

ENCOUNTERS  
*with* Master  
Sheng Yen Ⅲ

## **Encounters with Master Sheng Yen II**

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## Preface

To share with the public the thoughts and life experiences of Dharma Drum Mountain founder Master Sheng Yen (also known as Shifu, meaning “Master”), the Sheng Yen Education Foundation embarked on a series of talks beginning in September of 2009. Fifty-three talks were given at the Sheng Yen Lecture Hall (located in the official residence where Master Sheng Yen lived in his final years). The talks were titled *A Living Example, Countless Teachings—Encounters with Master Sheng Yen* and we invited all his monastic and lay disciples to share with us their stories about Shifu, how he taught them through his living example and words. Listening to these speakers’ personal accounts of the interactions between teacher and student allowed the audience to commemorate Master Sheng Yen’s journey, and once again hear his gracious teachings.

The talks include stories of Master Sheng Yen’s everyday life, how he would give detailed guidance to his disciples regarding their speech and actions. There are also accounts of his travels to share the Buddhadharma locally and overseas, reaching out to the public, and teaching them skillfully and flexibly based on the existing circumstances. Even in his later

years when he became quite ill, he was an example of how to face life and death with freedom and ease. All of these examples, no matter how small the story or how short the conversation, radiate Shifu's compassion and wisdom. They inspire us to vow to "Emulate the worthies and sages, practice what the Dharma has taught us, and repay through our heartfelt gratitude."

At the end of the series, we felt that the interactions from these true life stories were brimming with the Dharma spirit. Hence the audiences initiated and organized transcripts of the talks, to be compiled and published by the Sheng Yen Education Foundation, hoping to allow the general public to learn from the wisdom of Master Sheng Yen, so that together we can realize his vision to create a pure land on this earth.

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# Transformation Through Education: Spontaneity and Skill

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Venerable Guo Dong

*On August 31, 2006 the Sangha's General Assembly announced the newly selected Abbot President. Other than silently reciting Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva's name, there were no other thoughts in my mind. I was deeply thankful that the Sangha had given me this learning opportunity*

*On September 2 the succession ceremony for the second Abbot President of Dharma Drum Mountain (DDM) was successfully completed.*

*In order to shorten my learning cycle, Master Sheng Yen gave me a personal tour of the Abbot's quarters, and taught me how to fulfill the duties of an Abbot President. He told me that I needed to have a broad mind and far-reaching vision. He mentally prepared me by adding, "It's inevitable that others will compare you against Shifu. Don't worry about it. Just request that they don't keep testing you."*

## **Introducing the Speaker**

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### **Venerable Guo Dong, Abbot President, Dharma Drum Mountain**

Venerable Guo Dong was ordained in 1993. He has served as Venerable Master Sheng Yen's personal attendant, Monastic Advisor of both the End-of-Life Caring Group and the Dharma Drum Mountain Fellowship, and as Managing Director of the Bhikshu Sangha. In September of 2006 he became DDM's second Abbot President. The Abbot President has a warm, friendly and cordial personality. Generous and cheerful, he is forever forming bonds of friendship and guiding sentient beings to learn and practice the Buddhadharma with a warm and compassionate heart.



Shifu often gave us Dharma talks telling us that he, like any other ordinary person, would experience the processes of birth, old age, illness and death. But Shifu had a very different attitude towards life—he took this life as a process of putting the Buddhadharma into practice. Ever since Shifu was a novice monk, as soon as he learned or experienced something from the Buddhadharma, he was eager to share it with others. This is actually a form of giving, as well as an act of compassion. Helping people to suffer less and experience more joy is indeed the compassion and wisdom of the Buddhadharma, and can be traced back to the Buddha’s original intention.

## Four Phases in Life

When writing an essay, people generally pay close attention to the [four stages of a traditional Chinese composition]: opening, development, transition, and conclusion. Today I’ll share an application of those same four stages to life, all from the perspective of the Buddhadharma.

By “opening,” I mean the origin of life. In the process

of practicing the Dharma, we need a vessel, a base to begin with, which is the physical life that our parents give us. As such, we must respect our life.

The “development” stage refers to giving full play to the value of life. Whether we are lay practitioners or members of the monastic sangha, or whatever roles we play in our life, why not see those roles as the process of dignifying life? When dealing with people and the events of daily life, we should treat every single thought, word, and deed as something that helps our process of transformation, helping us to evoke the mind of renunciation and initiate the bodhi mind. This would be the “transition” phase.

The “transition” stage refers to the purification of life. DDM’s vision is “To uplift the character of humanity and build a pure land on earth.” Purification of mind is none other than hoping to uplift the character of humanity, thus realizing the vision of a Buddhist pure land in the human realm. The aim of purifying life is to fulfill life. For those who practice the Dharma, “opening, development,

transition, and conclusion” is the process of using our limited physical life to achieve the eternal wisdom of life.

## My first genuflexion, harmony of mind

Before I became a Buddhist, I had come across folk beliefs. Initially, I felt uneasy and hesitated to bow sincerely like other people, even though I had nothing against religion. But one day, the word “harmony” flashed across my mind, and I was able to bow naturally. And that was because through friends, relatives and media coverage, I observed that many people could better handle prosperity than adversity. They could live in harmony in favorable circumstances, but did not have peace of mind when conflicts occurred. Keeping the surrounding social atmosphere in mind, “harmony” was the only thought in my mind when I bowed, sincerely wishing peace and harmony for one and all.

As I was new to meditation at that time, I often experienced an uncontrolled flow of internal energy during periods of sitting meditation at home. My body

wouldn't stop shaking, and my head was swinging as if it was going to fly off. As a result I had no choice but to stop practicing. The next day, I went with a friend to pay a visit to his master at a temple in the Shuangxi District of Taipei City. His master told me, "You should go and join the seven-day meditation retreat at Nung Chan Monastery." Before that visit, I didn't know that Nung Chan Monastery existed, and I had never heard of Master Sheng Yen.

Towards the end of 1987 I made my first trip to Nung Chan Monastery and brought home the book *Orthodox Chinese Buddhism*. From then on, I would visit Nung Chan Monastery every Lunar New Year to buy some books and make a donation to the Monastery. I began to increase the frequency of my visits after I quit my job in late March 1991, and also because I wanted to concentrate on harmonizing my mind.

## A rainstorm helped me become a monk

Before I became a monastic my last job was in a toilet paper factory, as Assistant to the General Manager. I took

the job as a favor to the father of a classmate, and was in charge of logistics and warehouse management. It was initially a one-week assignment, but after a week or two my classmate's father asked me if I could help out long-term. I ended up working there for about four years. That was a wholesome seed that was previously planted, and that company has now been sponsoring the toilet rolls used by DDM for more than ten years.

Due to a setback that occurred on the job, I was filled with shame and regret. It was hard to get over that incident. I was also filled with many doubts about life, and felt the need to deal with them properly and harmonize my mind. So I left the job.

Following my resignation, I just happened to receive information on the Chan Meditation class and other activities of DDM's Keelung office. I don't normally join activities at organizations I'm unfamiliar with. But because I was thinking about harmonizing my mind I registered for the pilgrimage activity, which was to be held at the Dharma Drum Mountain Center. Due to a heavy

downpour on the evening of the activity, however, it was cancelled. At that point, there was only a Guanyin Hall on top of the mountain, positioned where the current Wish Fulfilling Guanyin Hall is. The cleared land surrounding the Guanyin Hall at that time was very small, and the car park was situated in the little outdoor garden so it wasn't very accessible to large tour buses.

When we were about to leave the Center, my car was blocked by a tour bus whose axle had fallen off. I had no choice but to spend the night on the mountain at the Center. That evening, two monks accompanied me and asked about my personal life, including things like my age, my job and marital status. I told them that I'd just left the career scene and wanted to spend some time taking care of my inner life. They asked if I had any plan to become a monk. Not giving it much thought, I replied with a question, "If I were to become a monk, what are some of the things I would need to prepare and be aware of?" That was the first time the thought of becoming a monk had crossed my mind.

## Devoting ourselves to benefitting others

The normal process of learning meditation at DDM begins with attending meditation class, followed by participation in other Chan practice activities. I, however, experienced the reverse, beginning with a three-day Chan retreat. One may wonder why I'd still need to go for meditation training after the three-day retreat. The reason was that due to the lack of basic Chan practice, it was an extremely painful three-day experience for me. My legs were extremely painful for all three days, right from day one. During the last five minutes of the last sitting meditation session of the retreat, I remember glancing at my watch three times, wondering how five minutes could possibly take so long. Immediately after the retreat, I decided to enroll in a meditation class and learn the basics of meditation from the beginning.

Even though I suffered during the three-day Chan retreat, the rewards were abundant. The experience also led me to think about seeking refuge. I had been rejecting advice to seek refuge by claiming that being good-hearted

was good enough. But after the retreat, I felt that if I still didn't take refuge, I'd be like a stranger at Nung Chan Monastery. In July that same year, I finally took refuge in the Three Jewels at Nung Chan Monastery and began to participate in volunteer activities there, followed by registering for the seven-day Chan retreat at the end of the year.

