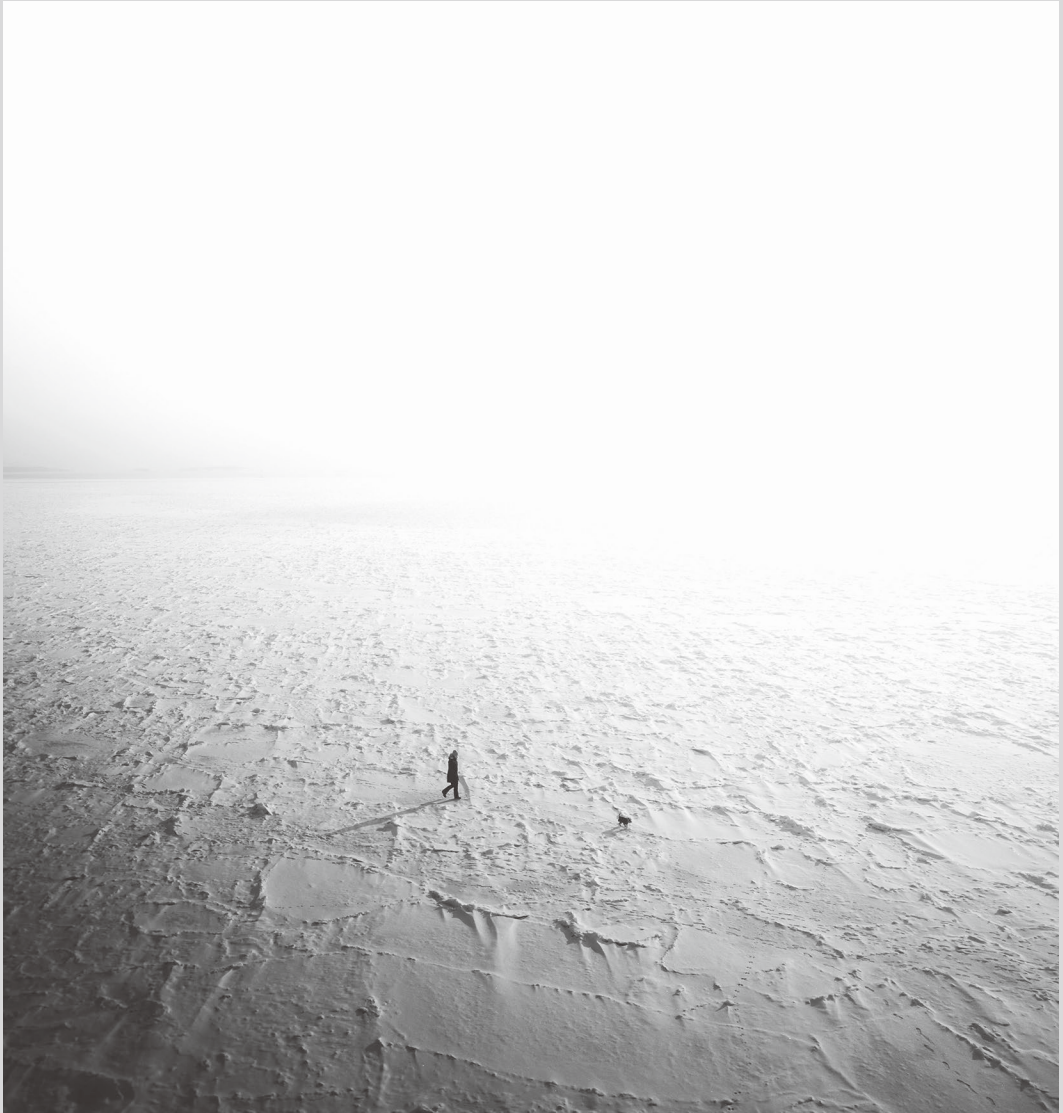


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CHAN MAGAZINE

WINTER 2021





Compassion

All religions that advocate mutual respect should regard other religious traditions as equal to their own. In other words, the emergence of religion is for the sake of loving human beings, and sentient beings. It is entirely impossible that religions arose for the sake of encouraging adherents to slaughter human beings or destroy the world. Moreover, whether it's about ascending to Heaven or attaining rebirth in the Buddha's Pure Land, the prerequisite must be based on compassion toward people and sentient beings.



CHAN MASTER SHENG YEN
The World of Human Realm, 2018

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禪 CHAN MAGAZINE

Volume 41, Number 1 — Winter 2021

Making Use of Life's Hard Times	4
BY <i>Chan Master Sheng Yen</i>	
Living Fully Is to See Each Moment as Brand New	12
BY <i>Rebecca Li</i>	
The Jewel Net of Indra	20
BY <i>Ernest Heau</i>	
Group Meditation Going Online – Really?	32
BY <i>Warren Hsing</i>	
Retreats, Workshops & Group Meditation	36
Chan Meditation Center Affiliates	38

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Making Use of Life's Hard Times

BY

CHAN MASTER SHENG YEN





Chan Master Sheng Yen DDM Archive Photo

This article is excerpted from *The World of Human Realm* 《人間世》 (*Ren Jian Shi*, Dharma Drum Publishing, 2018). In the author's preface, Master Sheng Yen (Shifu) explains how this book came to be: In 2001 Mr. Shengkai Zhang started a periodical named *Open Weekly*, and asked our Shifu to contribute a weekly article. A journalist would interview Shifu on current issues facing society. The transcripts of these interviews were edited by Ven. Guo Chan and Ms. Ligui Hu. The column ran for a year and a half until in 2003 Mr. Zhang had to discontinue *Open Weekly*. To honor Mr. Zhang's dedication, it was decided to publish the essays in book form. About that work, Shifu wrote: "When I was initially interviewed, I responded colloquially and did not pay enough attention to the importance of phrasing, as well as the universality of the topics, and the logical structure of the ideas. [...] It wasn't until I returned to New York, when I was already affected by aging and ailment, though still busy from morning until night, that I had time to go back and work on this book, making the final touches [...] I went through nearly every paragraph and word, revising and enlarging to make the book more readable. I take this opportunity now to offer readers a taste of how to apply the Dharma to daily life." Translating by Chiacheng Chang, editing by Ven. Chang Wu and Ernest Heau.

