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CHAN MAGAZINE

WINTER 2022





# 空性生緣



## *Dependently Originated and Empty of Inherent Nature*

The illusory manifestation and existence of all phenomena stem from the karmic forces engendered by sentient beings. So if one thoroughly realizes the conditioned and empty nature of phenomena, one will not be lured and burdened by illusory phenomena, becoming their slave. One will be at ease and free from afflictions and delusions. This is the fulfillment of the practice of liberation from the cycle of birth and death. Anyone who is no longer pushed around by external phenomena can stop producing karma, which binds us to the cycle of birth and death. He can leave behind birth and death, or he can choose to control his own birth and death.



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CHAN MASTER SHENG YEN  
*Orthodox Chinese Buddhism, 1965*

## CHAN MAGAZINE

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*Essential Buddhist  
Concepts and Beliefs*

— BY —

CHAN MASTER SHENG YEN

Photo by Jason Leung





Chan Master Sheng Yen DDM Archive Photo

This article is excerpted from Chan Master Sheng Yen's book *Orthodox Chinese Buddhism*, which he wrote in the early 1960s while secluded on a solitary retreat. It is based on early Buddhist scriptures, especially the *Āgama Sūtras*, and addresses topics one by one in a question-and-answer format. Given the vague, confusing semblance of Buddhism which prevailed in Taiwanese society at that time and which had long been prevalent among ordinary Chinese laypeople, his efforts were directed at explaining and clarifying what Buddhism really is. Due to the enthusiastic reception this book received among Chinese readers, people eagerly suggested that it be translated into English so that a larger readership could enjoy its perspectives. In addition to the translation of the complete original text, the English edition (Dharma Drum Publications and North Atlantic Books, 2007) includes new annotations, appendixes, and a glossary designed for the Western readers. Translated by Douglas Gildow and Otto Chang; edited and annotated by Douglas Gildow; editorial consulting by Wei Tan and Ernest Heau.



## What Is the Fundamental Doctrine of Buddhism?

**T**HAT THERE ARE A VAST NUMBER OF BUDDHIST scriptures is well known. So no one can say definitively which sūtra or sūtras are representative of Buddhism. Largely for this reason many schools of Buddhism emerged in China, each based on the perspective of particular sūtras or treatises.

Nonetheless, there is a fundamental doctrine common to all Buddhism – what the Buddha discovered about life and the universe – the truth of conditioned arising, also known as dependent origination.

Simply put, conditioned arising means that things originate from causes and conditions, or alternatively, combinations of different factors produce all phenomena. For instance, for an article to be written, reach the hands of a reader, and help the reader understand something about Buddhism, the sequence of causal relations (causes and conditions) may appear simple but is actually exceedingly complex. First, a writing system must be developed and the author must master it. The author must absorb and accumulate knowledge. Then the author must have good health, enthusiasm, and understanding. Other necessary factors include the manufacture and use of stationery; proofing, typesetting, and printing; and handling and delivery of the mail. Finally, to satisfy the author's purpose in writing the article, the readers need to be interested, intelligent, and motivated to read. This example of conditioned arising is only the simplest and the most obvious. If we investigate further, we will see that any single relationship is necessarily connected to innumerable other relationships. Such interdependency among relationships is what is meant by "causes and conditions." Things arise when causes and conditions come together, and things pass away when causes and conditions

disperse. This is the doctrine of dependent origination and extinction.

Because everything in the universe arises and passes away according to conditions, everything is impermanent and constantly changing; hence, Buddhists consider all phenomena provisional, temporary, and illusory.<sup>1</sup>

From a tiny bubble to the whole Earth, or even the stars, nothing is everlasting. If nothing is permanent and substantial, this proves that everything is empty. This is what is meant when it's said in Buddhism that all phenomena are "dependently originated and therefore empty of inherent nature" (緣生性空 *yuánshēng xìngkōng*).

Because of this doctrine, Buddhism is often known as the "way of emptiness." But many people gravely misunderstand the true meaning of emptiness. Emptiness means that nothing is fixed or unchanging. It means non-substantiality rather than non-existence. Many people misinterpret emptiness to signify that nothing exists. Buddhists use the concept of conditioned arising to analyze things and to demonstrate their lack of substance. For instance a car, if analyzed from the perspective of a chemist, is no longer a car but a compound of various elements and the bonds among them. Viewed from its outside appearance, a car is still a car, unless it has been damaged to the point that it is ready to be recast in a smelting furnace.

Buddhists say that everything arises from conditions and hence is empty of self-nature in order to analyze and shed light on the essential nature of things. It reminds us that we are living in a world of non-substantiality and illusion, and therefore had better not become captive to transitory fame, wealth, or desire for objects. To realize this is to see through the illusory nature of phenomena or to drop the endless greed for fame, wealth, and objects. The existence

of phenomena is never denied. Although Buddhists say that phenomena are devoid of substance, they recognize that their lives do not exist apart from illusory phenomena, because those not liberated from birth and death still produce karma and receive karmic results. Karmic force is also illusory, yet it can propel beings to higher or lower states to experience happiness or suffering.

At this point, please be reminded that the illusory manifestation and existence of all phenomena stem from the karmic forces engendered by sentient beings. So if one thoroughly realizes the conditioned and empty nature of phenomena, one will not be lured and burdened by illusory phenomena, becoming their slave. One will be at ease and free from afflictions and delusions. This is the fulfillment of the practice of liberation from the cycle of birth and death. Anyone who is no longer pushed around by external phenomena can stop producing karma, which binds us to the cycle of birth and death. He can leave behind birth and death, or he can choose to control his own birth and death.

## Do Buddhists Believe the Cycle of Birth and Death Is Real?

The answer to this question is affirmative. According to Buddhism, except for those who are liberated from birth and death (such as arhats on the Nikāya path) and those noble ones who can control their own birth and death (such as bodhisattvas at advanced stages of the Mahāyāna path), every sentient being is subject to the cycle of birth and death, or *saṃsāra*.<sup>2</sup>

The round of birth and death actually involves upward or downward rebirth in different relatively fortunate or unfortunate destinies, not rebirth along a circular path as around a wheel. Sentient beings transmigrate through a total of six modes

of existence, called the “six destinies” or “six paths” (Sanskrit *ṣaḍ-gati*; Chinese *liùqù, liùdào*). From highest to lowest, these are destinies as a deity, human, asura,<sup>3</sup> animal, hungry ghost, or hell-dweller. Rebirth into any of these destinies is based on one’s adherence or non-adherence to the five precepts and the ten good deeds, and on one’s commission or non-commission of the ten evil deeds (the opposites of the ten good deeds) and the five heinous crimes (killing one’s father, mother, or an arhat; destroying the harmonious unity of the Saṅgha; and shedding a Buddha’s blood). Results from practicing the five precepts and the ten good deeds are classed into three levels – upper, middle, and lower – leading to rebirth as a deity, human, or asura, respectively. The ten evil deeds and the five heinous crimes are similarly classified into three levels of offense, and lead to rebirth as an animal, hungry ghost, or hell-dweller, respectively. Good deeds lead to birth in the three higher destinies, while evil deeds result in birth in the three lower destinies. After one has exhausted the good and/or bad retributions in one particular life, that lifetime will end, and another cycle of birth and death will commence. This transmigration within the six destinies, being born then dying, dying then being born again, is called the cycle of birth and death, or *saṃsāra*.