In those days, the twice-a-year, seven-day Chan retreats at Nung Chan Monastery were very popular, with limited space for applicants. Someone even told me that being a first-time applicant, I wouldn't be accepted. I responded that, "There's a first time for everything." And sure enough, I was lucky enough to be accepted. During an interview session at the retreat, I asked Master Sheng Yen, "How do I achieve three-point support during sitting meditation?" I asked because I had difficulty keeping my knees in contact with the floor because I'm rather large. Master Sheng Yen only gave me a short reply: "It's difficult!" I sensed that Shifu was trying to motivate me, so I decided that I would "Undertake the arduous, endure the unbearable, and take the practice one step at a time!"



The theme of that retreat was the “bodhi-mind,” and it left a lasting impression in my mind. Shifu said, “Bodhi mind means devoting ourselves to benefitting others.” I agreed that bodhi-mind has great significance, but I found that people were hesitant to put it into practice because they were overly concerned about other people’s opinions. My experience in fund raising was a good example of that. Shortly after I began to visit Nung Chan Monastery more frequently, I was encouraged to be a fund raiser. But due to a concern that other people might perceive me as doing it for my own self-interest, I didn’t take on that assignment. This is what Shifu meant by “overly concerned about other people’s opinions.” But he also said that fund raising must emphasize spreading the Dharma and reaching out to more people. The money that was raised was not for him, but for the construction of the monastery to promote DDM’s vision to “Uplift the character of humanity and purify people’s minds; build a pure land on earth and purify society.” Shifu’s Dharma talks were extremely useful in clearing up my doubts, and as soon as the retreat was over, I volunteered as a fund raiser.

A week after the seven-day Chan retreat, I thought about becoming a monk. Upon completion of the seven-day chanting retreat during the Tomb Sweeping Festival in 1992, that thought became even stronger, as it would facilitate spreading the Dharma to my family. One of the supporting factors was that during that time, there were very few monks at Nung Chan Monastery. I could thus increase the headcount of male disciples by one!

My mother was already a Buddhist and was extremely supportive of me becoming a monk. She said, “It will be a great blessing for me if you become a monk.” I was greatly touched by what she said! But my other family members objected. My father even implied that it was not very reputable by saying, “No one from the Yu family has ever become a monk!” Realizing that it would be difficult to change their view immediately, I could only tell my father, “The day will come when you’ll feel honored that I became a monastic.” Actually, I had always maintained healthy relationships with my family, and they objected because they couldn’t bear to part with me. But they all eventually respected and supported my decision. My

father even showed concern by asking, “How much money do you need to bring along?” My reply was, “Shifu told us not to bring any money, and that we should settle all financial matters before joining the monastic sangha.” If such matters are not settled they may be a distraction in spiritual cultivation and spreading the Dharma to benefit sentient beings, and may also undermine motivation due to the availability of a backup plan.

## Becoming a monk requires great determination

Before becoming a monk I had my doubts. I thought, “Is my idea to leave home and become a monk a case of right mindfulness, or just a delusion?” To clear up my doubts, I re-read the section entitled “The Significance and Objectives of Becoming a Monk” from Master Sheng Yen’s book *The Essentials of Buddhist Sila and Vinaya*. In that section, Shifu noted that while renunciation helps us to transcend samsara, renunciation alone is not enough to become a buddha. To achieve buddhahood, one must generate the bodhi-mind to help all sentient beings,

and that is the true meaning and purpose of becoming a monk. That further reinforced my determination to become a monk. I strongly identified with DDM's vision, spirit, direction and approach, and was deeply touched by the way Shifu promoted the Buddhadharma with such magnanimity and far-sightedness.

In July of 1992 when Shifu returned from the United States I was brought to meet him by a monastic, the Deputy Director-in-Chief. Shifu told me, "To become a monk, you have to be determined enough to go through hell. Only then can your body and mind abide in heaven or a Buddha-land. If your attitude is that one becomes a monk to enjoy life, your body and mind will definitely feel like they're in hell." He went on to say, "You're already a good bit older than the other novice monks, so you should forget about going to the Buddhist College or Institute of Buddhist Studies. There's enough for you to learn by staying in the monastic sangha." Shifu was preparing me, hoping that I would be amenable to on-the-job learning in the sangha. My success in joining the sangha was due to very rare causes and conditions. You see, I was 38 years

old when I joined, but a year later the entry age was set at 35 years or less! So if I would have come one year later, I wouldn't have been able to become a monk.

After being a postulant for one year, I was ordained at Nung Chan Monastery on September 15, 1993. A month before that, as Shifu's attendant, I drove him to a meeting near the Chung-Hwa Institute of Buddhist Culture. Even though Shifu clearly instructed me to use Wen Quan Road and park the car beside Level 2, I took the initiative to take a short cut that involved driving the wrong way, against traffic, for a short distance. When Shifu discovered what I was doing he asked me, "Guo Dong, didn't I tell you to take Wen Quan Road?" Just when I was about to explain, Shifu snapped at me, saying, "I don't want to hear it!" I immediately apologized, but Shifu just said, "Next time, you'll know better."

During the next hour or two while Shifu was in the meeting, I was in emotional turmoil, thinking about my unauthorized decision and Shifu's scolding. I decided that no matter what situation I encountered in the future, I

should ask for advice when necessary instead of keeping it to myself. After the meeting was over and we went back to the Institute, Shifu probably saw that I was still troubled by that incident. With great compassion, he said, “Guo Dong, let’s go back.” His tone was very gentle. While I was still repenting my mistake, Shifu immediately came to comfort me. What I learned from that good experience was that, when in doubt, seek advice or communicate at once. Better still, let go of the hindrance, and don’t get caught up in dead ends or create unnecessary vexations for yourself.

While I was a monastic postulant, working in the engineering team and handling the communications for maintenance and installation of utilities and engineering projects, during one of his breakfast Dharma talks Shifu told us that, “Working in a group, one should always voice their thoughts and opinions. But after that, whether your views are adopted or not, just let them go and move on without worries or obstructions in the mind. Letting go isn’t the same as giving up, thinking that it’s no longer your business anymore and ignoring subsequent action and follow-up. Letting go means releasing your attachments.

But the next time you have a good idea, you should still come out with it. Don't be discouraged because your views weren't accepted."

Before becoming a monk I had a strong personality and would argue with others if we couldn't communicate smoothly. But after becoming a monk, my temperament gradually improved and became softer. When I had just become a monk, Shifu also hoped that I would lose weight to improve my health. The following year when he returned from the United States, he saw that I had become slimmer, and still showed care and concern by asking about my health. Actually, besides my deliberate effort to lose weight, the daily routine in the sangha also had an unexpected added effect.

After becoming a monk, I assigned myself an additional task. While the wake-up call at Nung Chan Monastery came at ten minutes past four in the morning, I normally woke up at half past three and went to the main hall to prostrate to the Buddha statues and memorize the Shurangama Mantra. Before joining the monastic sangha, I participated

in group practices at the Chung-Hwa Institute of Buddhist Culture. During one of the practices involving chanting the Shurangama Mantra, I couldn't keep up with the group even with the sutra booklet in front of me. So I vowed to memorize that text, which I accomplished in four months.

## Promoting Buddhist end-of-life care services and funerals

In 1995 on the fourth day of the first lunar month, as Shifu's attendant, I accompanied him to a group service for Chinese New Year held at the Neng Ren Home Economics and Commercial Vocational High School in Xindian (a district of New Taipei City). The service was organized by the Buddhist Association of the Republic of China. As Shifu was having a discussion with the elders, the Director-in-Chief came and talked to me about the End-of-Life Caring Group. The Monastic Advisor of the Caring Group at that time was a female monastic, and the Director-in-Chief expressed a concern, saying, "There are numerous inconveniences for a female venerable to handle end-of-life caring requests at night. What if we have a



male venerable instead?” I replied, “Considering the safety issues when providing end-of-life care in the evening, a male venerable is indeed more appropriate.” He then asked me, “Could you take that role?” When the gathering was over, Shifu asked me, “Guo Dong, did the Director-in-Chief discuss things with you? I’m sure you will be able to do a good job.” There were no other thoughts in my mind at that moment. I was just deeply thankful that Shifu and the sangha had given me a learning opportunity.” Shifu had previously said that, “When one is assigned any task by the sangha, one must treat it as a sacred duty, and vow to learn how to take responsibility.” So naturally, I said I was willing, and also expressed my gratitude to the sangha for giving me a chance to learn.

After accepting the role as Monastic Advisor for the End-of-Life Caring Group, I began to visit various locations throughout Taiwan to provide caring services and increase my understanding. Early on, there weren’t many lay volunteers in the Caring Group. But the Group’s non-stop, twenty-four hour operating mode had already had an impact on the volunteers’ normal everyday lives.