Highs and Lows

UNWARE OF THE MEANING OR VALUE of life itself, many people take the ups and downs in life, the easy times and tough times, as their standard of good and bad. When everything is going smoothly they celebrate their good luck, but when things are not going well, they complain about bad luck. If they really understood the meaning and value of life, then there wouldn't be any issue between the good times and bad times, nor any concern with highs and lows. Adversity need not be bad and fortune is not necessarily good; it all depends on how we handle and use the situation.

My own life has been perhaps more difficult than that of the average person. When I was young, other children at my age were able to attend school, but I didn't have that opportunity. This might be considered a low period in my life. Later, I went to study in a Buddhist seminary, but not long thereafter China's civil war broke out. Many monasteries and temples were destroyed. Many of my monastic classmates returned to lay life to find work, but I enlisted as a soldier intending to resume monastic life later. During that time, I served with the army while others at my age pursued their education. That can be considered another low time for me. When I resumed monastic life, I finally had the opportunity for further practice and study. I went to Japan to study, though without much financial support; so times were just as hard as before.

After obtaining my doctoral degree I went to the United States. When the bad luck struck me again, I had to wander the streets without a place to go. So this, too, can be considered a low period in my life. But I used these difficult times to study and read extensively so that I could cultivate my knowledge, learning, character, and temperament to improve

myself. Although I really had nothing, I did not waste my life.

When I was a little over ten years old, probably because of my surroundings, I learned to use the low periods to support myself. Since then I started to try writing and submitting articles for publishing, and in my twenties, some of them were published. In order to write, I had to cultivate myself and read widely, so even though those were times of unrest and upheaval I did not put my life on hold. Even when I was in the army, I used that time for personal growth. Aside from completing the assignments and duties given to me by senior officers, I would use my time reading, writing, and prostrating to the Buddha.

Every Period Has Its Own Value

After being discharged from the army and returning to monastic life, I had the opportunity to go on a solitary retreat in the mountains. Although I had no lay followers to offer support I lived there for six years, enjoying myself very much even although others might find that way of life unbearable. It turns out that was my most prolific period of writing on Buddhism.

Especially, when I was studying in Japan, although there was no one to support me, it was a golden period for my personal growth. Even when wandering in the streets in the United States, each day I was happy being busy, never feeling confused, meaningless, or hopeless. Now, even though I occasionally encounter setbacks I won't see them as misfortunes, because I have been used to facing adversity. I view my experiences with these difficult periods as a certainty in the process of life. Now I've grown old, with many experiences, and I have established an international organization. Perhaps some people would see this and think that this is the

high point of my life, but I just take it as a process, instead of something about “high” or “low” points. Everyone’s life has its ups and downs, so as long as you do not waste your time, every period has its own value. If we allow our frame of mind to be affected by the ups and downs we encounter around us, we will feel life lacks meaning and is without value. If we only seek high points in our life and do not make the most of low points, we will probably see very little significance in our lives.

A Buddhist Teaching on Relieving Stress

A lay disciple of mine has a relative who fled the country to escape enormous debts, but since his own finances were tied up with his relative’s, the burden of repaying the debt fell on him. As a result, his family’s savings and properties were wiped out, he lost his business, and restrictions were put on his ability to leave the country. Forced to work for someone else, no matter where he worked, creditors would always track him down to pay off the debt. Finally, he came to me: “Master Sheng Yen, I’ve come to the end of my rope. That relative of mine is really despicable. I want to find and kill him, and then I’ll kill myself.” I told him, “If you kill him you’ll have committed murder, and killing yourself would be another murder.”

He came to think that way because he felt helpless, like he had no choice, because he realized that he couldn’t pay back that debt in this lifetime. Fortunately, he had some friends who took him in and fed him. So I told him that since he still had friends and something to eat, he was really fortunate. At the same time I convinced him to follow the Four Steps for Handling a Problem: face it, accept it, deal with it, and then let it go. Today, his financial issue still has

not been resolved, but he’s been living a more peaceful life for many years now.

People start to feel more stress as they approach maturity. Some have great ability to deal with stress by turning it into a kind of training, but few can actually do that. Some can transform stress by letting the situation settle in their mind before setting out to handle it, or by talking with wise friends and coming up with ways to resolve the situation together. Others may get together with others to complain, or rush out for a quick fix by partying or drinking; this may give temporary relief, but it is like anesthesia – the stress and pressure return when they sober up.

Using Right Views

The best way to handle stress is to use the right views to channel and release it. Instead of resisting stress, transform it into nothing, as in the saying, “Deflect a thousand pounds with four ounces.” This refers to tai chi, where a soft and slightest effort can turn an attack to one’s own advantage, thus dissolving what seems like overwhelming stress. Another saying, “Be resilient against fixation, empty against existence,” means that when we are resilient and empty, while the opponent fixates on existence, a threat can be transformed and released. How can we put this into actual practice? By using the Four Steps to Solving a Problem: face it, accept it, deal with it, and then let it go. Whenever we encounter a crisis or stressful situation, we face it; we do not run away or pretend it is not there. We need to rely on the resources at hand, including our wisdom, experience, skills, physical abilities, timing, finances, and relationships, to give our best efforts to deal with the situation. Some people’s resources are plentiful, other’s are limited; some problems are easy to resolve, others remain unresolved even after we have attended to them.



*Face it, Accept it,
Deal with it, and then Let it go.*

Four Steps for Handling a Problem Calligraphy by Chan Master Sheng Yen

Even if a problem has not really been resolved, at least we are still alive, so we should practice letting go this feeling of hopelessness, and not let it linger on. Do not feel defeated and dejected due to these setbacks; do not assume you are useless and smother yourself in remorse. When you are distracted by problems, it is easy to be anxious and agitated. At times like these, it is best to do silent sitting. Sitting for at least five to ten minutes each day will help settle down your mind. Allowing your mind to take a rest reduces your stress, enabling you to face your troubles in a more relaxed manner.