Although sentient beings can be born into any of the six destinies, Buddhists believe good or bad karma is mainly performed in the human destiny. In other words, only humans are equally capable of both producing new karma and receiving the results of previous karma; in other destinies, beings generally just receive karmic results. As deities or asuras, sentient beings mainly enjoy karmic rewards, and they have virtually no time to perform new karma. In the lower three destinies, sentient beings mainly experience suffering, and cannot distinguish good from evil. So

it is only in the human destiny that we can experience both happiness and suffering, and distinguish good from evil. According to Buddhism, producing karmic energy depends on one's state of mind. So if one lacks the opportunity or ability to distinguish good from evil, then one's action cannot produce much karmic energy. Thus, Buddhism strongly emphasizes the moral responsibility of human beings.

Because karmic energies are generated primarily by humans, beings that ascend or descend to a particular destiny all have a chance to ascend or descend again. One doesn't just ascend to a higher destiny and continue ascending forever, or descend to a lower destiny and continue descending forever.

As humans we produce various kinds of karma – some good, some bad; some light, some heavy. Which karmic results will we experience first, and to which destiny will we go first? After death we gravitate toward one destiny or another based on three possible forces. The first force is activated if we have generated some particularly strong good or evil karmic energy during life. If our good karma outweighs our bad karma, we will go to the higher destinies. And within the higher destinies, if our karma for the heavenly destiny outweighs other good karma, we will be reborn as a deity first. On the contrary, if our bad karma outweighs good karma, we will be reborn in the lower destinies. And if our karma for hell outweighs other bad karma, we will be born as hell-dwellers first.<sup>4</sup> After the results of the heaviest karma are experienced, results of the second-heaviest karma will be experienced, and so on.

The second force that determines place of rebirth is habitual tendencies. This force is predominant if we have not performed any particularly good or evil deeds, but have maintained an especially strong habit. Under such circumstances, after death we will be attracted to a certain place based on the habit.

Therefore, progress in doing good and practicing Buddhism mainly depends on our day-to-day efforts.

The third force determining rebirth is a being's state of mind at the moment of death. At that moment, if negative states such as fear, anxiety, craving, or vexations occupy the mind, it is difficult to avoid rebirth in a lower destiny. So Buddhists believe that when someone is dying, his family members should not overreact with moans and tears. Instead, they should practice generosity and cultivate merit for him, and let him know what they are doing. In addition, they should remind him of all the good deeds he has done during his life, and make him feel comforted and willing to let go. They should also recite a Buddha's name and help focus his mind on this particular Buddha's merit and pure land. If the person has not committed any gross misconduct, and his mind focuses on these thoughts, he will not be reborn in the lower destinies. In fact, because his mind is attuned and receptive to the power of the vows of



Buddhas and bodhisattvas, he can even be reborn in a Buddha's pure land. Therefore, Buddhists advocate reciting a Buddha's name around a dying person to help the dying focus his attention on such thoughts.

According to folk belief, one becomes a ghost immediately after death. According to the Buddhist theory of rebirth, this is untrue. To become a hungry ghost is only one of the six destinies, so it is only one of six possibilities after death.

## **Do Buddhists Firmly Believe in the Law of Karmic Cause and Effect?**

Yes, Buddhists believe in the law of karmic cause and effect, or the law of karma, just as they believe the infallible, simple truth that after one eats, one's hunger will be satisfied.

Most people question the certainty of the law of karma because they view things from the limited vantage point of the present life only. They see unfair karmic rewards and retribution in this life: some people endure hardship and do good deeds all their lives only to receive no reward, not even a good death! Others pervert justice for bribes and commit every injustice imaginable, but nevertheless live a life of ease through legal loopholes, enjoying good fortune and longevity.

However, the law of karma operates through the three times. Besides one's current life, one has already passed through countless previous lives, and one will pass through countless lives in the future. This current life, compared with the continuous stream of lives from the past into the future, seems as short and minuscule as the duration of a spark produced by striking a stone. Karmic results, which take place in an order determined by the relative size and weight of karmic forces, can be carried over from the remote past to the present or into the distant future. Good

or evil deeds in this life may not bear karmic fruit during this lifetime, and the happiness or suffering that one experiences may not be caused by actions performed in this life. Rather, karmic forces generated in previous lives cause the majority of this life's tribulations. Likewise, the consequences of this life's actions are more likely to be felt in future lives. If one understands that the law of karma operates in all the three times, one will feel more convinced and accepting of its truth.

Furthermore, the law of karma is not the same as fatalism or determinism, as many people wrongly imagine. Buddhists believe that, except for certain heavy, unchangeable karma, people can change karma from previous lives by their efforts in following lives. For example, if in previous lives someone acted in a way to cause himself to be poor in this life, he can still work hard and thereby change his financial situation in this life. In other words, causes from the past plus causes (behavior) in the present jointly determine results in the present. This is why the law of karma is not fatalism or determinism, but rather one hundred percent "endeavorism." If Buddhism were to fall into the quagmire of fatalism or determinism, then the theory that sentient beings can attain enlightenment could no longer hold. If one's fate has already been determined in previous lives, wouldn't all good deeds in this life be done in vain?

We see that the law of karma does not deviate from the principle of conditioned arising. From causal seeds sown in previous lives to the fruits harvested in this life, many auxiliary factors play a role in determining the results. Examples of these auxiliary factors include one's striving or sluggishness and one's good or bad behavior in the present life. As an analogy, although sugar-water is basically sweet, if we add lemon or coffee to the glass, the taste will change.





In summary, the law of karma in Buddhism runs through all three times and thus links together the past, present, and future. In the present life, we receive the effects of karma done in previous lives. Our behavior in this life can develop into karmic seeds that sprout in future lives, or it can interact with previous karma to produce results in this life.

The principle of karmic cause and effect seems simple but really isn't so. Buddhism is like that also: it appears simple, but it is actually a very sophisticated religion. 🌿

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#### Translator's Notes

1. Notice the special usage of the word illusory here: it does not signify that phenomena do not exist; rather, it means that phenomena exist provisionally and temporarily, in a way we do not usually (fully) perceive.
2. To avoid using the pejorative term Hīnayāna (Lesser Vehicle), the Chinese term *xiǎoshèng fójiào* 小乘佛教 is generally translated in this book as “Nikāya Buddhism,” which in this newly coined usage means the Buddhism which purported or purports to be centered on those early sūtras which

were eventually organized into collections called nikāyas or āgamas (C. *āhán*). Whereas today the Theravāda school is the only extant representative of Nikāya Buddhism, in ancient India there were many Nikāya schools, each with its own set of scriptures. Therefore, Nikāya Buddhism cannot be narrowly identified with the contemporary Theravāda school nor with its set of Pali scriptures. Following this decision, the word *xiǎoshèng* as an adjective is translated as Nikāya, and followers of this form of Buddhism are called Nikāyists.

3. *Asura* is sometimes translated “demigod,” “titan,” or even “demon.” Master Sheng Yen glosses this term with the Chinese word *shén* 神, indicating that various spiritual beings that do not fit into other categories can be lumped into the asura category. When asked if the popular Chinese deities, including Guāngōng 關公, Māzǔ 媽祖, etc. are included in this category, Master Sheng Yen replied, “Not necessarily. The asura destiny is for relatively unvirtuous divinities; if the divinity is highly virtuous, we can consider him or her as pertaining to a higher destiny, to being one of the heavenly deities” (interview by translator, Taipei, Taiwan, 8 April 2002).
4. *Diyù* 地獄 (hell) could also be translated as “purgatory” or “purgatorial hell,” since in some Christian conceptions, a stay in purgatory is temporary and has a purifying effect, in the same way that a stay in a Buddhist hell “burns off” bad karma. The Chinese word *diyù* consists of the characters meaning “earth” (*di*) and “prison” (*yù*), and is popularly conceived of as a place in the earth where sinners are punished by inhospitable environments and sadistic demons. We still choose to render *diyù* as “hell” since it is a more common word and the Buddhist *diyù* resembles popular conceptions of hell: subterranean and filled with torture and demons. Actually, this terminology is complicated by the fact that in popular Chinese religion, as opposed to orthodox Buddhism, the term *diyù* can refer to either (1) a set of underground courts through which all the dead must pass, or (2) the hells to which some of the dead are assigned after passing through these courts (Stephen F. Teiser, *The Scripture on the Ten Kings and the Making of Purgatory in Medieval Chinese Buddhism*. [Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994], 2). As manuscript reader Wei Tan noted, in Buddhism hell is not ultimately purifying. Rather, it is merely a place where a set of negative karmic retributions is received until it is exhausted. One does not emerge from hell purer as far as the mind is concerned.