Thus, given our limited human resources, we made adjustments in how we delivered caring services. I also realized that when lay volunteers were unable to provide service at night, at least there must be some way to help family members of the deceased conduct end-of-life Buddha-chanting services by themselves. In response to the situation, the “*DDM Care Ritual Handbook*,” as well as Buddha-recitation and chanting for caring services cassette tapes were successively rolled out.

During that period we also began to promote Buddhist-style end-of-life care and funerals. Previously, the public had the impression that Buddhism mainly dealt with chanting sutras and reciting the Buddha’s name. The public was confused about Buddhist funerals because they often added folk customs including wearing heavy mourning garments and burning “ritual money.” Given the situation, we put on our thinking caps to find a way to promote correct Chinese Buddhism without affecting folk beliefs. Shifu once said that there were reasons why folk beliefs had developed into their present forms. DDM’s aim was to promote the spirit and intentions of the Buddhadharma

such as non-extravagance and non-wastefulness, simplify unnecessary and overly elaborate formalities, emphasize environmental protection, and foster a simple, warm, solemn and peaceful atmosphere. So when providing caring services, we had to have effective communication with the family members to gain mutual understanding.

“Caring Service” takes various formats. If the family members share DDM’s philosophy, we take the lead. Otherwise, we don’t force things, because we don’t want our caring services to become a burden for the family. I used to share with lay Buddhists that a grand ceremony relies more on the sense of involvement of the participants rather than ostentation. We needed to master the principle of providing caring services with sincerity using a soft and harmonious approach. While following guiding principles, we also needed to be flexible to adapt to the different needs of every individual. It’s also very important to communicate with the family members in advance.

Shifu repeatedly reminded us that the objectives for all activities organized by DDM must include “caring,”

and that they must also serve an educational function. In the process of building up the DDM organization, end-of-life caring services were a key contributing factor in gaining more support. Some people said that providing caring services doesn't necessarily mean that we would gain support. When they said that, I would share with them a teaching from Shifu: "Conduct caring services with a pure heart." The key is to provide good, appropriate caring services and promote our vision so that everybody understands the philosophy and methodology of Buddhist-style funerary offerings. Whether they support DDM or not becomes secondary. If they are moved by the Buddhist services, they will surely support DDM.

## All things radiate light and expound the Dharma

From 1995 through the year 2000 I learned a great deal from being in the End-of-Life Caring Group. In the year 2000 I was fortunate enough to participate in a 49 Day Chan Retreat that Shifu led at the Dharma Drum Retreat Center in New York, USA. In one of his Dharma talks

during the retreat, Shifu said, “All the myriad phenomena in the universe radiate light and expound the Dharma. What kind of light are they radiating? It’s the light of compassion and wisdom. What kind of Dharma are they expounding? They’re expounding the dependently arising dharma of impermanence, no-self, and emptiness.” Take the Dharma Drum Retreat Center as an example. One day after an afternoon thunderstorm, the water and electricity were cut off because power cables snapped after being hit by a big tree that fell. A truck was sent in that night to clear away the fallen tree. By the next day, the power line was repaired, and everything was back to normal.

Shifu explained that that situation demonstrated “dependent arising, impermanence, no-self, and emptiness.” All causes and conditions are ever-changing, just like practice. If we can’t experience the impermanence of causes and conditions, as well as the emptiness of no-self, then attachments will arise, which is like going looking for unnecessary vexations. For practitioners, every single thought presents an opportunity to help us experience impermanence and no-self. The lack of such awareness will

result in vexations and obstructions due to ignorance.

## Grateful for opportunities to learn to be accountable

After returning from the United States I became the Monastic Advisor for the Dharma Drum Mountain Fellowship, and later the Managing Director of the Bhikshu Sangha.

For all those years, my practice was mainly carried out in daily life. During my interactions with lay volunteers, I stayed mindful of my actions, speech and thoughts to adjust, repent and eliminate my bad habits.

In May of 2005 Shifu instructed me to attend a ten-day Chan retreat at the Dharma Drum Retreat Center in New York, USA. That retreat helped me a great deal, as I came to a deeper realization about the phrase: “There is no essential difference between the nature of mind, buddhas, and sentient beings.” While sentient beings often generate vexations due to ignorance, they still possess the pure

Buddha-nature. At any moment when their minds are pure, there is no difference between them and the complete wisdom of their Buddha-nature.

I also realized that when somebody is worried, trapped by vexations, we should reflect on whether we ourselves can learn to accommodate them instead of complaining, criticizing or being unsympathetic. My thinking is that if somebody is already vexed, we should at least learn to be considerate, even if we can't offer help. Whenever a benevolent thought arises spontaneously, wish them well. Shifu once said that no matter how many evil acts someone has committed, we must still harbor good thoughts about them, wish them well, and hope that they will turn over a new leaf and do more good deeds.

On August 31, 2006, as instructed by Master Sheng Yen, the monastic sangha's General Assembly passed procedural rules for selecting DDM's Abbot President. Shifu told all the monastics that, "No one should think 'It's best if it's not me.' And don't think, 'It should be me.' No matter who it is, everyone must vow to learn to be

accountable for roles assigned by Shifu and the Sangha.” Shifu then announced the nominee for the next Abbot President in the Sangha General Assembly. Other than silently reciting “Guanshiyin Pusa” (Avalokiteshvara Boddhisatva), there were no other thoughts in my mind. I was deeply thankful that the sangha had given me this opportunity to learn to be accountable and serve. On September 2, the succession ceremony for the second Abbot President of Dharma Drum Mountain was successfully completed. Shifu was very kind to let me move into the Abbot’s quarters that very day, while he himself temporarily moved into the guest quarters. Even for the sitting arrangements in the dining hall, the newly appointed Abbot President took the host’s seat while Shifu joined the rest of the sangha. Leading by example, Shifu’s intention was to build up the monastic system.

To shorten my learning cycle, Shifu gave me a personal tour of the Abbot’s quarters and taught me how to fulfill the duties of an Abbot President. He told me that I needed to have a broad mind and far reaching vision. He prepared me mentally by adding, “It’s inevitable that



others will compare you to Shifu. No need to worry. Just ask people not to keep putting you to the test.” He then reminded me to proactively visit and offer care to all of our global affiliates. In 2007 when I returned from my trip to render care and guidance in Singapore, even though Shifu was in a hospital intensive care unit for a medical check-up, he didn’t stop offering his kind guidance. He taught me how to balance my behavior in various situations, and avoid unnecessary socializing and banquets while attending activities at appropriate times. He admonished me to use the Dharma to benefit all sentient beings, to guide and lead the public through caring.

## Continuing Shifu’s vows, transmitting the light of Dharma

Looking back on my Dharma learning path, I am deeply grateful to Shifu! I strongly believe everyone in the monastic and lay sangha is very thankful for Shifu’s teachings. Especially after Shifu passed away, the spirit of “continuing Shifu’s vows and transmitting the light of Dharma from generation to generation,” as demonstrated

by the lay Dharma supporters, left a lasting impression. Before his demise, Shifu had explained that the DDM organization is guided by its vision. At the same time, as long as DDM's monastic and lay sangha can uphold the organization's vision, spirit, direction and approach, integrating internal and external resources and staying updated on social changes, DDM will survive and make developmental breakthroughs. This is what we should all devote our efforts to, everyone working together. Of course, as the organization makes progress it always needs to strike a balance between stable growth and innovative breakthroughs, requiring numerous discussions between multiple parties before reaching a consensus. To this end, on behalf of the monastic sangha, I would like to express our appreciation for the care and support rendered by all of our lay followers.

In the book *Take Chan to Work with You*, Shifu mentioned six essential conditions for building a harmonious team and achieving consensus. That was actually the Six Essential Operating Principles that Shifu shared during the Sangha Development Camp in the early days: adhere

to your principles, authorize full empowerment, respect others, care for others, communicate proactively, and conduct self-criticism often. Last but not least, let me share the Eight Forces with you: “Do your utmost, give your best effort considering the existing conditions, transform stress into a helpful force, foster group cohesion, show vitality, derive strength from your vows, and encourage each other and strive to excel.”

*(Talk delivered on March 10, 2010  
at the Sheng Yen Education Foundation)*



## **Learning from Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva**

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Venerable Guo Hui

*Master Sheng Yen used to say that when I don't smile, I look serious and unapproachable. He taught me to look into the mirror more often, and emulate the smile and compassion of Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva. Start with facial expression, then speech, and gradually your attitude will change. Practice often, and it will become internalized. This is also the practice of contemplating loving-kindness and compassion.*

## **Introducing the Speaker**

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### **Venerable Guo Hui**

Ordained in 1985, one of the earliest male monastics at Dharma Drum Mountain ordained under Master Sheng Yen, Venerable Guo Hui formerly served as Secretary of Nung Chan Monastery, Master Sheng Yen's personal attendant, Monastic Advisor for the Meditation Group and the Office of Works, and Director-in-Chief of Nung Chan Monastery. In 1997 the Venerable went to Japan for further studies. He obtained his masters and doctorate degrees from Rissho University in 2000 and 2005, respectively, and then returned to Taiwan and has served as the Dean of the Buddhist College, Dharma Drum Sangha University. Venerable Guo Hui is currently the Vice-Abbot of DDM as well as the Director of the Department of Buddhist Studies, Undergraduate Programs, at Dharma Drum Buddhist College.