If you open your mind and calmly contemplate mundane phenomena, then stress is less likely to arise. Above all, when you do run into a stressful situation, by all means do not get caught in a dead end; do not get flustered and confused, telling yourself,

“It’s all over for me, it’s all over.” Remind yourself that heaven never deliberately leaves you without possibilities. However, even in a desperate situation, there are always some ways to resolve things.

The Way Out of Depression

Depression indeed plagues many people in the modern world. It is said that more than one million people in Taiwan suffer from depression. Depression can occur in people who are anxious to do well, who seek perfection while fearing loss and failure, or who are afraid of doing some job poorly. Some are unable to face uncertainty about the future; unsure about what the future may hold – whether it is natural disasters, human catastrophes, or economic, political, work related, or family troubles – they

worry and become anxious. Excessive worry and anxiety can lead to depression, leaving people bewildered, making it even more difficult to face seemingly overwhelming problems.

Since people in Taiwan have long lived in an environment that lacks a crisis mentality, many people do not know how to handle crises, which predisposes them to depression. Therefore, the notion that people must stay vigilant in times of peace is particularly important. Every day, we must be prepared for whatever might come our way, so when dangers do arise we are not thrown into a panic and become unable to respond effectively. I once met a construction company owner who was afraid of handling money for fear of germs, so he would count his money one bill at a time using a pair of tongs, or asked his assistant to help. This business owner, who feared that paper money harbored germs that would infect him, eventually died after contracting a minor illness. He was overly afraid and anxious about coming into contact with any kind of bacteria, so over time his body came to lack the basic level of immunity that most people should have. This deficiency lowered his resistance, which made him very susceptible to all sorts of bacteria and infections.

Face It and Deal With It

Excessive anxiety and depression and an inability to deal with the actual pressures of life cause the situations we face day-to-day to appear more severe and complicated. However, we should not be too fearful about troubles that have not yet happened. Many people worry senselessly about problems that have not yet occurred, or cannot let go of problems that have already passed, wondering if they will return. For example, following a large earthquake, many people are fearful about when the next one might strike, and so worry about this and that, falling into a pit of endless anxiety. This kind of fear is totally unreasonable and unnecessary. All mundane events and things are impermanent and constantly changing. In our daily life, we should be well-prepared for what may come, and as long as the response is appropriate, then the problem should be solved easily.

How can one avoid depression and overcome fear and anxiety? I can offer a piece of advice in four simple phrases: Face it, accept it, deal with it, and then let it go. That is, when some problem or situation arises, do not run away from it or ignore it. We must actively make use of our resources and wisdom to



Photo by Ven. Chang Duo

deal with it. By doing so, what is initially a negative situation might be transformed into a positive one. After you have done your best to handle the situation, don't keep thinking about it. Whatever the outcome is, you need to let go of it. Moreover, you should be content with having done your best, and do not try to achieve ends that are unachievable. A lot of stress actually comes from our mind. We cannot change every situation no matter how much we worry and fret. When a problem arises, we should face it with a positive mindset and use wisdom to deal with it. Only in this way can we overcome difficulties and relieve stress.

Let Everyone's Bad Luck Turn to Good

In every country or ethnic group, when people encounter failure and don't know which way to turn, many will think about seeking advice from the spirit world or through divination. The Western will seek out someone like a gypsy with a crystal ball and the Chinese will consult a fortune-teller or cast divination sticks. If the fortune seems bad, they ask someone to do some magical ritual, chant scriptures, say a mantra, draw a talisman, or consult the *I Ching*. The diviners then demand a sum of money for this service. Even then your fortune may not change, but at least you have improved the diviner's fortune, for you've helped him earn some money.

Perhaps these activities can offer some sort of comfort, but when you are really at an impasse, you should still rely on your own strength to find a way out. As a religious teacher, I don't deny the existence of ghosts, spirits, and fortune tellers. They can know a small portion of a person's past and future, but they have no ability to reverse one's fortune. There is a saying that goes, "The poor seek divination, the rich

burn incense." The poor will not become wealthier by consulting fortune-tellers more often.

To really be able to create good fortune, you must first understand the Buddhist principle of cause and effect. The principle of cause and effect simply means "you reap what you sow." Because this life is so short, it is not possible to verify the relationship between cause and effect for everything. Very few people really understand how their destiny came to fruition in this life. The concept of cause and effect tells us that our present situation is the result of our past actions, and our future is created by our present deeds. Your present condition has already become a reality, so it cannot be reversed. But you can employ wise judgment and put forth effort to improve it, and this will allow you to alter your future.

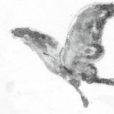
Some people complain that the heavens are unfair, and no matter how hard they try, nothing ever works out. I always tell them they need to understand their own capabilities, financial situation, social relation, personality, and their interests. If you don't understand your own strengths and weaknesses and blindly follow the winds of current circumstances, you won't be able to really benefit. Because your conditions are different from those of others, the opportunities that will arise for you are different. Just following whatever you see others doing will only cause you additional trouble. Therefore, your destiny rests upon the totality of circumstances around you. If the conditions are not right or your effort is not right, it will be very hard to succeed. So, if you want to improve your fortune it is best not to seek divination, but to experience meaning in your everyday life and the value of life. Put simply, cultivate good thoughts, speak kind words, perform good deeds, and broaden your karmic affinities. In this way you will naturally be surrounded by people of good character and find good fortune everywhere. 🌿

*Living Fully Is to See
Each Moment as Brand New*

— BY —

REBECCA LI





Rebecca Li, PhD, is the founder and guiding teacher of Chan Dharma Community. She began practicing with Chan Master Sheng Yen in 1996, and in 1999 began serving as his translator. In 2016, Rebecca received Dharma transmission from Simon Child (Dharma heir of Master Sheng Yen). Rebecca is a sociology professor at The College of New Jersey where she also serves as faculty director of the Alan Dawley Center for the Study of Social Justice. She teaches meditation and Dharma classes, gives public lectures, and leads Chan retreats at Dharma Drum centers in North America. This article is from her new book *Allow Joy into Our Hearts: Chan Practice in Uncertain Times* (Winterhead Publishing, 2021).