# *Mindfulness and Everyday Life of Monastics*

————— BY —————  
VENERABLE CHANG WU

Venerable Chang Wu is currently the Abbess of the Dharma Drum Center in Vancouver, Canada. She leads intensive meditation retreats for seasoned practitioners around the world. She has taught Buddhism and meditation practice at the Sheng Yen Academy and Dharma Drum Sangha University in Taiwan, and plays an active role in organizing and participating in scholarly conferences and interfaith dialogues. This article is based on her talk given at the Chan-Bern Meditation Center in Switzerland, July 9, 2021. Transcribed by Helen Ho, edited by Buffe Maggie Laffey.

**I** THINK PEOPLE ARE CURIOUS ABOUT WHAT monastics do in their everyday life. They don't have a nine-to-five job, they don't have a family – what could they do? Sleep and eat? Meditate? You want to find out how our life is different from your expectations, and, perhaps, judge our performance based on that afterwards. But, I don't see that monastics and laity are really separate. We're just playing different roles in this life due to our own causes and conditions. Our goal is the same – the practice. As humans, we share the same nature, the same suffering; there is no difference there. I think this is a great opportunity to really tell you how a monk or a nun lives their life. In the end, you can tell me how different we are.

I'd like to present this talk in three parts. First: secular mindfulness practice and Buddhist meditation practice; are they the same or are they different? Second, I will describe the everyday life of a nun or a monk. And third, I will go over the basics of meditation practice in everyday life.

## Secular Mindfulness

Mindfulness practice is a secular movement. It's so widespread nowadays, it has become a global movement. Buddhism originally spread from India to China and other Asian countries, and then to North America and Europe. Mindfulness as the offspring of Buddhism originated in the United States, and today is very popular in Asian countries too. So we have come full circle and are inter-connected.

Mindfulness is actually used to help people to cope with stress, anxiety, pain, and illness. It helps people have better concentration at work or study, leading to better performance and better life management. Some people use it to deal with insomnia, and it does help that.

The practice of Mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) started with Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn in the United States. He was a student of Zen Buddhism, who practiced yoga in addition to meditation, and studied with various Buddhist teachers. His teachers include Philip Kapleau and Thích Nhất Hạnh. He is also the founding member of the Cambridge Zen Center. In the 1970s he created an eight-week mindfulness program at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. It began as an experiment to try out on hospital patients, as a tool to help them relieve their anxiety and cope with the fear of illness and physical pain. Also to help them recover sooner and endure less suffering. It was run as an experiment for a number of years and has proven medically and scientifically to be very helpful.

Now almost fifty years later, it's so widespread because it's practical and it's effective. It is now commercialized, as a commodity, a profession. Today you can register for twelve weeks of training, or sixty hours online, to become a certified mindfulness meditation coach. You can get this course at a discounted price of \$400. You can become a certified coach, a teacher, and mindfulness can become your livelihood.

## Beer and Chocolate

Certified mindfulness coaches hold commercialized events such as “beer meditation” or “chocolate meditation.” Have you heard about that? A couple of years ago some people I knew went to a chocolate meditation in downtown Vancouver. For a forty-five-minute session they charge seventy-five dollars. What did they do? You sit for a while in guided meditation, not for too long, then you stand up and they give you a piece of chocolate and you taste it. You do get much more of the taste of chocolate, than you





would if you had not just meditated. After a little while, you sit some more, and they give you another piece of chocolate. Wow, forty-five minutes and your seventy-five bucks are gone! Beer meditation is quite similar; you go there, they charge you whole a lot of money, you meditate and try out different kinds of beer. The practice becomes a commodity. In Western culture there is a perspective that views everything as a marketplace, and that includes spiritual practice.

Mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) is a product derived from Buddhist meditation practice, but it's not the whole. The creators of MBSR only took part of Buddhist practice; they only adopted the technique. I'm not saying mindfulness is bad, no; it's effective and beneficial. It definitely helps people to have better health, to better cope with the things going on in their lives. But since they only took part of the Buddhist meditation practice, they only get partial benefits. That's why I say it's a loss. And what they missed is the most important, most precious and essential part of Buddhism. And why is that? Dr. Jon

Kabat-Zinn is a Zen practitioner, and he has trained and practiced with many great Buddhist teachers. But he is also a scientist and medical doctor. So he preferred not to label the practice with Buddhism, to set it completely apart from any religious element. He preferred to create his mindfulness program as meditation combined with science.

## Mindfulness in Buddhism

Now, I'd like to present the Buddhist style of meditation practice. In Buddhism, meditation is a way to cultivate the mind. Mind experiences stress, anxiety, pleasure, joy, and all kinds of emotions; that is the condition of the mind. We want to cultivate the mind so all these vexations will not be obstructions to the attainment of wisdom and compassion, or the attainment of enlightenment. That's our goal: a completely opened heart and mind, ultimate wisdom seeing the truth of reality. We need to deal with all these issues of stress and emotions, yes, but with a higher goal, the ultimate jewel.

How do we approach meditation practice? It is a technique. We use the meditation method to know the condition of our body and mind, and that is exactly the beginning of knowing oneself. That's where we embark on the journey of self-discovery. Do we always know how we feel, psychologically, emotionally? Sometimes, right? Not all the time. So that's the method we start from. Knowing the condition of body and mind, we work with that knowledge to take care of our body and mind.

## Practicing with Right View

When we practice meditation, our practice is guided by the right view, the right understanding of the Buddhadharma. How do we gain our right

understanding? Through learning the teachings of the Buddha. Then we are able to tell right from wrong, good from evil, wholesome from unwholesome. We are able to lead our life in accordance with the teaching of right view.

In our life, we have many chances to challenge ourselves on whether we truly do have that right view. We become more conscious of what we do, and say, and even what we think. How would my action, my speech, affect others and myself later on? Have I caused some harm to others and myself, without knowing it when I was actually doing it? Morality shows us the guidelines of what is wrong and what is right. In Buddhism, meditation must be cultivated together with morality and wisdom to make it complete.

What is the purpose of Buddhist meditation practice? To become free from vexations caused by greed, anger and ignorance. To be liberated from the suffering caused by delusion and strong attachment to the self. That's why we practice Buddhist meditation; it's not just about alleviating anxiety and stress. Yes, that is important, but there is more beyond that. We want to become enlightened, and also help others to become enlightened. These two very important aspects completely differentiate Buddhist meditation from the secular mindfulness movement.

## Everyday Life of a Nun

Now for the second part of our talk – most of you are curious about the everyday life of a nun. Our life is not much different from yours. We cook, wash dishes, clean toilets, mop the floors, carry out the garbage. We sweep foliage and remove weeds from the garden and orchard. We have a big house, so there are many cleaning jobs. There's a lot of work to do, just like every one of you, in your households.

Perhaps you have a paid job in an office; you talk and interact with people. We also interact, we work with our volunteers to maintain our Dharma center. We work with suppliers, mechanics, and repair persons to come to fix our building and equipment.