I come from a farming family in Tounan village, Yunlin County, Taiwan. Both my grandparents and parents are farmers, and I majored in Agricultural Science at the university. While my parents anticipated that I would join them upon graduation, instead I went straight to compulsory military service, followed by becoming a monk at Nung Chan Monastery. They were obviously disappointed! When I expressed my intention to enter the monkhood they disagreed initially, but they eventually accepted it.

## A vivid sense of “birth, aging, sickness and death”

I have been a bookworm since childhood, but from high school onward I began to ponder over philosophical questions related to life such as: Where do humans come from? Is there life after death? What is the purpose of life? During my university days, I never stopped pondering these questions, and I was more interested in them than in the subjects I was studying.

During my sophomore year at the university I had my first contact with religion. I joined a devoted Christian classmate to attend church and participate in the Christian fellowship and Bible study. After continuing for a period of time, one day, I suddenly lost interest in the theory of the Bible. I then had the opportunity to read the story of how Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva became enlightened and the book *The Spirit and Characteristics of Buddhism*, which drastically changed my understanding of Buddhism.

My initial contact with Buddhism coincided with a period in which my grandfather fell ill and passed away. After contracting a lung disease, he suffered terrible pain right up until he died. It was his suffering that gave me a vivid experience of the reality of birth, old age, illness and death. Many friends also passed away during those few years due to accidents and suicides. All these personal experiences served to impel me towards Buddhism. After reading some books about Buddhism, I found that the Buddhadharmā's principles are deep and profound. In addition to being a religious belief, Buddhism is founded on a rational and scientific philosophy of life. Life as



described by the Buddhadharmā encompasses the timeless and immeasurable universe, and all sentient beings. Buddhadharmā not only resolved my doubts about life, but is also the religious philosophy that most thoroughly addresses the most fundamental aspects of life.

These causes and conditions led me to join National Taiwan University's Chen Xi Buddhist Society (also known as "NTU Sunrise"), as well as the Eight Precepts Society at the Lien Yin Temple in Nantou County. NTU Sunrise was a nexus of information for the Buddhist community, and I found out about a seven-day Chan retreat at the Chung-Hwa Institute of Buddhist Culture in Beitou. I was still studying at National Taiwan University, whose close proximity to the Chung-Hwa Institute helped me draw closer to Shifu. After completing the seven-day Chan retreat led by Shifu, I felt that Chan meditation was truly extraordinary. But my first seven-day Chan experience was nothing but pain in my legs. The pain lasted from the first sitting session all the way through the last session. Shifu also watched with a sharp eye, so much so that it seemed like he could read all our minds and nothing could escape

his notice. That made me nervous.

While serving in the military we had a vacation every three months, but I didn't go home. Instead, I went to the Chung-Hwa Institute to participate in seven-day Chan retreats. As time passed, my desire to enter the monkhood got stronger. So after completing my military service I went straight to Nung Chan Monastery. After a year as a postulant, I became an ordained monk in 1985. My first assignment after becoming a monk began with growing vegetables, which appeared to fit nicely into what I had studied. Thereafter I worked in general affairs, disciplinary affairs, as a personal attendant, and as Monastic Advisor for the Project Services Office and the Meditation Group. In 1991 Shifu sent Venerable Guo Yuan and me to travel to Wat Phra Dhammakaya in Thailand for a one-year learning experience. Upon our return, I became the Director-in-Chief of Nung Chan Monastery.

## Grateful to Shifu for supporting further study in Japan

Shifu was always educating and grooming me during my stay at Nung Chan Monastery, including sending me to Japan for further studies in 1997. I was given a choice to pursue a higher degree in Japan or the United States. After comparing the English and Japanese languages, I picked Japan because their language is more similar to Chinese. Many Chinese characters are also found in the Japanese language, so it was not totally new.

I started off as a graduate student in Japan in the first year, and successfully enrolled in the master's program at Rissho University in the second year. As I had learned some basic Japanese before my trip, I underestimated how difficult the language is. The reality was that while I was able to read part of the texts, listening and speaking were a different animal altogether, and I couldn't communicate. So I ended up playing catch-up by taking extra Japanese classes every morning before attending graduate school classes in the afternoon. Year two saw speedier improvement in my

Japanese ability through frequent consultations with my lecturers and fellow classmates. I later learned two more languages, Sanskrit and Tibetan. I learned Sanskrit from Shifu's good friend, Professor Kenyo Mitomo. I also spent five years at a Tibetan Buddhist Centre, where I studied their language.

Upon obtaining a master's degree from Rissho University in 2000, I planned to return to Taiwan but Shifu encouraged me to continue my studies. Spring of 2005 saw the founding of Dharma Drum Mountain, as well as the completion of my doctorate degree. In August that same year Shifu travelled to the Oigo Works in Japan to inspect and accept the Lotus Bell. I joined Shifu in Tokyo and accompanied him on the trip, after which we returned to Taiwan together. It was obvious that my graduate studies in Japan were made possible by Shifu's efforts.

Upon returning to Taiwan, Shifu recommended me for my first job as a teacher in the Department of Applied Foreign Languages at Asia University in the Wufeng District of Taichung City. Thereafter I was also Dean of the

Buddhist Seminary of Dharma Drum Sangha University for a year. After Dharma Drum Buddhist College was founded I spent a year as the Director of the Preparatory Office for the Department of Buddhist Studies. After the merger of the Buddhist Studies Department and the Chung-Hwa Institute of Buddhist Studies I became the Director of the Undergraduate Program, where I continue to serve today. In September of 2006 Shifu identified 12 dharma heirs, including me, and Venerable Guo Pin and I became Vice Abbots.

## Carrying out Shifu's teachings

Following Shifu for so many years, I learned a lot from him. His teachings are readily available in *The Complete Works of Master Sheng Yen*, which includes over 100 books. As Shifu said in his book *The World of Chan*, when he re-joined the monkhood, he told Master Dong Chu that “I want to be a monk who knows his place well, and will never disappoint you nor do a disservice to Buddhism.” His teacher, Master Dong Chu, responded by saying, “You shouldn't say that. It should be the other way around: Just

don't do a disservice to yourself, or do anything that makes you feel disappointed in yourself." Shifu thus realized that, "Master Dong Chu is just pointing out a path, and teaching you how to traverse that path. But if you want to take that path, your forward progress, step by step, depends on your own efforts. Walking your own path requires perseverance, endurance and time, as well as a down-to-earth approach." Although those words came from Shifu's own experience, they also apply to us, teachings that are richly profound. It would be a shame if we didn't apply them, and fulfill the path that Shifu showed us.

You all have your own families and jobs, so sometimes you may be busy and forget to practice. But spiritual practice is a personal matter, and the people around you can't help. As for me, even though every day is busy, both morning and evening I still attend services and do sitting meditation. Just as Shifu said, if we make cultivation a priority, there will be time for it. We all need to eat and wash up every day because these activities are part of our daily routine, and to be responsible for ourselves is to treat cultivation as part of that daily routine. Cultivation isn't

limited to sitting meditation, and there are various forms, but the most important factor is to persevere and maintain a daily practice.

In his book *The Chan Practice of Silent Illumination*, Shifu tells us that first and foremost, all Buddhists must have a sense of gratitude. They should be grateful for their parents, teachers, all sentient beings and their country, and most of all—for the Three Jewels. Without the Three Jewels, there would be no Buddhadharma to hear, no Buddhadharma to practice. The concepts and methods of the Buddhadharma have been passed down for generations. Today we have the Dharma Drum Lineage of Chan Buddhism, created by Shifu by integrating the essential and unique features of Chinese Buddhism with the strengths of other major Buddhist traditions. So we should be forever grateful to Shifu. Gratitude is both a necessary concept for all Buddhists, as well as a critical foundation for cultivation.

Shifu once said that monastics are the core of any group that spreads the Dharma, so we should be thankful

for the Three Jewels that spread and transmit the Dharma. The “Lotus Sutra” also states that we should be grateful to anyone who spreads the Dharma, as long as they’re transmitting the Dharma as spoken by the Buddha. DDM has carried out many important projects both inside and outside the organization that would have been impossible with only the monastic sangha, and were only completed with the help of our lay practitioners. The monastic and lay members of Dharma Drum Mountain have promoted learning about, spreading, and upholding the Dharma with a common vision, direction and objectives, and that’s why all of you should be respected and appreciated.