MANY OF YOU HAVE BEEN READING Pema Chödrön's book *When Things Fall Apart*, and when I was thinking about what I would share with you this evening, this quote came to mind. I'll read it first, and then I want to invite you to reflect on it.

To be fully alive, fully human, and completely awake is to be continually thrown out of the nest. To live fully is to be always in no-man's-land. To experience each moment as completely new and fresh. To live is to be willing to die over and over again.

That last sentence – To live is to be willing to die over and over again – that's not how we usually live. She is inviting us to come up with the courage to be fully human, to really live in a wakeful way.

I'd like to invite you to reflect on the first thing she mentioned in this quote: the nest. What is the nest that we need to be allowing ourselves to be continually thrown out of? She's referring to the world as we see it and the niche, the little space, the little safe haven we have created for ourselves and believe to be ours. This is our little safe place that we have worked hard to build, and we intend to live there forever. That's our plan. We worked hard to build this because we want to have a nest.

Now, the fact that she used the word nest is quite interesting. You might like to think about birds. If you ever watch birds build nests, it's not like, I really need to glue these sticks together because I'm planning for it to last a millennium. They just kind of pick up whatever they can find, pile the thing together, and it's good enough. I just need to lay my eggs this time and then they hatch and the babies fly away and I don't need the nest anymore. Still, they work really hard, fly back and forth, back and forth to build the nest. But they know, even as they're building, that

the nest won't last forever. It's just for this round of eggs and then they move on.

Do we know that what we have built, what we call our life, is also like this nest? It's temporary; just for the purpose of this moment, this phase, this time, this situation we are in. Or do we not know? Do we blindly believe I am trying to build something with concrete walls around it so that I can keep something in this constantly changing world unchanged. In other words, we might have heard the teaching of impermanence many times and say, "Oh yes, everything is impermanent, I know that. Everything out there is impermanent." But secretly, we wish that this little thing we built, if we work hard enough at it, we can build something that's exempt from impermanence.

I'd like to invite you to reflect on that and contemplate whether there is some secret wish, some belief that this will work. Maybe I found the trick to do that. It's like thinking, I can be lucky. If I buy just one more lottery ticket, I will hit the jackpot – that kind of thinking. I'd like to invite you to reflect on this nest, this life we don't really think about. We just take it for granted. But underlying that, we believe it is something we can rely on to be there forever.

Think about it. What makes up our world, the life that we think is ours? Of course, the first thing has to do with our physical condition. We often have this belief that if we exercise and eat healthy, we'll always be just the way we are now and can keep doing whatever we're doing. Of course, we cannot keep doing what we are doing. Ask anyone who's past their forties, or maybe even past their thirties, and they will tell you that. That's when talking to your elderly parent or an older friend or relative will really help you. They tell you, "Oh, I can't do this," and you laugh at them, but you should keep in mind, that's your future. Learn from them. They're telling you that's your future.

But our current physical condition is what makes our current life possible. Our being able to move around, do things, cook for ourselves, bathe ourselves, drive to places, go to the airport to get on a flight – all that makes our life possible as it is now.

Of course, there's mental capacity, too – whether we can remember things, whether we can think clearly, whether we are able to maintain stability. We may know people who are no longer able to function properly. I have a friend who had a very good job as a professor, and she lost it because she had a breakdown. So the life she knew is now completely gone. There are all kinds of changes in our mental capacity that happen with age or with disease such as Alzheimer's. So our mental capacity right now is the result of causes and conditions.

Of course, related to that is our material condition. I'm referring to our financial situation, our ability to earn a living, the value of our possessions. The money we have, those pieces of paper, they seem to be worth something. We can use them to go and get things. But even that is not for sure. Ask anyone who has ever lived in hyperinflation. Ask anyone who lost their job overnight, who fell into poverty overnight, who got evicted from their home because they couldn't make the next payment. Their life as they knew it, completely turned upside down.

When we reflect on this, what we notice is that all these capacities – physical, mental, material, financial – are things we simply take for granted. "That's my life, that's my body, my mind, my material possessions, my lifestyle, my family, my friends, that's my world. That's this little niche of the world I have carved out for myself and all I need to do is work hard to keep it together. That's my nest."

Sometimes we think of our life as our relationships – our family, our friends. You might think, "Whatever happens, they will still be my family."

But the relationships we maintain with the people in our life also depend on many causes and conditions.

For many people, especially those with children or grandchildren, not having the physical capacity to travel to see them completely changed their life. Or not being able to see each other frequently changed a friendship. Some people can't afford to do the things they used to do with family and friends. You might not notice it, or you might choose not to think about it, but there are always people in our life who decline to do things with us because they can't afford it. They're too embarrassed to admit it. We might find ourselves in that situation if our material circumstances change.

So the relationships we have now may change. I'm not saying for better or worse, but they become different. Perhaps you're thinking, "I make sure to stay close to the people I love." But you are not the only person in a relationship. The other people involved in the relationship also have constantly changing causes and conditions. Their physical or mental



or financial conditions may change, meaning that they can't or don't want to do what they used to do with you anymore. Maybe your family used to travel for the holidays and they can't join you anymore, and they slowly become more and more distant. And you feel that as a loss.

Our relationships also depend on our world view and the views of the people around us. How do we see the world? How do they see it? Many of you may have experienced that. I have heard many, many practitioners over the past few years expressing a lot of suffering from the loss of relationships because of a difference in political views. Over time, they realize they can no longer have the same kinds of conversations that are the ingredients of their relationship. This happened for many people after the 2016 election. As much as we want to say, "I am working hard on my relationship," we are not the only condition in these relationships.

And of course, our worldviews change. We were not born with them. Many people don't feel the way they felt several years ago. We'd like to believe our views are right and others' views are wrong. But really, where did these worldviews come from? The people we hang out with, our circumstances, where we are in our society, in our economy. Just think about the people around you. People who work in finance, people who work in social services, people who work in knowledge production, they all have different worldviews simply because of where they are in the social structure. When people change where they are in the social structure, their view changes too. We tend to believe people get more conservative when they grow older, but it's not that simple.