To give you an example, last week we had a heat wave in Vancouver, 109 degrees Fahrenheit. The majority of households in Vancouver don't have air conditioning, but our center has an air conditioner because it's a public place. If you suddenly have a hundred fifty people in the building, you need to keep the air well ventilated. Our office, with two sides made completely of glass, is the very hottest room



Photo by Ven. Chang Duo

in the summer and the coldest in the winter. During that heat wave, we tried not to use the air conditioner. But the third day was the hottest day. We put blueberries out on the table during the morning, and by the afternoon they were already very mushy and not tasty anymore, in just those few hours. So we finally turned on the air conditioner. It was running for an hour before it began to spill water. At the beginning, it was just drops, but later on it was a heavy flow, so we had to hurry to get buckets to catch the water, and mop the floor. Then we made phone calls to the manufacturer and the dealer, and repair persons, but we couldn't find anybody to come fix it. So this is everyday life for nuns, just like your life, we have to deal with problems and interact with many people like you do.

We do have a lot of administrative responsibility. To give you an example – the youngest nun in our monastery, her responsibilities include the kitchen: providing three meals a day. These are not entirely cooked by herself; other nuns share in that, but she is responsible for organizing and running the kitchen, getting grocery supplies and that kind of thing. She is also responsible for dormitory services: cleaning, organizing, finding supplies. In addition to this, she teaches classes of beginner's meditation, and classes on Buddhism, and she's mentoring a study group. Like her, the other nuns at our monastery share different kinds of multi-aspect responsibilities.

## Time Management

One aspect of the monastic lifestyle that is perhaps different from yours, is the way we use our time. We often are not able to allocate our time; to say e.g., this is office hours, this is family time, this is my personal time. That is how you live your life, right, in separate parts? We don't often have the liberty to do that.

Just recently, one of our members had some issue and called me at a quarter after nine in the evening. I talked to her until eleven PM. I became tired and almost lost my voice, but I cannot say: "Listen, it's night time here; this is my personal time." I can't.

Living this kind of lifestyle, I learned to make use of my time. Starting with intervals of one hour at first, and then intervals of thirty minutes, and then intervals of fifteen minutes, I learned to make use of every segment of the hour. This is very good training. I learned, while I am dealing with something, to quickly let go of the conversation I was having, or sometimes the emotions. To complete a task as quickly as possible, and then be ready for what is happening right now. To adapt quickly to new situations and requirements, and also to be present with my whole being – my body with six sense faculties, and mind, and heart. Easy to say, but not at all easy to do. Sometimes very challenging and frustrating, so I'm still practicing. It's definitely a very worthwhile practice. Practicing in this way really helps me to gain the taste of Chan, the taste of freedom. So it's a very very pleasant journey for me. I don't know if you are still curious about monastic life? If so, maybe you can come and live with us for a time, I welcome you.

## Basics of Everyday Practice

Now for the third part of our talk; the basics of our everyday practice. Meditation is not just about sitting. It can be practiced in motion, in every activity you are doing. In addition, when we practice meditation, we also need to apply the teachings of Buddhadharma. No matter how much you understand, just apply it.

Always maintain a very relaxed body; this is a solid foundation for our practice. When the body

is relaxed, the mind is usually calm and stable. Try to develop the habit of being aware of the condition of your body and mind at all times. Your mind will not be different from how your body feels. It's hard to detect our mental activities clearly. But the body is something obvious and concrete that you can direct your awareness to. Your physical conditions reflect your mental conditions, your emotional state. So if your body is not comfortable, relax and make it comfortable. When tension is released from the body, stress and anxiety is also released from the mind. When the mind is open and no longer agitated, you have more room to perceive what's going on. So always maintain that relaxed body, and train your mind to cultivate awareness of how the body feels. If you practice like that regularly, when some strong emotions suddenly come up, you will have the ability to redirect the awareness to the body and help calm the mind. If you don't practice like that normally, when such strong events occur you will not be able to redirect your awareness. Your whole mind will be stuck in that situation. So practice regularly.

## Causes and Conditions

In your everyday activities, try to perceive whatever is going on from the perspective of causes and conditions; this is the application of Buddhadharmā. You will start to see that these things are not fixed; they change all the time. When a new person, new elements, come in, observe the workings of how they affect each other. Observing causes and conditions, you start seeing something deeper, broader, that you have not seen before. You see more and more the illusory nature of all phenomena. You start getting a little closer to the truth of reality. This is how we should practice meditation in our everyday life.

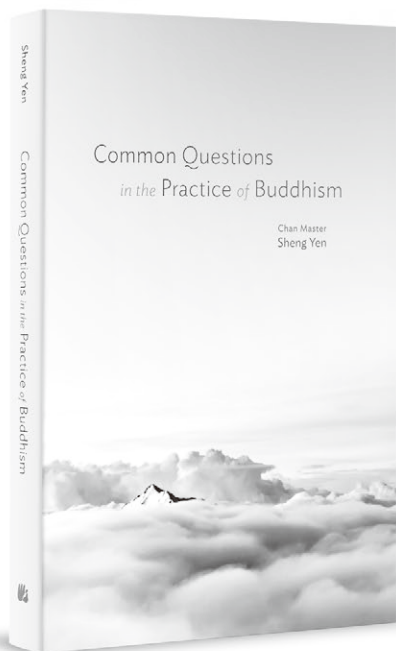
There are plenty of opportunities for us to practice that, almost everywhere, almost anytime. If we practice in that way, we are getting closer to being connected with the nature that everyone of us possesses – the mind of bodhi, the awakening mind. We don't need to wait for it to come some day; we don't need to anticipate it will somehow fall on us. We can actually gain a piece of that, experience that in our everyday life, even right here, right now!

Meditation is very useful especially in the moment when things are happening. When we feel agitated, stressed and emotional, that is exactly when we practice the method – in that situation at that very moment. If the situation comes on so strong that you have difficulty redirecting your awareness to the body, you probably want to leave those circumstances and do something else, maybe walk around outside. Then you can come back to direct awareness of your body. Start from knowing how your body feels – not imagining with your brain, but physically through tactile sensation. Let relaxation do its work. You don't necessarily need to come back to your breath, since when you are agitated your breath is probably very irregular. If you start work on your breath at that time, you might have another problem controlling your breath. So simply relaxing the body is the best.

After you cool down your emotions and review the situation, it may not seem so serious anymore. But after it's over, it's time to reflect on it. How did it happen? What could I do in the future so the same thing will not repeat again? That's your practice of reflection, awareness, and review. Applying the teaching of wisdom, you'll generate a sense of humility, repentance. You will try hard not repeat the same mistake again.

These are the practices I try to use in my everyday life. And it's full of fun and very challenging, but absolutely worthwhile and liberating. 🌿





## 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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# *Origins of Chan Practice*

— BY —

SIMON CHILD

Simon Child is the principal teacher of the Western Chan Fellowship, a lay Chan organization based in the UK. Simon started his training with John Crook in 1981 and trained with Chan Master Sheng Yen from 1992, from whom he received Dharma Transmission in 2000. His teaching approach uses the orthodox methods of Chan Master Sheng Yen with some adaptations to help the Western personality engage with traditional practice. In this article, Simon discusses the roots of Chan meditation methods and attitudes towards practice. Taken from a talk given at a Silent Illumination Intensive retreat, at the Dharma Drum Retreat Center in May, 2015. Transcribed and edited by Buffe Maggie Laffey.



Photo by Kalyanayahaluwo

## The Question of Suffering

I THOUGHT IT MIGHT BE INTERESTING TO look at the origins of our Chan style of meditation, which is actually rooted very firmly in the history of Buddhism. You can't say it was "invented" at any particular time, but it's emerged and become clearer as a single strand of practice. The origins of this can be traced right back to the Buddha. This is my own interpretation but it works quite well for me. Let's see if it works for you.