Shifu also urged us to generate great compassion. Buddhist practitioners who are unable to do that will see limited success. Before generating great compassion, we must first let go of self-attachment and selfishness. When we do that, we will no longer feel antagonism or hatred, will not harm, doubt or show envy towards any individual or sentient being. Instead, we’ll treat others with tolerance, empathy, sympathy, impartiality and care. This is especially true for Chan practitioners, as a mind of great



compassion is a prerequisite for seeing your original face, your true nature. The plaque in DDM's Grand Buddha Hall is inscribed with Chinese characters that say "Original Face," while the theme of DDM's official founding was "The Rising Great Compassion." These are all doctrines that Shifu held dear. Compassion can be trained slowly over time. Take me as an example. Shifu used to say that when I wasn't smiling, I looked serious and unapproachable. He taught me to look in the mirror more, and emulate the smile and compassion of Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva. Start with facial expression, then speech, and gradually the attitude will change. Do that often and it will become internalized. This is also training in "contemplating compassion."

## Let go of forms, generate mind without attachments

Shifu also taught us the right attitude towards Chan meditation—we should let go of all forms and set aside all affairs. That means not being attached to any phenomena. As the *Diamond Sutra* says, we should

“generate mind without attachments.” That means that although phenomena do exist, we should learn to avoid being attached to them. The more unattached we are, the happier and more cheerful our life will be. Everyday life has many vexations, which are often a result of judgments, distinctions and evaluations based on our past experiences and general knowledge. As long as we use the discriminating mind, we’ll make comparisons such as good versus bad, large versus small, and high versus low. These are all vexations. The nature of all phenomenon is impermanent, and unreal. But this is not clear to most people.

If we can see at a deeper level or think about processes in reverse, we can treat vexations as opportunities for cultivation and see adverse situations as opportunities for further advancement. That way we’ll suffer less, and then go on to transform suffering into wisdom and joy.

As I said earlier, the first time I participated in a seven-day Chan retreat I was in pain the whole time. While that pain was obviously a vexation, the fact that I chose to

accept it helped me endure till the end of the retreat. It was just as Shifu had said: “Face it, accept it, deal with it, and then let it go.” Things that can’t be resolved immediately can also be handled by just calmly waiting. Since change is the only constant, with the passage of time causes and conditions will be different, as will the availability of a solution. Shifu also said to “be busy but happy, and tired but joyful.” Physical tiredness will not be an issue as long as the mind is healthy.

Shifu’s books have also had a far-reaching impact, especially *Orthodox Chinese Buddhism*, whose broad influence can be seen not just in Taiwan, but in mainland China, South Asia, and throughout Chinese communities around the world. Many have come to know what correct Buddhist faith is through that book. Without correct views, it’s easy to go astray when learning about the Dharma and practicing Chan cultivation. So Shifu’s book has great merit, and he encourages us to practice the Buddhadharmā in our daily life. That kind of practice helps us, but also gives the people we interact with a friendly and gentle feeling, always welcome among Buddhists.

## Gentle, kind, compassionate, unconfined by forms

Some people say that Master Sheng Yen was very strict in teaching his monastic disciples. Actually, Shifu's teaching style was more gentle, kind and compassionate. Although sometimes he was strict, it was all based on his vow to benefit his disciples. Even when Shifu yelled at disciples who made mistakes, he was actually offering wisdom and compassionate guidance. It was much like the ancient masters of the Chan school who would physically strike and shout at disciples, energetic and forceful. These are the teaching methods and skills of Chan masters. Shifu's teaching style, however, also had a lighter side. He could be warm, gentle and humorous, much like Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva who has manifested in innumerable forms, and is not limited to a single form.

Shifu led us to do many significant things for society, a concrete realization of DDM's vision to "Uplift the character of humanity and build a pure land on earth." We must continue to promote these meaningful activities in

the future. Shifu spent his entire life spreading Chinese Chan Buddhism, and even founded the Dharma Drum Lineage of Chan Buddhism in his old age. He told us that Dharma Drum Mountain is both a Guanyin (Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva) temple, as well as a Chan temple. Even more, DDM is a home base for Chinese Chan Buddhism. Shifu also investigated and digested multiple schools of Chinese Buddhism. He studied the Tiantai School in depth and wrote *The Heart of Tiantai: Annotated Translation and Commentary of the Essential Principle of Doctrine and Contemplation*. He also explored the Huayan School (Skt. *Avatamsaka*) and wrote the *Heart of Huayan Teachings: Commentary on the Origins of Humanity*. Shifu often said that Chinese Buddhism is broad and rich, and worthy of our in-depth exploration. That makes it even more important for us to develop and share it for generations to come.

In his later years, though he was seriously ill and required operations and dialysis, as long as he was physically able, Shifu still often gave Dharma talks to the monastic sangha and lay believers, and showed concern

for one and all. His vow of compassion led him to offer his life till the very last moment. While Shifu's physical body has left us, his reality-body and wisdom life will be with us forever. It's just like when Shakyamuni Buddha was about to enter nirvana 2,600 years ago, and his disciples around him wept. But the Buddha told them to take the Dharma and the precepts as their guiding teachers. Similarly, Shifu's passing is also teaching us that we should let go of all our attachments, because the quietude that comes with the extinction of afflictions is true joy.

Everyone will experience birth, old age, illness and death, as our physical life is limited. No one knows when impermanence will take our life away, but as long as one is still breathing, one should let oneself and other people live a peaceful, healthy and joyous life. The study and practice of the Buddhadharma will enable us to create these mutual benefits. Shifu often said, "The Buddhadharma is so good, yet so few people know about it." So while we study and practice the Buddhadharma, we must share it as well. But we need to practice to experience its benefits. So I hope that you, bodhisattvas all, will both study and practice the

Buddhadharma, and then go on to uphold, support and spread it.

*(Talk delivered on October 21, 2009  
at the Sheng Yen Education Foundation)*





# Using Chan to Teach Compassion, Wisdom, and No-Self

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Venerable Guo Xing

*Upon meeting anyone, Chan Master Sheng Yen  
would think: From interacting with me,  
how can they benefit?*

*In the past, the reason behind this thinking escaped me.  
Nor did I think about whether I could do that.*

*But now, if I don't think that way,  
it must be because of selfishness.*

## **Introducing the Speaker**

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### **Venerable Guo Xing**

Venerable Guo Xing was ordained in 1986, and is currently the Resident Abbot of the Chan Meditation Center and the Dharma Drum Retreat Center in New York. Since his ordination, all of his duties have been closely related to Chan practice. Having practiced under Master Sheng Yen for over 20 years, Ven. Guo Xing learned Shifu's teaching methods. Whether practicing in the meditation hall or dealing with people and situations every day, he takes the attitude of no-self as his starting point so that he can truly benefit people.

I have a rather reclusive personality. Before I was ordained, I usually watched movies and hiked in the mountains alone. I did most things solo. Now, as I think about my past, this type of personality is indeed suitable for a monastic. My photo in my high school yearbook has me sitting in meditation, and the caption says, “Amitufo.” Actually, at that time, I didn’t know what “practice” meant. Although I had vague yearnings for spiritual practice, I found little information about it.

## Pondering impermanence

The causes and conditions that led me to learn about Buddhism and be ordained are all related to Chan practice. The duties that I took on after I was ordained were also directly related to the practice. I was the Monastic Advisor for the Meditation Group for a long time, and also studied meditation in Thailand. Thereafter my duties at the Chan Practice Center of the Meditation Activity Department, at the Dharma Drum Mountain Chan Hall, and now in the two dharma centers in New York, are all intimately related to Chan practice.

I initially wanted to learn about Chan for many reasons. I was an expert in Chinese chess, and was able to play without a chess board by just calling out the moves for the chess pieces. At any one time, I could think about seventeen steps ahead. Chinese chess players all say that everything has a sticking point, and it never depends on luck. At that time I was in a relationship that wasn't going smoothly, and I wanted to know what past conditions had caused that situation. That was one of my motivations for learning Chan. Other reasons included my deteriorating chess skills, and poor health.

From the time I was exposed to meditation, I was a very diligent learner. Before I attended my first seven-day meditation retreat at Nung Chan Monastery, I had already been meditating for six hours every day for about a month. That included sitting for about two hours at home in the morning, finding time at work to sit for an hour or two, and then sitting about two hours after work.

At that time I was working and wanted to earn money. I manned a street stall, and drove a taxi, and realized that

earning money requires good fortune. The Chairman of the Formosa Plastics Group, Wang Yung-ching, was talking about the principle of sustaining business operations for a period of 30 years. I wanted to do the same, and find a business that could sustain operations for 30 years. For a while I drove a little van, thinking that I would work, and at the same time look for better opportunities. But a young colleague of mine had drowned while swimming, which made me feel that life is impermanent. So I really started to think about things. I was prepared to work hard for thirty years. But if such “impermanence” struck in the twenty-ninth year of hard work, just when I was near success, it wouldn’t be worth it. Or if I did work hard for 30 years and succeed, by that time I would already be 60 years old. At that age, if I still wasn’t successful despite my hard work, that would make the whole thing even more futile. And even if I was going to be successful to earn recognition and respect from other people, I would have to take on some jobs that I don’t enjoy. Is that worth it?