Often, people's views change because of the drastic changes around us. Some of you have alluded to that. This week, the relationship between the United



States and China has taken an extremely sharp turn for the worse. We don't know what will unfold, but we are living in a different world. Of course, we are always living in a different world, but many people's lives and what they think and how they feel will be shaken up by what is unfolding right now.

People can change in all kinds of ways, and your relationship with them changes along the way. We thought we had built a world made up of relationships that are fixed, but then all kinds of feelings and views get shaken up, and people whom we may have felt close to now seem quite distant from us.

I am bringing up all these examples to help you think about what is meant by impermanence and dependent origination. All these factors are constantly changing – changing – everything, constantly changing. Like the incessant rain and wind shaking up the fragile nest made of those little sticks and pieces of leaves. I don't know if you have ever seen a bird's nest being blown out of a tree. It happens. Sometimes part of the nest gets blown away, sometimes all of it; it happens all the time.

Photo by Marc A. Sporys

Yet, the birds don't stop building their nests, thinking: Oh, the wind is going to blow it away anyway, I might as well just not bother. And we don't stop building our lives. We go to school, we find someone, maybe we get married, we have a family, we keep our connections, we maintain our relationships, we cultivate our capacity to live harmoniously in our relationships. We take care of each other, help each other. We work hard in our domain to take care of our finances so that we have some capacity to look after ourselves, our family, maybe help other people. We live our life. But knowing full well that this nest, this life we have built, could be blown away at any time, despite our best efforts. The birds were not goofing off. They worked hard to build that nest. And we work hard to build our lives. But we don't know what will happen.

Pema Chödrön wrote, "To live fully is to be always in no-man's-land..." What is no-man's-land? Every moment is completely new. Wherever we are now, no one ever has been here before. No one. This moment has never taken place before. No-man's-land.

Now, that's not how we think at all. We have this entrenched tendency to try to compare what's happening now to some similar situation in the past. We compare the COVID-19 pandemic with the 1918 flu pandemic. And then we think, Okay, we have some idea of what's happening now. We know what's going to happen next. I was just talking to my father in Hong Kong; the United States has revoked the special status that makes people's way of life there possible, but he assumes it's just going to blow over like what happened after the events in Tiananmen Square in 1989. So we draw on the past to make assumptions about the present.

We do that to try to convince ourselves that we already know what's going to happen, because we

can't deal with the uncertainty, instead of being willing to see that this is no-man's-land – no one has ever been here before. Let's pay close attention. But instead we take comfort from some idea of what has happened in the past and tell ourselves, "This is just another version of the same thing." And the moment we do this, we stop paying attention to what's actually happening right here, right now, moment to moment.

Instead of being in no-man's-land, experiencing each moment as completely new, we are missing a lot of what is going on. And this holding on to the idea of some other thing, some old knowledge, becomes a substitute for fully experiencing the present that is brand new. It actually blocks our ability to be fully here and generates anxiety and tension, because we're holding on to something that doesn't quite fit what's going on. We try very hard to fit our reality into our idea of reality. It's a lot of effort. But we do that all the time.

That last sentence that I read a couple of times: "To live is to be willing to die over and over again." That sounds so contradictory. I want to live, not to die. We have created this dichotomy in our mind. What does she mean by dying over and over again? She's talking about our ideas of who we are supposed to be and how our life is supposed to be. Our unwillingness to let go of these fixed ideas of ourselves and our life keeps us from being fully alive.

I am going to invite you to examine all the ideas you've got about who you are supposed to be. It doesn't matter how old you are, what situation you are in. You might have a few ideas, and you might have a fairly long list. Some examples:

I'm the person who knows best.

I'm the parent, you're my child. I know more than you.

I'm not going to let you tell me what's going on.

I'm the most capable person.

I'm young and strong and smart.
I'm the caregiver. I'm the person who helps.
I never take help. I'm the one who gives.

These are ideas of who we're supposed to be and how our life is supposed to be that we have worked hard to build. Maybe our idea is that we are supposed to live independently. I pay for everything myself, no one helps me. Or being someone who's the well-to-do one among my family and pays for everyone else.

Whatever idea we have about how our life is supposed to be, when the world suddenly changes around us, our life changes. All the flying around to see our family who live all over the time zones doesn't seem to be possible anymore. Many people see their industry disappearing and have to abandon their old profession and learn new skills. Some people find themselves having to leave behind their hometown, their friends, their family to move to a new land because of political changes or other kinds of changes. Now they live in a different culture, speak a different language, and they have to start all over from scratch. Maybe they're in their forties, fifties, sixties and they need to find a new job, build a new social network.

So here Pema Chödrön is referring to letting go of the idea of our old life, our old self, how our life, our self is supposed to be. To die over and over. Every moment there are changes; we are a new person. Our life is new.

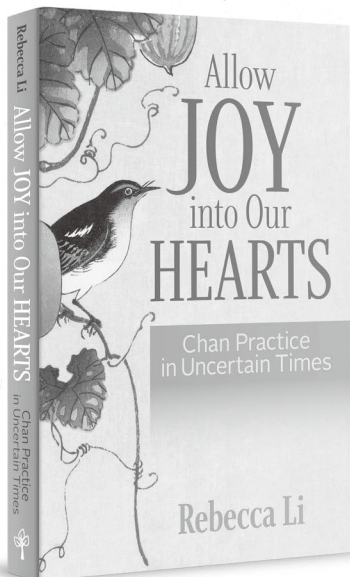
For many people, their greatest fear is to be displaced from their hometown, or from their old job, or from their way of life that they cherish very much. But it's inevitable. Even if we are never displaced from our hometown, our physical deterioration will displace us from our old life. It's inevitable. In fact, it's actually happening all the time. We're just pretending that it's not happening. We kind of sit tight in the middle of the nest and hope for the best, when in reality, all the sticks are already coming loose and it's ready to collapse.

This is not the problem. This is the reality. And if we can let go of the idea of, "My life was like that and I want to go back to that moment, I want to go back to that way," then we can live this present moment that's brand new, and live it fully. This moment that's brand new is all yours. No one is taking anything from you. There's nothing missing; it's brand new.