You all know the life story of the Buddha. How he was touched by the question of suffering: How can there be suffering? What is suffering? What is the solution to suffering? He became possessed by that question. You could say he took that as a *kung-an* (koan) or a *huatou*; he experienced the great doubt in relation to that question. It drove him to leave the palace. It drove him to seek out teachers, to test their teachings and find them lacking, and to keep looking. He wasn't easily satisfied. He tried the practices of all the great teachers of his day, and he became quite accomplished at these practices. But he didn't resolve the question of suffering. And he kept looking.

He entered a period of asceticism and nearly died from starvation, but realized this wasn't going to help him break through. During all this period he was driven by great doubt. "I must break through the question of suffering;" that's what drove him. But then, realizing that he wasn't breaking through, and was nearly dying from wasting away, he rested and took some food and sat under the bodhi tree. In my way of interpreting it, we could say that his practice changed to silent illumination.

Sitting under the bodhi tree, the Buddha was assailed with temptations from Mara. He could have ignored these images, for he was very well trained in methods of cutting off his awareness, but he didn't.

He just sat there and witnessed them. He let them flow through him and said "Come on Mara, try harder. I've not been shaken by that." He didn't blank out the mind – he let whatever entered the mind, enter it. He let it flow through and wasn't moved by it. And it was through \*this\* practice that he broke through to enlightenment.

At that point of sitting under the bodhi tree, he was just sitting there. He continued just sitting and experiencing whatever the mind presented to him. He wasn't trying to change it, stop it, or filter it; he just experienced the sitting and everything involved with it. This was something of a turnaround for practice. Most of the methods that the Buddha had been taught were methods of cutting off the mind. These could indeed lead to deep trance states, very still and quiet. But these states weren't satisfying because they didn't address or resolve the question of suffering. When he came out of these states, there was still the problem of suffering.

## Calming and Insight

Initially, the Buddha deeply practiced *samādhi* states, methods of calming the mind, *śamatha*. He mastered these states. But these alone, although useful, didn't turn out to be enough. What he added to the practice was the cultivation of insight, or *vipāśyanā*, the wisdom which allows you to be with what is there to be seen; not afraid to see it, not shaken by it. In a sense, this is what's different between Buddhist practice and the practices that went before. It adds this extra and very important dimension of the cultivation of insight, of awareness, experiencing. The calming practices are still useful because nearly everyone starts with busy, rather wild and uncontrolled minds. It's useful to have these techniques to calm the mind down. But



unless these are then complemented by insight, you remain in a rather dull state, unenlightened.

In this way of interpreting it we see both the main methods of Chan and the life story of the Buddha. We see the power of the huatou to drive him through his journey. But he also practiced silent illumination and through that, introduced this important quality of practice: vipaśyanā, insight. These two distinct aspects to the practice, śamatha and vipaśyanā, calming and insight, are recognized through all traditions of Buddhism. They are practiced differently in different traditions, using varied methods, and they are sometimes practiced in a different sequence. Often the Theravada practitioners will practice one and then the other; they'll practice śamatha for quite a long time first and then they may switch to vipaśyanā later, perhaps following the tradition of the Buddha. In Chan we tend to fuse these practices more. We may emphasize one more than the other, depending

on the state of the mind and what it needs, but in essence these are not separated. Both aspects need to be present at some point in the practice.

In another way you can see origins of this practice if you look in the *Diamond Sutra*. Interestingly, Shifu (Master Sheng Yen) wrote about this in his book *Hoofprint of the Ox* (Oxford University Press, 2001) in the chapter on silent illumination. It was something I had already noticed for myself before I saw it in that book; it stands out. There is a key line in the *Diamond Sutra* associated with the enlightenment of the sixth patriarch Dajian Huineng (638–713). Different translations put it differently, but Shifu's translation goes: "without dwelling in anything whatsoever, allow this mind to arise." "Without dwelling in anything whatsoever" points towards silence, non-attachment. "Allow this mind to arise" points towards the awakened, illuminated mind. The *Diamond Sutra* didn't say "without dwelling in anything whatsoever, don't allow the mind to arise in case it dwells in something." No, it says "allow the mind to arise," a clear instruction to have a mind which is bright and awake. It's not "switch the mind off so that you don't become attached." It's "without becoming attached, have the mind switched on."

## Chan Patriarchs

If we follow through with the early Chan patriarchs, we find this thread of śamatha and vipaśyanā being practiced together coming through from the time of Bodhidharma (fifth century CE), the first Chan patriarch. The flavor of this attitude is in the poem associated with the third patriarch Jianzhi Sengcan (496–606), the *Xin Xin Ming*, or *Faith in Mind*. There are some particular lines I want to read out from this poem; I brought with me two different translations of it, I'll read the one from Shifu's book<sup>1</sup> first:



Photo by Jacek Ulinski

If you wish to enter the one vehicle,  
do not be repelled by the sense realm.  
With no aversion to the sense realm,  
you become one with true enlightenment.

“The sense realm” points towards allowing the mind to be open, aware, and experiencing. It’s not saying, cut the mind off so that you can practice. It’s saying, open yourself to the sense realm so that you can become enlightened. Another translation (used by the Rochester Zen Center<sup>2</sup>) goes like this:

If you would walk the highest way,  
do not reject the sense domain.  
For as it is whole and complete,  
this sense world is enlightenment.

Again, pointing us towards allowing ourselves to experience the sense world. Not to separate ourselves from it. To be fully aware of the sense world *\*is\** enlightenment. How are you going to get there by cutting yourself off from it? Of course the sense world has its traps, as we all know: attachments, self-indulgence, and all the rest of it; it’s not always smooth and straightforward. But cutting yourself off from it is not the solution. The solution is training the mind to be stable so it can be exposed to the sense world without generating attachment from wandering mind. This principal was being stated by the third patriarch fifteen hundred years ago.

Master Huineng’s teaching spoke about *samādhi*: the state of concentrated clear mind and *prajñā*: insight or wisdom. He spoke very clearly about these being the same, not even being related to each other, but being the same. They can’t be separated. If you have wisdom you must have a clear still mind, and if you have a clear still mind you can’t avoid wisdom. They’re just different aspects of the same thing.

## One State to Be Cultivated

We must remember that this applies to silence and illumination too. We use these words to try and explain it. By using two words to describe two aspects of this state, you might think there were two things to be cultivated. But no, there’s one state to be cultivated. In this state you could name these two qualities and they would both apply even though they have different meanings. You could name other qualities too, and they would also apply. The state of silent illumination could also be called spacious; the mind seems large and clear. We pick on these two words silent and illumination as the traditional naming of the method, but they are not indicating two. They are indicating one state about which different qualities could be named, but they are not separate aspects of the state. They go together; they’re inseparable.

If we look later in time we come to Chan Master Hongzhi Zhengjue (1091–1157) who was based at Tiantong monastery near Ningbo in southeast China. He is known to us because he had several writings on the practice of silent illumination and these have survived and come down to us. Some have been translated into English. Maybe he wasn’t the only one who wrote about it, but of course the ones whose writings didn’t survive, we don’t know about. He may have been the one who named it silent illumination, as that name seems to have appeared around that time. The way he wrote can be problematic to decipher because he wrote quite poetically; eloquently, but using a lot of imagery and references which we don’t always understand unless we know the relevant culture of the time.

His writings contain some interesting pointers. Some sections are called practice instructions, but they’re not direct didactic teachings on how to approach the method. They are more descriptions of



being in a state of silent illumination. He's describing his experience of this state, and he's saying "This is what it's like, do you want to come and join me? It's nice." He's tempting you over with poetic imagery. Describing such states adequately is quite difficult, using straightforward prose, but maybe you can hint at the grandeur through imagery. Because of the words *illumination* and *silence* he tended to use images of nature with great space, and light and dark, to try and paint a picture of how he is experiencing his mind.