“Impermanence” can strike at any time. Should my life be just birth, education and training, getting

married, bringing up kids, having a career and eventually death? Why do humans come into this world? What is the meaning of life? Our founding father, Sun Yat-sen said, “The purpose of life is to serve others.” Former President Chiang Kai-shek said, “The meaning of life is to create and sustain subsequent lives in the universe.” But these were not the answers that I was looking for. It wasn’t until I went to Nung Chan Monastery to seek guidance and learn about Buddhism that I discovered that only Buddhism can give me the answers. That’s because Buddhist teachings span previous, current and future lives. Learning about Buddhism confirmed that I wanted to be on the path of practice in this life, and didn’t intend to get married.

## Resolving doubts about becoming a monastic

In the beginning, when I first started learning about Buddhism, the first sutra that I acquired was the *Flower Ornament Sutra*. But at that time, I didn’t understand it. While I also liked the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* and the *Shurangama Sutra*, my understanding was limited.

I only understood two phrases from the *Platform Sutra*: “Do not think of good, do not think of evil,” and my own understanding is “do not favor what is good, do not detest what is evil.” After reading the *Shurangama Sutra*, I was totally convinced, and felt that the realms of hell and heaven are within the mind, not outside of it.

After I sought guidance at Nung Chan Monastery, I attended activities there every Sunday. Later on someone told Shifu that I wanted to be ordained. One day Shifu asked me whether I was thinking of becoming a monk. I said no, and that I was planning to be a lay practitioner. At that time I had a blind-spot about becoming a monk, but I didn't express it. Shifu appeared to understand my mind, what I was thinking, and said, “While monastics provide Dharma teachings and lay people provide offerings, this is not some kind of exchange.” Shifu's words resolved the question in my mind. That was because although I had thought about becoming a monk, my mind always harbored doubt: “What do I have that would make people give offerings?” Shifu's clarification allowed me to let go of that concern.

My mother knew that I wanted to become a monk and was worried. She came to Nung Chan Monastery and wanted Shifu to advise me not to be ordained. Shifu said, “My advice is useless. It’s best that you advise your son yourself!” But I’m not the kind of person who can be swayed after I’ve made a decision. So my mother was very worried, and said that I’m heartless. But I didn’t change my ambition. It’s probably because I have this kind of personality that I was able to become a monk. I moved into Nung Chan Monastery in 1986 and was ordained the following year.

## Do not favor the good, do not detest the evil

Before I was ordained I had a rather romanticized idea, and assumed that after I became a monk I would be able to do sitting meditation for six or ten hours every day. But I discovered that after handling the tasks that I was responsible for, there wasn’t even two hours a day left for sitting meditation. When I was just ordained, Nung Chan Monastery only had an inner sanctuary, with no outer hall.



There was also no kitchen or new meditation hall, and all these areas were part of my duties. When I decided to be ordained I told myself, “Do not favor what is good, do not detest what is evil.” This belief helped me a lot. I was willing to do anything that the monastic community required. I was busy and tired, but I worked with joy. At that time I was responsible for cooking breakfast, managing vehicles, and cleaning in the morning. As Nung Chan Monastery was surrounded by a bamboo forest, the ground was covered with bamboo leaves. Now when I think back, these processes nurtured blessings. One time I fell from the second story when I was supervising work, and both my hands were injured. So for some time I needed to be fed three meals a day, as I wasn’t able to feed myself. I still keep a photo from that time. I looked full of dharma bliss and whole-heartedly accepted the reality of the situation.

I’ve been very busy since the day I was ordained, but I’ve been thinking, “Do not favor what is good, do not detest what is evil” the whole time. When I was assigned to the United States, my approach remained the same. The Abbot President had asked Shifu whether or not to

discuss this assignment with me. Shifu said that wouldn't be necessary, "He will go anywhere that he's asked to go." Actually, I still have expectations in mind, but my approach is, "Do not favor what is good, do not detest what is evil." This attitude dissolves my ego, and I feel that this approach is quite useful.

After I was ordained, I encouraged myself to be in the state of mind of a seven-day meditation retreat every second of every day. However, I now understand that the most important aspect of the practice is the wisdom perspective. The initial phase of Chan practice is to count breaths, and bring the attention to the breath and body sensations. These practices are used to calm the mind, but Chan cultivation is about wisdom. Shifu said the present state is emptiness, and when I first heard that I couldn't understand. I studied the *Agama Sutra*, which talks about no-self, and that form is not the self, not what I possess, and form and the self don't exist in each other. But I couldn't understand. When I discussed the Buddha's wisdom with other people, I thought the Buddha's ability to undergo myriad transformations was really great.

I misunderstood, and thought that such supernatural powers are wisdom, and couldn't understand the concept of no-self no matter how hard I studied.

I had thought that my character was warm and gentle. It was only after I joined the monastic sangha that I realized my interactions with other people were less than exemplary. This is the best environment for practice, as I have to adapt my philosophy and attitude to these people, these activities, and the environment. I finally realized that all vexations come from attachment to the self. Throughout this process, Shifu's guidance and teachings enable us to use Chan practices to dissolve the self, the ego.

For a disciple like me, Shifu's teachings and guidance were very direct. He once said to me, "Guo Xing, if nobody asks you for advice, don't express your opinion. If someone asks you for advice, don't refrain from giving your suggestions. But after you express your opinion, don't expect it to be adopted." What lies behind that statement? It's "no-self." Ever since Shifu said that, I've remembered it.

I studied and practiced Buddhism with the Master for over 20 years, and feel that the compassion and wisdom that the Buddhadharma emphasizes are really wonderful! If we have some realization about compassion and wisdom, looking back, we see that we were only able to do that because of Shifu's teachings to his disciples. He could scold someone, but then in the twinkling of an eye, flash a smile. And behind it all was his compassion and wisdom in educating and guiding us based on the circumstances and conditions at that moment.

One time Shifu scolded me in front of everyone, and a layperson felt sad for me for several days. I asked them, "Why are you sad?" Only a skillful person gets to enjoy that kind of treatment from Shifu. Actually, saying that my mind remained completely unmoved when Shifu scolded me would be disingenuous. However, I did observe my mind to see whether it wavered or not. Sometimes, it would waver, and it seemed like more blood flowed to my face. But a few seconds later, it didn't matter. My meditation practice allows my mind to remain unmoved. Now my idea is that if I harbor the thought that, "Shifu

scolded Guo Xing,” then there’s been no realization of emptiness. As long as the mind still thinks about “me” and “you” there’s a subject-object duality, and “external objects” perceived by the mind. To me, these are vexations, although at a very fine level. If you scold me and my mind remains calm, that’s an expression of skillfulness. That skill enables you to be happy. But from the perspective of Chan cultivation, this is just the removal of gross vexations.

## Generosity based on no-self

From the perspective of enlightenment, there is no Buddha and there are no sentient beings. As Master Yongjia said, “In the dream there are clearly six paths for sentient beings. After enlightenment, all is emptiness.” Without the concept of no-self, many things basically cannot be handled well, and compassion that lacks the wisdom of no-self can only be considered to be in the process of learning about compassion. For example, I hope all sentient beings will be happy. But that notion entails an “I” hoping that all beings are happy. That means you (subject) have a choice, and sentient beings (object)

are specified. Regardless whether it's making offerings or cultivation, without the concept of no-self, everything is subject to choice, and then there's no way to go beyond what the Chan tradition calls "subject-object dualism."

Instead, Shifu's teachings for his disciples are all based on the perspective of no-self. When Shifu met anyone, he would consider what benefits that person would derive. In the past I didn't know the reasoning behind that consideration, and didn't think about whether I could also do it. But now, if I'm not thinking that way, the reason is simply selfishness. During Shifu's childhood, bananas were hard to come by. But if he had one, he would happily take it to school and share it with his classmates. In the past, I might not have done that. But in the more than 10 years since I became a monk, I've gradually changed my attitude.

One time when I was washing my robes I found the robes of another monk in the spin dryer. I thought to myself, "That person is not mindful and forgot to retrieve his robes." So I took out his robes and put them aside. When I said "that person is not mindful," I didn't see my

own vexations, and didn't realize that the object of my scolding was the robes. I perceived the robes as a person, and while I was talking about the person, I was actually scolding the robes. After a while, I discovered that I was wrong, because the robes had triggered a little hatred in my mind. I thought that the other person wasn't mindful, and that was a hateful thought.

*The Heart Sutra* says that "form is emptiness." I didn't treat the robes of another person as my own, and that is dualistic thinking. If I face that situation again I won't discriminate. I'll take out the robes and hang them to dry. From that process, I practiced dissolving my concept of self. At the age of seven, Shifu thought that he should share with people, but I only realized that when I was over forty. If not for that process, I would forever be thinking dualistically, making a distinction between myself and sentient beings, which is like a dream state. People generally dream at night, and feel uncomfortable with the dream images of other people, and yet they don't know that the dream state is a creation of the mind. Chan reveals that the present moment is like a dream. In that

moment, you feel that other people are objects outside the mind, and that perception extends into dreams at night. In the daytime, you can't see that the images that well up in the mind are just images. These images are just the mind, through the six senses, recording and storing impressions in our memory and consciousness, and then subsequently replaying them again.