If we can unlearn the habit of judging this moment by comparing it with the "should," our idea of how ourself, our life is supposed to be, and finding what is happening unsatisfactory – if we unlearn that and realize we are in no-man's-land moment after moment, every moment, willing to die over and over and over again, then whatever happens, it's not a problem. The world today is blessing us with many opportunities to practice. So, as many of you have mentioned, we have much to be grateful for indeed. 🍀



Photo by Mantas Hesthave



Allow Joy into Our Hearts

Chan Practice in Uncertain Times

Rebecca Li

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

Winterhead Publishing · ISBN 978-1-954564-00-8



The Jewel Net of Indra

by Ernest Heau

Prologue: In the *Avatamsaka (Flower Ornament) Sutra*, the palace of the god Indra is festooned with a jewel net of infinite expanse, forming a web of an infinite number of jewels. Each jewel reflects every other jewel in the net, and is itself reflected by every other jewel. In like manner do all sentient beings reflect each other.

FIRST CANTO

I

Taking wing
on a gust of air
cleaving space as it goes
eyes follow with clarity
though the mind wavers
for within the heart
there lives
airiness and lightness
as the cosmos now turns
on the axis
of a bird's fragile wings.

II

The way its tendrils coil
gracefully to center
the fern must know
that the inward path
redeems its design
and in that knowledge
finds rest and release
the strength
to hold fast to principle
letting causation take its course
finding order in chaos.

III

Only in shadows
are they seen, when the moon
gives way to gravity's lure
the infinity of star-beings
seeking an early end
to endless rounds
sojourning in darkness
'til the mind's eye awakens
to a ray of light
that opens onto
the realm of the possible.

IV

No longer capable
of cogent thought, numbness
infecting the sensual realm
eyes fluttering
behind shuttered windows
the threshold of pain
no longer matters
only breathing remains
like a country gate
blown back and forth
by transient winds.

V

Shimmering at night
invisible by day
infinity cannot number them
no two alike, yet
no difference cleaves them
nothing conjoins them
only the sound
of an inner chime
through the forest
of the mind's oceans
beneath the heart's canyons.

VI

The clash and confusion
of insistent fact
unsatisfying
in the extreme
the lure of the unknown
the stillness of mountains
dark rivers
rising after the storm
the mind's eye in a vortex
time unwinding
from a silkworm's belly.

VII

Moist and warm
the womb reveals
its inner plan
unraveling potential
on the hotbed of the real
beneath a canopy
of light-limned clouds
the wind-borne eagle
seeks its prey
silent, alert, engaged
beyond gravity's embrace.

VIII

Heart's blood
running in rivulets
without rest, without pause
a persistent pulse
floods the mind with hope
crimson dreams
seeking the open sea
heading to far horizons
dark, dark yet so luminous
never known, never seen
yet so, so familiar.

IX

Eyes on the path
turning away
in a moment of regret
mouth parched
by the dusts of endeavor
dry thunder rolling
bringing forth no rain
a hapless beetle
impaled
on the thorn
of an unforgiving rose.

X

The open hand gestures
an offering of peace
the ancient masters
as always unseen
their faint voices
trailing in shifting winds
green meadows
beyond a thicket of woods
the scent of burning leaves
the cries of gulls
echo in the mind.

XI

Where crows gather
there is hope
where ashes heap
there is remembrance
where flowers bloom
there is life
there is death
the winding trail narrows
coming to rest
in the shadow
of a trillion suns.



SECOND CANTO

I

*Having no other choice
the future unfolds
leaving behind
echoes and rhythms
cacophonies and silences
colors of the mind
the patter of rain on leaves
eliciting from a forlorn heart
a singular thought
finding quiet release
in a falling branch.*

II

*It is as they say
tears falling to earth
bring forth sweet blossoms
bitter herbs soothe
the wayward heart
in whose dense jungle
there rules with ardor
the claws of the tiger
merciful in its swiftness
honoring its prey
in a surfeit of passion.*

III

To go on is to surrender
to the whims of eternity
time out of order
space curling inward
like a mystical dragon
consuming itself
slow dirge of passion
knowing no limits
so refined in execution
leaving no trace
of regret or remorse.

IV

They come soon enough
events foretold
since time began
massive clouds
dark and foreboding
a giant buffalo
eating its way
through fields of clover
a midnight storm
shattering the dreams
of a roosting owl.

V

If the thrown pebble
does not know its thrower
how can it tell
when oft-repeated dreams
will give birth
to a sudden impulse
how, at the end of its arc
piercing the still pond
bright ripples
expand in circles
touching the other shore.

VI

Behind hooded eyes
they lay in wait
denizens of lost paradise
long after purity's demise
an odor of sanctity
of no known origin
wispy and evanescent
rising in the morning air
tall grasses
bedecked with dew
bending in solemn praise.

VII

No respite
for lesser gods
conditions prospering
when the world was young
all things possible
already ordained
in the heat of latency
sprouting wings
as if space were
creation's first promise
and time it's last refuge.

VIII

Nameless birds
returning to true north
their place of origin
wings fluttering
dark legacies
of earth-bound shadows
memories flowing back
as dust and diamonds
countless devas
weeping, rejoicing
as if born anew.

IX

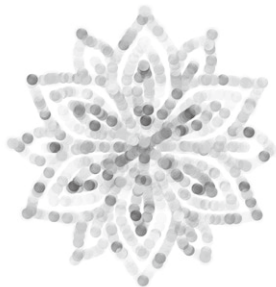
Wolves at midnight
proclaim their ardor
the new moon
slowly ascending
over ghostly pines
echoes of distant winds
resound from the valleys
rocks and rivers
stillness and motion
between past and present
no boundary to be seen.

X

Days come and go
half-built monuments
returning to dust
bridges not crossed
when omens were dark
leaves on the forest floor
a good season for dying
a cup of tea
brewed over gathered twigs
offered without words
by a forgiving hand.

XI

From shadows they come
their seeds sown
before time awoke
and space trembled
before forgiveness had a voice
and atonement had no name
multitudes of beings
palms together
breathing as one
waiting in silence
for the coming of light.