## A Growing Tradition

There are a few little phrases here and there which point to practice being based on sitting. There is one phrase "to contemplate your authentic body is how to contemplate Buddha;" this is pointing towards introspection, looking into the mind, into our experience. There are not many of these phrases in his instructions, but there is at least a tantalizing glimpse of how this practice developed. We also have some

additional knowledge of it because that was a well-known and famous monastery, indeed, it still is a lively place of practice. Certain teachers followed on and we have their writings too, so we have some idea of how the practice continued. This isn't just some errant collection of writings by one person, there is a tradition here.

As I say, Hongzhi's writings are quite difficult. I'm going to take a more accessible section from one of his poems and just read that through to you. This particular poem is called *Silent Illumination*. The translation is from Shifu's book *Poetry of Enlightenment*<sup>3</sup>.

Silently and serenely, one forgets all words,  
Clearly and vividly, it appears before you.  
When one realizes it, time has no limits.  
When experienced, your surroundings come to life.  
Singularly illuminating is this bright awareness,  
Full of wonder is the pure illumination.  
The moon's appearance, a river of stars,  
Snow-clad pines, clouds hovering on mountain peaks.

In darkness, they glow with brightness.  
In shadows, they shine with a splendid light.  
Like the dreaming of a crane flying in empty space,  
Like the clear, still water of an autumn pool,  
Endless eons dissolve into nothingness,  
Each indistinguishable from the other.  
In this illumination all striving is forgotten.  
Where does this wonder exist?

Is he tempting you to go and join him? It sounds quite attractive. This could seem a grandiose sort of language but actually, when you touch a wider open state than what you are accustomed to, there can be a sense of awe and wonder: “Oh I’ve been overlooking this all the time up until now. And now...!” He’s saying yes, this is worth persisting with; there’s great beauty and joy to be discovered. When I talk about these states where the mind can expand, I may be just presenting it as a technical state to be aware of so you know how to practice. But Hongzhi is also



pointing out the more emotional state, the [awed intake of breath] “Wow, look at those stars, look at the beauty of that moon!”

## Symbolic Imagery

Of course the moon in a dark sky is an image of light and dark, of illumination. He also talks about a river of stars, meaning the Milky Way. Also pine trees, another image of darkness, but these are snow-clad pines. We have clouds hovering on mountain peaks, an image of interpenetration; flowing clouds and mountain peaks unobstructing each other. If you see a cloud approaching a mountain, it doesn’t stop and think “How can I get past this?” It just divides and flows around it or over it. Sometimes he paints images of the moon reflected in a mountain stream – as soon as you hear those words you can picture the bright and dark, the flowing movement.

I’m not going to dissect the whole poem, but there are some key phrases in there such as: dropping words, not being attached to ideas, not creating a noise of stories in the mind. The surroundings come to life – part of the purpose of practicing in this way is just to be more alive, more real, more present.

Endless eons dissolve into nothingness,  
Each indistinguishable from the other.

If the mind stops discriminating, how can there be distinguishing? How can there be striving when there is nowhere to go other than being where you are? The idea of being somewhere else is just a construction of mind, it’s a fantasy. \*This\* is where you are. Be where you are fully and there’s no need to entertain ideas of being somewhere else. You’re already in the right place, the only place you could be, and it’s a wonderful place to be.

## Dogen and Shikantaza

These are just a taste of the writings of Hongzhi. He taught in twelfth century China at Tiantong monastery, the same monastery where about eighty years later the young monk Dogen arrived from Japan<sup>4</sup>. You know the name Dogen, he is the founder of the Soto sect in Japan. He wasn't satisfied with the teaching he was finding in Japan, and he traveled to China to try and find a better master. He traveled quite a while, I think a couple of years, still not being satisfied with the teaching he found. But then he arrived at Tiantong monastery and found Hongzhi's successor Tiantong Rujing (1163–1228). Dogen respected this master, and he stayed and practiced and had an enlightenment experience there in that monastery, and received transmission and took the teaching back to Japan, founding the Soto tradition there.

The Soto tradition and the practice of *shikantaza* is very closely related to the practice of silent illumination. It's pretty well the same practice except that it's presented and taught somewhat differently. But the essence of just sitting is shared between the practices. The way I present the practice is not the way a Japanese teacher would present it, but actually we are both pointing towards sitting, being present. Not a lot more to be said. But it's said anyway, to help nudge you in the right direction, because the simple instruction can leave you floundering a little bit, while some extra guidance can help you avoid drifting off course. But the essence of the practice is "just sitting." Sitting still, which allows the mind to be non-reactive because it doesn't need to do anything; it can just sink into the cushion. The "just" points towards nothing more than the sitting, nothing added by the mind. Just sit and enjoy the show, experience life moment after moment; experience what it brings you. Enjoy it even if it's bringing you

something uncomfortable, enjoy that it's flowing, that it's moving. You're alive.

This was some of the history of our Chan practice and how it got to us. Here we are keeping it alive, practicing it, but now we're also part of its history. We're continuing it, and it will continue into the future. We practice it, we cultivate it and we live it. Because we don't only practice it sitting – we practice it standing and walking and working and eating and everything else. We continue it. It becomes part of our life. It *is* our way of living.

Is there another way of living, other than being awake? Alert? Aware? Well, there are other ways that people live, but is that the way that you want to live? Don't you want to live experiencing each moment of life? This practice is inviting you to do that. You know the frustration of having been taken away from life and being stuck on a story of the mind, and the daydream, and the drowsiness – that's not the way you want to live. But you can cultivate the skill of maintaining a constant open awareness, a constant appreciation of life and whatever it's bringing you, even the difficult bits, because they are moments of being alive. Cultivate that attitude. Cultivate that skill, and then you can live the rest of your life alive and continue this tradition. 🌿

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1. Chan Master Sheng Yen, *The Poetry of Enlightenment: Poems by Ancient Chan Masters* (New York: Dharma Drum Publications, 1987), 27.
  2. Chan Master Jianzhi Sengcan, "Affirming Faith in Mind: Chanting Version of the Rochester Zen Center," Translations by Philip Kapleau & Bodhin Kjolhede, based on translations of D.T. Suzuki, R.H. Blyth and others.
  3. Sheng Yen, *The Poetry of Enlightenment*, 91.
  4. Dōgen Kigen (1200–1253) studied Caodong Buddhism under Tiantong Rujing, and returned to Japan to establish the Soto sect. "Soto" is the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese word "Caodong." Both "Caodong" and "Soto" use the same Chinese characters "曹洞." Our shifu Chan Master Sheng Yen is also a dharma heir of Caodong School.



# *The Correct View of Meditation*

————— BY —————  
GILBERT GUTIERREZ

Gilbert Gutierrez is an attorney practicing in Riverside, California. He is also a Dharma Heir of Chan Master Sheng Yen with over fifty years of experience in meditation, various martial arts, and chi gong. He gives introductory and advanced Dharma talks and leads retreats at DDMBA centers throughout the United States, and also gives weekly classes at his own group in Riverside, California. His website [www.riversidechan.org](http://www.riversidechan.org) includes a lively “meet up” site and a weekly Dharma Talk podcast. Gilbert teaches in a very casual and accessible yet deep manner, drawing on every-day life situations as well as on the works of great masters. This article is a compilation taken from his “Chan 101” forum on WeChat. Edited by Sentha Sivabalan and Buffe Maggie Laffey.