We're easily drawn into a dialogue with images that emerge in our mind. But as soon as we start talking to those images, thoughts beget thoughts, and the thoughts never stop. In one of Shifu's teachings, he said that when you realize that you've generated a thought, that thought has already disappeared. We as unenlightened beings don't have the ability to see the arising of the thought, and all we see is the extinguishing of the thought. We thought we saw the thought arise, but that's just a temporary function of consciousness. Any form that you discover has actually already disappeared.

We have a mind that can perceive forms. But the mind itself is non-abiding, has no form, and no discriminating



thoughts. Therefore, Chan teaches that “the essence of mind is nirvana (the end of suffering), and its function is prajna (wisdom).” If we’re clear about that, we’ll never again take an image in the memory as an actual, true essence. If we think about someone we detested in the past, but can maintain a peaceful mind, we won’t treat the image of that person in our memory as the actual person. Therefore, as I’m facing people and situations, I investigate whether or not I’m tricked by my own mental images. All forms are empty, and the essence of the present state is empty. Actually, it’s not just forms—feelings, conceptions, volition, and consciousness are also empty.

## The compassion of no-self

Coming back to one of my earlier remarks, let’s use the perspective of no-self to view Shifu. With respect to my earlier example, someone asked him, “When you want to scold someone, should it be done behind closed doors?” Shifu said, “Whoever I scold, even if they’re not present, when they find out about it, they’ll be touched.” That means if you think about things from other people’s

perspective, or you have the attitude of no-self, even if you're scolding someone, they'll be touched. Looking at Shifu from that perspective, we can learn his approach to genuinely benefitting others. I once saw an interview during a Chan retreat between Shifu and a participant. Shifu hadn't finished talking, but the participant stood up, wanting to leave. Shifu immediately banged on the table and shouted, "Come back!" The participant was startled and hurried back to his seat. Shifu said, "My banging on the table doesn't mean that I'm angry. If I didn't do that, your problem would become even more serious." If your heart is full of compassion, even a scolding can move someone because that act accords with wisdom.

Shifu gave a lot of Dharma teachings in his life, all of which involve being considerate of others based on the compassion of no-self, but without thinking that, "I'm considerate of other people." As Shifu said, "to benefit others is to benefit self." This concept precludes any idea about "people whom I have helped," and will not treat the person who receives help as a true or real object, because that person's image is only a temporary thought in the

mind. Thus when we benefit others, at the same time we benefit ourselves.

From the worldly perspective, in benefitting others “I” help the “object” of my assistance. For the most part, the initial impetus still comes from one’s own feelings, and the other person will perceive that. However, if help is given based on the other person’s need, but you yourself don’t feel that you’re helping them, then that harmonizes the mind. First, in the process of helping people, you’re cultivating merit. Second, the mind harbors no thoughts that “I” am helping “someone else,” which is cultivating wisdom. If you can imagine things from the other person’s perspective, you won’t feel that it’s hard to help them. That’s because you’re actually helping yourself, liberating yourself from the deluded mind that distinguishes between self and others. Shifu said, “Make the most of this life by offering your life,” so you’ll never tire of helping people. If we can’t realize that the five aggregates are empty, we could make the best use of our lives today, but still have to reconsider whether to do that tomorrow. Why? Because we usually think that my body is “me” while forgetting that this body

is actually a tool for practicing the bodhisattva path.

When Shifu was ill in his later years, he provided the same teaching of no-self. A little over a month before Shifu passed away, many followers were chanting the Great Compassion Mantra to pray for blessings for him. One of our monastics invited Shifu to join in the Great Compassion Mantra chanting to pray for blessings for himself, since due to his merit and virtue, his chanting would be the most effective and meritorious. Shifu then scolded that monastic, saying, “I don’t ask for personal benefits for all the things that I do.” What did Shifu mean? Suppose I pray for myself. Then do “I” exist? If there is still an “I,” then suffering will arise from that ego, that “I.”

Now I always practice accepting circumstances with equanimity, and I always apply what’s called, “broaden your scope of feeling and acceptance.” Assuming you’re able to broaden that scope, starting from accepting minor pains and gradually moving on to moderate pain, then eventually you’ll be able to accept great pain. When a mosquito bites me, I say, “Please leave quickly after you’re

full!” In the past, I would blow the mosquito away. But now I use the approach that says, “sensations are empty, emptiness is sensation.”

## The wisdom of Chinese Buddhism

All along, Shifu was dedicated to popularizing Chinese Chan Buddhism. In the early years, I went to study at the Fa Shen Monastery (Wat Phra Dhammakaya) in Thailand, where I was taught to cultivate concentration, and thus develop superhuman powers. I knew that Chinese Buddhism doesn't emphasize those powers, so I spent my time working on *huatou*. For a month or two, because I didn't take on any important or urgent duties, I was able to concentrate on the practice. My body became soft like cotton bolls, and I felt at ease all day, so much so that when I was walking, turning my head or changing my line of sight required my active consent. In other words, I could control the movements of all the parts of my body. At that time, Shifu told people, “Did you notice that Venerable Guo Xing has changed?” Secretly, I was working hard, but Shifu had detected that early on.

Around that time I also began to give talks during our Meditation Group about “Observing the Mind,” observing greed, hatred and jealousy. Shifu said, “Observe the mind? That’s not the mind!” He wanted me to change my topic and talk about Faith in Mind, which talks about the enlightened state of Chan Master Shenhui. I spoke on that topic for two years at the Anho Branch Monastery in Taipei and at Nung Chan Monastery, but with great difficulty. I read Shifu’s book (also entitled *Faith in Mind*), and talked about it one page at a time. While I understood Shifu’s book when I was reading it, five minutes after I closed the book, I couldn’t talk about it in my own words. At that time, I hadn’t grasped the concepts of “essence” and “function,” and Shifu was pushing me to talk about those topics. Now, I’m grateful for that two-year experience, because if Shifu hadn’t pushed me, I might not have a clear understanding of the framework of Chan Buddhist teachings.

With that foundation, I was able to gain insights when re-reading the documented teachings of Chan masters. Shifu said it’s best for meditators to read the *Essentials of*

*Chan Practice and Realization* first, and then *The Dragon's Pearl: An Anthology of Chan Masters* for deeper teachings. He also said that Chan Master Shenhui's teachings offer the most complete framework for Chan Buddhism. Chinese Chan Buddhism is very straightforward, pointing directly to the mind, and considers it very important to make the activities of everyday life our practice. To be more precise, life itself is Chan.

When a lineage master is talking to or scolding you, they're in a "Chan" state, brimming with the wisdom of no-self. That means there is no "I" talking to you, no "I" scolding you. From the lineage masters, I see that there is no object other than my mind, and they have already transcended subject-object duality. But to go beyond that dualism, the average person will have to practice. It's the existence of dualistic thinking that prompts us to practice letting go of dualism, by, on one hand, dissolving the self, and on the other hand, considering the needs of sentient beings. Every present moment is the true mind, not the deluded mind of discrimination. The essence of the mind has no subject-object dualism. Of course, it takes time to

understand that. But with that understanding comes the realization that “the mind, buddhas and sentient beings are not different.” Or as the Sixth Patriarch Huineng said, our mind, if deluded, functions as a sentient being. But if it’s enlightened, it functions as an enlightened being, a buddha. The mind of a sentient being and the mind of a buddha are actually the same mind. However, if the mind functions in the subject-object, dualistic mode, the perfect and unobstructed mind of great compassion is transformed into the dualistic, deluded mind of the average person. Shifu therefore emphasized that we have to use the unenlightened, mundane body to practice the way of the bodhisattva.

As Shifu told us, Chan is the epitome of purity, and does not emphasize superhuman powers. Instead, Chan’s remarkable effectiveness manifests through constant application to our actions and speech in daily life. Right now, you listening to me talk is also a remarkable form of power. I’m talking, and you’re listening, so we’re both using a remarkable power. From the mind arises the ability to hear, and from the mind arises the ability to speak, and



these are called functions. Chan teachings say that the mind gives rise to many functions that are remarkable, and of these functions, the function of wisdom is the most far-reaching. Because most people have vexations, the mind's abilities are diminished, and this is known as "lesser functioning." The Chan tradition emphasizes major functions, primarily the function of completely ending suffering. Because the true essence of the mind is undefiled wisdom, it can generate remarkable powers and marvelous functions. But if we have not returned to this source, then when remarkable powers arrive they will be no match for karmic forces and thus unable to remove vexations. So Shifu didn't allow us to talk about superhuman powers. However, does Chan Buddhism have superhuman powers? Yes, it does, such as mastery over one's own mind no matter what we're doing. From the perspective of the Linji School of Chan Buddhism, if we wander among the six sense objects: form, sound, odor, taste, touch and mental objects, but aren't deluded by them, these are the remarkable functions that Chan Buddhism emphasizes. Some people acquire just a little taste of these superhuman powers, and then think they're superior. But that's not the

major function—wisdom. Even if such powers can attract followers, it won't last. From the perspective of Chinese Buddhism, it's important to understand this idea.