THIRD CANTO

I

*In the eye of a gnat
a sweltering jungle
urgent froth and foam
of tides rising and falling
clouds gathering
thunder and lightning
of distant origin
giving way to storms
the great cosmos
gathered
into a single thought.*

II

*Peals of laughter
echoing among leaves
ruby-red blossoms
promising new fruit
dull creatures preyed upon
by winged beings
validating nature's design
grieving skies
yielding cascades of rain
a monk's bowl
turned upside down.*

III

A copper urn
crudely modeled
yet lovingly adorned
a citizen of the earth
returning as ashes
amidst the swirling cosmos
free to roam
among charred ruins
trees, mountains, and rivers
a meteor dying
among sojourning stars.

IV

A southern wind
greeting morning light
leaves heavy with dew
the imminence of
snakes and raptors
temple bells
speaking an alien tongue
a cloud of starlings
fleeing the tower
seeking sanctuary
in a safer realm.

V

A spider's web
shining in morning dew
a careless insect caught
between ecstasy and woe
myriad beings
look on in sorrow and
mute acceptance
a fragrant rose
withered, unplucked, unseen
serving nature's purpose
fading with patient ardor.

VI

Birth and death
from sunrise to moonrise
the lesson of mayflies
eternally repeated
the quiet bliss
of full-bellied frogs
sunning on lily pads
a crane's cry
shattering space
the taste of ripened fruit
whose time has come.

VII

Gliding swiftly
through a pavilion of light
needing no one's permission
living and thriving
on what nature offers
a white egret in moonlight
a ghost seeking refuge
a meandering stream
having lost its way
finding deliverance
in a moon-blessed sea.

VIII

The deepest of wells
the darkest of nights
far below starlight
cool, silent, beyond reach
untouched and unsullied
rising in accord with conditions
a solitary pilgrim
comforted by owls
a simple heart
overflowing
with grace and gratitude.

IX

To be a wanderer
to be sufficient
abiding with an open heart
taking fortune as it comes
a purposeful bee
whose path to nectar
full of failed beginnings
and busy wanderings
gleaning moments
of ecstasy, gathering
abundance and sweet charity.

X

The broad patterned leaf
the luminous petals
folding towards center
the throbbing veins
of a stalking beast
life in transition
bestowing as remains
transcendent jewels
of no name and no form
the smoldering ashes
of long forgotten saints.

XI

Each breath a miracle
every sleep a dying
each waking a renewal
the sacred in the profane
the ordinary in the holy
lotuses blooming in the mire
the death of galaxies foretold
the wisdom of the sages
wispy as clouds
returning to origins
where becoming is all.

Group Meditation Going Online – Really?

————— BY —————
WARREN HSING

SHELTER-IN-PLACE. I'm sitting quietly in front of my desk, embracing a freshly brewed cup of coffee. The aroma flows freely and enjoyably. Silence pervades out of nowhere, just like sitting in the Chan Hall, except the occasionally clacking sound of the keyboard, jotting down what comes to mind, a request to share my experience and observation on transitioning group meditation online.

That's right. Online. Instead of holding the regular meditation group sessions at my local Dharma Drum center (San Francisco Bay Area) on weekends, a team of dedicated volunteers and I have been hosting these sessions online, led remotely by Venerable Guo Yuan, Abbot of our Dharma Drum Retreat Center in Pine Bush, NY. Observing social distancing, everyone has been attending from their own home.

The pandemic has changed every aspect of our lives, including group meditation. Almost overnight, Chan practitioners have gone from having their physical presence at their respective locales to being online in one virtual location across the globe, manifesting the resiliency of humanity.

The Genesis

"Wait. What? We are going online? Really?" One of the meditators asked. "The coronavirus is spreading. Today is our last session at the center. Starting tomorrow, all our programs are on-hold. The health and safety of all participants are the top concerns and priorities for our center's monastics (Ven. Chang Xing and Ven. Chang Yuan). We are looking into moving our learning and practice online quickly, and we are open to suggestions on how to do it. In the meantime, please continue to deepen your learning and practice at home." It was my last face-to-face exchange with the local group, from the greater San Francisco Bay Area. Feelings of uncertainty, disappointment, and sadness can be observed through glimpse of facial expressions, body gestures, and breathing on some. Yet, most eased into gradual acceptance with calmness sipping through, revering Master Sheng Yen's teaching of four steps in handling challenges in daily life (face it, accept it, deal with it, let it go) in practiced action.

This was the beginning of February 2020, in alignment to Dharma Drum Mountain's worldwide announcement in late January, before the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 outbreak as a pandemic in March.

Going Online

In March, we had our first online meditation group session, led by the venerable. Logistically, it wasn't a cakewalk to get it up and running. Our technically astute volunteers had to choose quickly a workable video communication tool for online programs. They had to take measures to ensure a secure, safe, and smooth online experience, as well as integrating the tool into our social networking platforms for mass consumption. In addition, they spent many hours showing me how to use the tool, which was a great challenge in and of itself. The most fun part was for me to do the same with Ven. Guo Yuan, for him to get familiar with the video tool for the first time, although he did learn the tool much quicker.

Yes, it did take "a whole village" to set up an online program for the first time, just like setting up a Chan retreat, from beginning to end. Yet, it was worth it. And so much more. This program was sangha's response to the Shelter-in-Place directives across many countries including North America. The aim was to provide a supportive forum conducive for Chan practitioners around the world to continue to practice and learn online while observing social distancing.

Around the same time, various Dharma Drum programs were spun up online to be in service of the same, as a cohesive whole from the monastics. These responsive programs that we have all been enjoying on the

receiving end were the fruition of weeks and weeks of tireless planning, coordination, and collaboration into the wee hours amongst the sangha on content, teaching resources, their availability, and scheduling, just to name a few. Then, there were the volunteers working around the clock from all the centers, helping behind-the-scenes, guided by the monastics.

The Acclimation

The first online session was like the first day of college, the first day of work, or the first day of something new for just about every practitioner and volunteer alike. Most were excited but felt uncertain because of the unknown aspects of being online. Their questions beforehand ranged widely from the tech-novices on "how to use the video tool?" to the frequent-meditator on "what will the online session feel like?" varieties. Our tech-savvy volunteers took



care of the former, while the adept Venerable Guo Yuan guided everyone for the latter. He led the participants through a relaxing yet mindful eight-form moving meditation and silent sitting with his calming voice, followed by an illuminating Dharma talk with an engaging question-and-answer wrap-up.