## Momentary Insights

**D**ON'T LOOK AT MEDITATION AS A MEANS to experience a momentary insight. Insights can last for the flick of an eye lash. Then we get startled at the sensory gates and focus on what just happened. When I was young we played a game of breaking the piñata (a papier-mâché animal filled with candy). Children took turns hitting the piñata with a stick. The youngest went first; I knew these children were too small to break the piñata. I waited for the bigger kids to hit it, especially those who were almost too old to play the game. They relished coming in and showing how strong they were. My eyes were steady on the target. Sometimes when the piñata was almost ready to break, a few pieces of candy would fly out beyond the crowd of children. Some children would rush to pick up the flying pieces but I stayed steady and ready for the big break. When that hit came you heard the unmistakable sound of the piñata breaking and the swoosh of candy. I made sure not to get hit by the stick and then dived into the mass of fallen goodies. I never pushed others out of the way, I was just content to get my share. Later I made sure the youngest had some candy as well.

Our practice is like this. We don't fall away from the practice at the slightest indication that something is happening. We sit and wait, staying with the method. There will be a rush. Don't get too excited. Mindfully course through the experience, carefully maintaining it without letting the sensory gates be dazzled. Awakening is beyond what consciousness can fathom, so if you don't heed this warning, you will allow self to interpret the event and return to consciousness. The result will be an ego-interpreted experience, some false sense of "enlightenment". But if the mind is steady, the mind will maintain this no-ego self nature of mind experience, as if achieving the



weightless state of a body in orbit. This is the entry to Chan. Practice in this way.

## When Sitting, Don't Think

When sitting the practitioner must not think. This often presents difficulties in understanding and applying no thinking. The mind is capable of no thought but not in the manner that we as sentient beings perceive. It is from the perception of mind that no thinking is applied. Mind is still engaged in thought: sit up, hold the position, apply the method, stay in the present moment, relax, don't think. But these are recurring "thoughts" manifesting as a present function. Master Sheng Yen said these thoughts are like a lily pad in a quiet pond, and the mind is like a big bullfrog sitting on and covering the entire pad. No part of these thoughts of applying the method is seen.

Sit quietly and serenely. Use the discerning mind to determine if a thought not matching the method

arises. Gently let go of the thought and bring up the method. What if you can't hold the method and thoughts keep arising? All the more so, the practitioner should increase their effort and conviction to practice. This is the way. Giving into thoughts only assures that each time you sit you will fail again. If in making a cake you don't use the right ingredients and don't follow the recipe directions, why would one expect a good result? Causes and conditions never fail. Yet if one learns the proper ingredients and directions to make a cake, most assuredly the cake will be baked to perfection. All of us are beginners so each time you sit, bake the cake of Chan.

## Contemplate

Contemplation is not thinking: the practitioner is not stringing together a sequence of habitual impressions to interpret the present arising environment. Rather, the mind comes to a rest in the present environment. There is a stillness at this moment, coming from the noumenal side of mind (knowing and doing are still functioning). However, the consciousness is engaged in the present function. The ego has been disengaged. Mind accords with vows and applies such vows and paramitas to the environment.

There is no you in the present moment. There is no you in contemplation. You are being contemplated by mind as the notions of you arise in mind. Because the mind is still, such notions of self appear in mind clearer and slower than before. The contemplative mind is able to discern these ego arisings as it is no longer entangled with the arising consciousness. Mind utilizes its pure, unadulterated knowing to course through the present arisings. It is no longer confused with the present arising which before was taken to be the province of a life in being (my world). Mind knows such arisings are manifestations:

shadows, phantoms and illusions projected upon mind. There is liberation in that there can be no real suffering from such dreams.

Without contemplation, one's practice will take one on a carousel ride in consciousness and true liberation is unattainable as one is trapped in the world of illusion. One can make a better self and a better world yet one is still trapped in the world of illusion. Contemplation is a direct knowing of what is arising in mind. When mind is used properly, mind reveals what cannot be revealed to the self. What self cannot experience.

We see mind like one sees a full eclipse of the sun. There is occluded light but with practice the light becomes stronger. Yet consciousness cannot know what mind is. It cannot fathom the full potential of infinite light. It is a speck, a dark spot on the surface of the sun. Part of the sun, yet unable to see the light in its entirety.

Contemplation is holding to the ever-changing present moment: no thinking, no attaching, no grasping, and no fear. With wisdom there is no fear. With wisdom there comes an interest in the apparent suffering of sentient beings in all quarters.

## Don't Try to Imagine Mind

Mind is the source of all phenomena. Mind functions and extends in a manner inconceivable to a sentient being. Practitioners should not try to imagine mind and liken it to consciousness. When we practice in this way, it is like a baby chick in the egg breaking the air sac in the egg and believing this is the world. It knows not the world, yet the world knows the baby chick. We must abandon this erroneous view point as it prevents us from breaking through. The rules and appearances in this world pertain to this world (such as gravity, time, space) but mind

follows *praṭīyasamutpāda* as mind. Thus appearances change, rules change, all in accordance with this principle which is not limited by the samsaric rule of order and creation. The sentient being has never created a thing.

The ancients referred to mind as the Tathagata. Sometimes the Buddha is referred to as *Tathāgata* (thus gone one) or *Tathā-āgata* (thus come one). These terms have the same references, pointing at mind but not defining mind. “Thusness” is not a definition and implies more the activity of the intrinsic nature of mind.

We often attempt to define mind but fall woefully short. It is like throwing a rock into the sky hoping to hit the moon. In fact the question “What is mind?” leads nowhere; “Ask the lamppost” is an appropriate response. Master Línjì Yìxué (? – 866) said, “If you happen upon a man of the Tao do not ask him about the way.” The Chan practice embodies the deep wisdom of Buddhadharmā. It extends beyond words and phrases. When asked about the Tao one master said, “Swallow all of the waters of the Ganges River first and then I will tell you.” Master Sheng Yēn would say laughingly, moving his arms as if swimming in air, “You are swimming in it all of the time.” Alas the humor of it was lost on the students listening to the tune played upon a stringless lute.

All phenomena is constructed of the fabric of mind. There is nothing outside of mind. When one refers to emptiness (*śūnyatā*) it is not the emptiness of all phenomena of any reality. Rather, it is the non-differentiation of all phenomena that must be contemplated. Practitioners must guide their practice by the fundamental principle that causes and conditions never fail (*praṭīyasamutpāda*). In fact this governs all appearances to the extent that *praṭīyasamutpāda* is the Buddha mind. This too must be contemplated. Still unsure? Then have a cup of tea.

## Sitting Periods

Many beginners are mistaken that the goal of sitting is to increase the sitting time. If one goes to sit with a group, you can be pushed to increase your sitting time. In some ways this is good, but in an important way can be counterproductive to proper meditation. When beginning it is better to start with five minutes of sincere practice. Get the method down and do not deviate from the method. Develop a proper foundation before adding minutes. Failing to do this will result in a poor practice.

When you meditate for forty minutes, and you lose control of your method early on and continue to sit, you are indulging in self habits that will be difficult to discard later on. One will encounter problems with scattered mind, drowsiness and body pain. Because one has not established the proper practice, sitting periods will be filled with distractions as one has not developed the ability to concentrate on the method. To start with a poor practice will be as hard as trying to turn a container ship in the opposite direction in the open ocean.

When minutes are slowly added to a proper practice, very steady and unhurried, one will not lose the technique of contemplation of the method. Of course senses of self continue to arise, but mind will be aware of such arisings and such arisings will not affect your meditation. If you already have such bad habits then re-tool: break down your method and apply the proper elements to your practice with sincerity and determination. Remember, quality over quantity is always better.

## Applying the Method

When we meditate the principle rule is to stay on the method. We stay on it by contemplating the method.



In the beginning you will feel like you are swimming up the mind stream. You will encounter so many thoughts and distractions; it seems so easy to turn around and go with the flow. It is ironic that reversing to the thought stream is seen as rest and going forward with contemplation seems as if there is effort. One is ignorant that the consciousness requires mind energy to regenerate the mental impression that the individual self exists.

When we begin to contemplate we begin “staying in the present moment,” to see thoughts as individual and discrete moments of arising thoughts. In the beginning we are befuddled and overwhelmed by arising thoughts. Eventually we give in to these thoughts and lose the method. Oftentimes we are confused when thoughts that mimic contemplation arise such as “I am on the method and I am contemplating;” it is very subtle.

We counteract these subtle distractions with subtle wisdom. We sit silently as if we want to detect the breath of a butterfly. Very subtle sitting is able to detect this illusory ego masquerading as contemplation. We continue with contemplation, using subtle wisdom to detect a change in the direction of the mind stream. When we can overcome these false mental impressions, we reach a tipping point in which the mind prefers to stay in a clear samadhi state rather than chase thoughts. This is doing mind work.

## Progress

As we begin to practice meditation we initially see great progress. We become aware of this monkey mind that chases after this and is afraid of that. Next we begin to feel the quietness when these mental impressions are subdued. This is indeed great progress. But after this initial experience we come to expect more results, more progress. So we sit, waiting and



*Gibbons at Play, 1427 (partial) Xuande Emperor of Ming*

expecting something to happen at the sensory gates. We begin the expectation of an enlightening experience. Then we become frustrated when these “experiences” do not appear. The practice then turns into a daily dose of tasteless mush. Frustrated, we turn to our expectations and begin to fabricate our ideas of enlightenment. Colors fly by, the Buddhas appear, and all sorts of extra pseudo-enlightenment experiences appear in mind temporarily placating the ego.

It is possible for the illusory consciousness to manufacture a sensory sensation that “mimics” an enlightenment experience. But the closest one can get is unified mind. This experience still belongs to the phenomenal side. It “mimics” the same way a shadow puppet appears on a screen; the true voice and mind does not belong to the appearance on the screen. Practicing in this way does not reflect right view. When one approaches the practice with the true and proper understanding as to how mind works, this grasping at shadows will be set aside.



True practice erodes the ego. The less ego, the less consciousness grasps and fewer mental states of frustration are generated. There comes a tipping point where these feelings of attainment and frustrations of non-attainment subside and the mind remains more on the practice via contemplation. Grasping cast aside, then true progress can be made.

## Do Not Be Discouraged

To those who think this is too deep for you: you read this as if it were a different language. Do not be discouraged. Keep trying to break through. It will come. We must contemplate which is outside of the habitual pattern “thinking box.” Contemplation is not other than the buddha mind at rest.

Imagine; what if there is this mind that permeates everything, knows everything, in all quarters and in

all times? It is beyond thinking, beyond conceptualization. The only way through is by contemplation. Yet it is this very mind that is reading this. Without constructs, without conditions, what is binding the mind? Set the mind free, let it go. Awakening, there are no borders, no issues, no me nor you. This is the truth. This truth has no falseness opposite it. (Don't rush by too soon what you just read.) That is why it is the ultimate truth.

It even incorporates all illusory appearances which also point to the truth: *pratīyasamutpāda*, causes and conditions never fail. Incorporate this truth in the present moment and never let it waver. Be tenacious, be alert, be sincere in every moment. You sit waiting for the arrival of your parents and yet your true identity has never left you for one second. *Kalpa* after *kalpa* it has been by your side, not separate from you in any moment. Yet this “you” has been created over and over, living and dying, suffering from imaginary illnesses, taking sweet candy as the panacea instead of the astringent and bitter medicine of the Dharma.

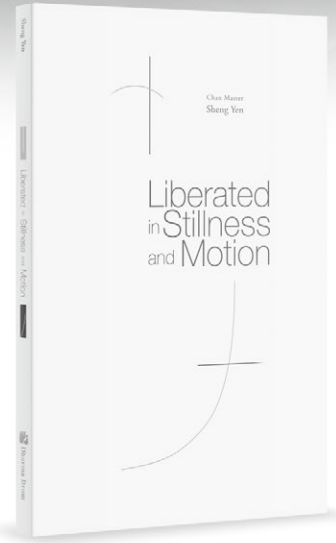
Subjugating the ghost is not hard if the ghost is identified. Yet time and time again the ghost poses as your true nature confusing you and then you take habitual patterns as your inner nature. Like a shadow claiming it is governing the direction that it is moving in, oblivious that the apparent motion is truly governed by mind. The peasant believing that he or she is king or queen. Mind is king and sovereign to the entire Dharma realm. Abandon attachment to conditioned appearances and the true nature will naturally appear, removing all doubts, settling all confusions, bright and perfectly absolute in all phenomena. This cannot be arrived at by thinking. One must become adept at contemplation. This is arrived at by sincere effort and true and proper understanding. Have faith that the one reading this can break through. 🌿

## Liberated in Stillness and Motion

### Chan Master Sheng Yen

“Correct Chan does not use miracles or the summoning of spirits as its appeal, nor does it emphasize other-worldly phenomena. Chan takes simple normal living as its basis, lessening afflictions as its purpose, being relaxed and at ease. One does not regret the past; rather, one actively prepares for the future, moving steadily ahead while being fully in the present. Although I introduce Chan in contemporary language and words, my perspective does not deviate from the teachings of the Buddha and the lineage masters. I avoid the ‘wild-fox Chan’ of some who talk of going beyond the Buddha and the lineage masters, who say outrageous things, scolding as if they were ancient buddhas from the past.”

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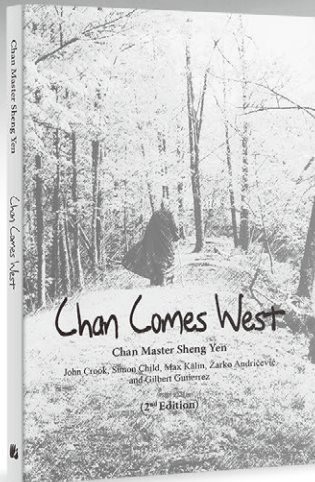


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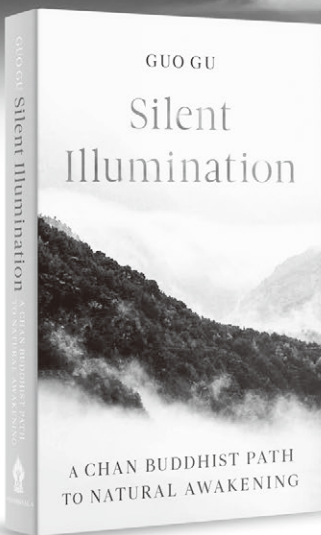
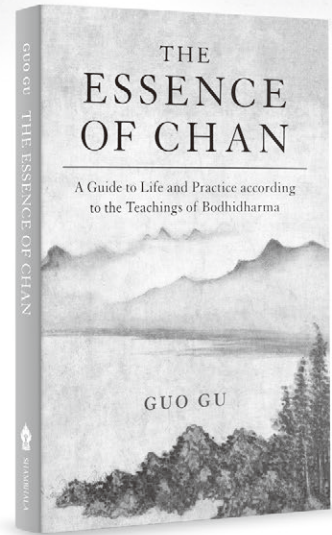
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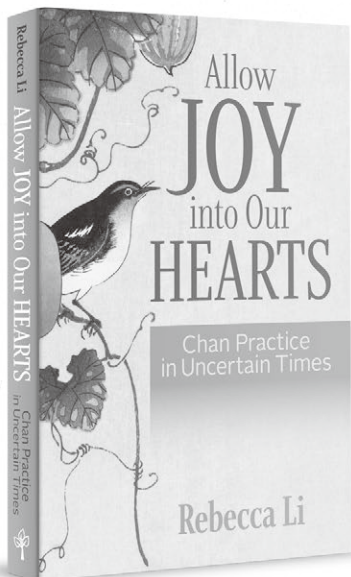
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