Ven. Guo Yuan led the eight-form moving meditation. Photo by Ven. Chang Hu

Everyone was looking forward to the weekend sessions after the first one. It did take awhile for most to get acclimated to the virtual setting from the confines of their homes. For some, it was difficult to adjust to viewing everyone else in two dimensions on a computer screen sitting at home by themselves, versus being together in close proximity with each other at the Chan Hall with a sense of camaraderie in the air. For others, it was hard to arrange a conducive environment or a workable schedule, to attend the sessions and practice at home. It was even more

challenging for those with health conditions, as those were the mountains that they had to conquer for themselves, whether physically, mentally, or both. On the other hand, for a few, the online sessions were pure bliss, due to the fact that they live so far away from a local meditation center that they couldn't have

the opportunities to practice in a group setting and led by a very experienced teacher before the pandemic.

Still, the practitioners continued working through their obstacles and attending the sessions, in the midst of pandemic upending their life. Why? Most felt that the very helpful weekly sessions with the Venerable empowered them to pivot from a place of reactivity to that of responsive living. It was never about looking through a computer screen, never about the environment nor the scheduling. They realized that by taking to heart the Dharma expounded by the teacher and the deepening of their awareness through practice, they can choose rather than react how they communicate, respond, and experience life around them (like dealing with leg pains during sitting), while positively influencing their

loved ones and everyone else they touch virtually on a daily basis. So, they adjusted, and continued to adjust, week by week.

The Metamorphosis

We are now months and months into the pandemic, with no end in sight. These online sessions have been running like clockwork, while meditators from Canada, Estonia, Germany, Indonesia, Italy, Poland, Russia, Taiwan, United Kingdom, United States and

around the globe have situated comfortably into their online routine, a far cry from the beginning. The distance disappears between this diverse group of meditators, with technology. They no longer feel that the virtual Chan Hall is out there somewhere, with their practice. Their routine becomes the practice, and their practice becomes the routine, evincing our Shifu, Master Sheng Yen's reminder to practitioners that the purpose of practice is the practice itself.

Couple of the practitioners have even asked if taking refuge in the three jewels from afar (United Kingdom and Russia) is a possibility. So our dear Venerable Guo Yuan led them through the precious refuge ceremony online (yes, online), for the first time, guiding these sincere practitioners "coming home in the Buddha" as described by the venerable. The ceremony was performed right after one of the sessions, a really special treat for the new Dharma refugees and a joyful event for the witnessing Dharma brothers and sisters.

The weekly sessions will continue. So will the transformation of our endearing Dharma brothers and sisters from these sessions. One observation clearly comes to mind in this unprecedented time: impermanence, or change, is always at play. With the coronavirus outbreak, thousands have died and suffered, and this still continues. Tears of grief, fear and sadness, engulf the world. Incredibly painful. At the same time, help around the world ensues immediately, with empathy, love, and compassion. This one such extreme brings the verity of impermanence to our mind, front and center. This extreme also exemplifies the true character of humanity, when all is being selfless in helping others, at full display. Incredibly powerful. Change is inevitable, transformation is also for certain, if we seize the opportunity positively from the conditions that the causes created. How? When we surf the waves of impermanence with an

open heart, the wholesomeness of life metamorphoses, and it is the oxygen for the liberation of our true nature. Collectively from all, the character of humanity is sure to be ever-uplifting.

A New Page

Torrents of thoughts pour through like a rushing waterfall. I can't type fast enough for them to travel through my hands and onto the computer. They gradually slow down to rivers, then through meandering streams, and flow back into the vast, deep, calming ocean. Time starts moving again. The aroma of coffee and coolness of the desk are still here. What differed are these words imprinted through the computer screen left by the torrential thoughts. And a little wetness around my eyes and on my cheeks. Hmmm. Must be the warmth of the cup. No. That's not it.

Peeking through the curtains of mind, it's Venerable Guo Yuan's compassionate guidance, his wisdom talks, the Q&A sessions, as well as the learning together, practicing together, the life stories meditators shared with me offline, the challenges they overcame, the tears, the joy, the dedication and support we all have for each other. Waves after waves of awe gushing back, surfed with deep gratitude.

Wait. There is more. Peeling through layers and layers of curtains: it's the ocean of humanity, that is vast and boundless, full of audacity of hope, faith, resiliency, and unity – with the belief that, yes, we can! Never give up, for humanity. Yes, all of us will emerge from this crisis much stronger, brimming with vibrant energy and undiminished conviction to continue onto a new page for humanity. For Dharma Drum Mountain, it is leading the way through its educational platform, online and offline, in the spirit of Chan. Our tomorrow starts here and in the NOW, day after day, week after week, year after year. 🌿

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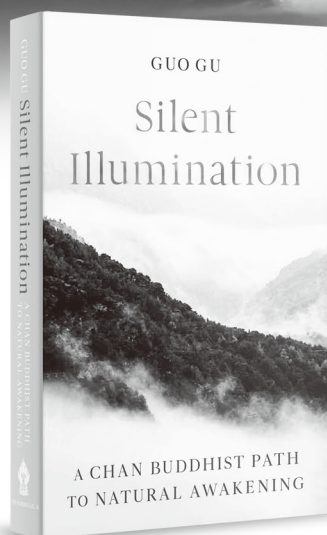
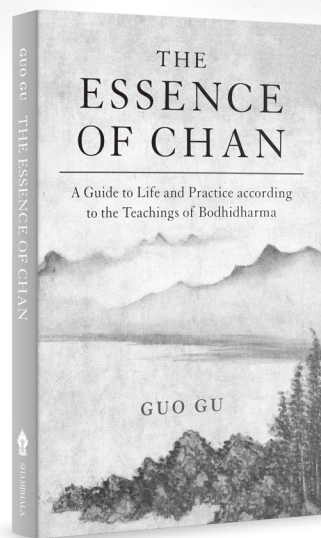
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Guo Gu

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