When I was in America I saw many people studying Japanese Zen or Korean Son, or Tibetan or Theravada Buddhism, but very few people learning Chinese Buddhism. Chinese Buddhist doctrine is different from other Buddhist systems. It not only perceives that the five aggregates are empty, but emphasizes the importance of applying that knowledge in daily life so we won't be perplexed by vexations. In Buddhist terminology that's known as having "no vexations to be removed" and "no enlightenment to be realized." Many people want to remove their vexations, but if they can clearly see that there is no "I" to be afflicted because in reality vexations don't exist, then vexations are manifestations of wisdom. Only when one's knowledge and views are right is it known as "the practice of no practice," which is to rectify and let go of the discriminative mind and return to the true nature, the essence of mind. To be able to do that, it's most important to continuously reflect on right knowledge

and views, and combine that with the basic method of meditation—counting breaths, so as to bring the mind back to its original essence.

## Practice conscientiously

In the Chan School wisdom denotes the fundamental nature of mind, and also Chan concentration, whose basic nature is an eternal state of concentration. Observation is a function of the mind, and such observation itself is wisdom. Like a mirror, the mind can reflect all things, but the nature of a mirror is like “a boat that crosses the water leaving no trace.” Even if you’ve experienced grasping innumerable times, the essential nature of the mind doesn’t cling to anything, so its nature will not change because of your grasping. The basic nature of the mind is to not hold onto anything, observing but unmovable. When you’re rich, the whole world is yours. But when you’re down and out with nowhere to call home, the whole world is still yours. That’s because the fundamental nature of the mind cannot be augmented nor diminished. Some people feel like they’ve been cast aside, and are unhappy about it.

Actually, you feel cast aside because you take some image in your own mind as “other people,” and some image in your mind as “yourself.” Clinging to these mental images, from the mundane perspective you’ll feel like you’re an outcast.

Actually the true nature of the mind is invariable and unmovable, never increased or reduced, and its changes are merely different forms of the mental images in your brain. But the worldly perspective treats this image as “I,” the self. And trying to reconstruct that image every day is what causes vexations without end. If you can understand the functions that Chan Buddhism is talking about, you will feel that Chinese Buddhism is really a great thing. There’s no need for penance or mortification, and always opportunities to practice. But it’s important to first establish the right understanding and right view.

From this process, gradually, I realized no-self and came to understand Chan practice. When you’ve just started, of course you won’t understand Chan practice. But start the practice with a rough idea, and from establishing

right knowledge and views, you'll gradually come to understand correctly. It's just like reading the *Diamond Sutra*. Today it seems like you have understood. But when you're re-reading it a few days later, you might have a different realization, and every re-reading will give rise to new realizations. You have to be conscientious, and develop a long-term approach.

While I had previously thought of using 30 years to practice meditation, I'm now prepared to spend 60 eons. That's because, as Shifu said, it takes 60 eons to succeed in each of the 25 dharma methods in the Shurangama Sutra. Anyone who hopes to be enlightened during a seven-day meditation retreat is just being greedy, and has really been fooled.

*(Talk delivered on December 6, 2010  
at the Sheng Yen Education Foundation)*



## My Changed Life

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Venerable Guo Qi

*Master Sheng Yen did not know that all the monks and nuns had rushed to the Abbot's Quarters.*

*While he was kneeling in front of Guanyin Bodhisattva, we knelt behind him.*

*After about five minutes, Shifu became aware of our presence and admonished us:*

*“You are a bunch of foolish disciples. I was beseeching Guanyin Bodhisattva to bless you all, and you still came to interrupt.”*

*Shifu used that kind of “teaching by example” to instruct and guide us.*

## **Introducing the Speaker**

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### **Venerable Guo Qi**

Venerable Guo Qi became a monk in 1992. Prior to the inauguration of the Dharma Drum Mountain World Center for Buddhist Education, he lived up on the mountain longer than any other monk, and knows the mountain's natural environment, including all the types of trees and plants, like the back of his hand. He reveres nature, and to get closer to mother earth, usually strode barefoot all over the mountain. Currently serving as the Director of the Young People Development Department, he previously served as the Meditation Instructor at Zhai Ming Monastery and the Dharma Drum Mountain Chan Hall.



**I**n following Shifu for so many years, I really did learn a whole lot. Shifu had said that after learning about Buddhism, life begins again anew. Learning about Buddhism definitely did change me, but it was really my brilliant teacher, Master Sheng Yen, who completely turned my life around.

## A frail and sickly child

To understand my destiny to study Buddhism, I have to start from my childhood. While my physique now looks quite robust, from the time I was young, I was actually frail, sickly, and thin, and unable to gain weight despite having a hearty appetite. I was always tense. During elementary school, I left home at five in the morning to avoid being late and was always the first to arrive at school. Every now and then, I even had to wake up the school custodian to open the school gate. I was tense even when packing up my school bag at the end of the day. The tenser I was, the slower I packed, and in the end, I was always the last to leave the school. Due to my nervous nature, I had a duodenal ulcer by the time I was 14 years old.

In addition, during those days, kungfu movies were popular among kids. Every kid loved to watch them, and wanted to emulate them. A neighbor was so impressed by the cool kicks of the kungfu actors that he wanted to try them out. Being naive, I let him experiment, and took a kick to my kidney, which became severely swollen. Right after that, I caught pulmonary tuberculosis and my health gradually deteriorated. I was often ill, and if I had the flu, it was hard for me to recover as I would cough for long periods of time.

After completing military service, I followed my eldest brother and trained in qigong and meditation. Whenever I began meditating, my *qi* (internal energy) would become activated quickly, but then it would stagnate. Wherever the *qi* travelled, it hurt. I realized there was a problem, and seriously considered looking for a teacher. It happened that my colleague saw a television news magazine program that introduced meditation training at Nung Chan Monastery, and invited me to join him and try it out. However, on the appointed day he had to work overtime, so I went alone.

## Meditation can make people younger

My first impression of Nung Chan Monastery was, instead of being richly ornamented like other temples, it was made up of a bunch of corrugated shacks. On that particular Sunday, there was a sutra lecture, and it felt solemn as everyone was quiet. Still being an introvert, I did not sign up for meditation class, but waited until my colleague was available so that we could both sign up. That was in September of 1988.

In that meditation class, the assistant trainer was a layperson. She was a skillful meditator, and could meditate continuously for one and a half hours. Besides that, she looked younger than her age. So I thought to myself, “Meditation is great!” There was a strict class requirement that every student had to meditate for two hours daily, an hour each in the morning and evening. If anyone was unable to meet the requirement, they would rather have you drop the class instead of taking up space. I was diligent. I meditated one and a half hours during each

morning and evening session, three hours daily. Right then, learning about Buddhism did not cross my mind. I just wanted to learn to meditate, especially since it could make you younger. Fantastic!

Meanwhile, the Taiwan economy was taking off, and I started a factory. After the meditation class was over, due to frequent overtime, I had little time for group meditation sittings. It wasn't until 1989 that I was able to frequent Nung Chan Monastery again. During that year Dharma Drum Mountain was founded and started its first year of fundraising. Both the Meditation Group and Buddha-name Chanting Group wanted to get members involved in fundraising activities, and I signed up and became a fundraiser. But because I was an introvert and loath to talk, I recruited a more outgoing colleague to be a Dharma Supporter, and he went to collect funds from donors. So as a fundraiser, I got pretty good results.

At the start of 1990 I became the Deputy Supervisor of the Meditation Group activity team. Back then, the Meditation Group would have more than a hundred people

show up for group practice. But few volunteered, unlike the Buddha-name Chanting Group, whose members loved to volunteer. As part of my duties, I was tasked to set up the venue. On one occasion I couldn't find a single volunteer, so I had to set up over a hundred cushions, mats, and towels all by myself. And when the group practice was over, I swept and mopped the floor alone. The monastic advisor for that day asked me, "Why are you doing these things all by yourself? You will think about resigning if you keep this up." Actually, at that time, I had already thought about becoming a monastic.

## A career that's not about making money

From Chan practice, I experienced just how wonderful spiritual practice is, and that inspired me to think about becoming a monk. In 1990 I first went for a three-day Chan retreat, and the second retreat was a seven-day Chan retreat hosted by Shifu. Back then Shifu didn't have specialized huatou or silent illumination retreats, and used the breath counting technique for the first three days. On the fourth day, the huatou method was explained. Each

day, from dawn to dusk, Shifu accompanied us. If anyone had any budding thoughts or a wandering mind, Shifu would immediately scold us and remind us to focus on proper technique. Prior to the seven-day Chan retreat, I was already in the habit of daily meditation, so I thought I was doing pretty well. At the retreat, the practitioner beside me kept fidgeting as though sitting on a pin cushion, and a thought came to me that I could demonstrate for him. Immediately, I heard Shifu's voice: "Don't think that by sitting still, you are on the path of spiritual practice. That's arrogance." His words struck my heart, and I corrected my way of thinking immediately.

As I had practiced qigong, I didn't need much sleep. After I awoke at one or two in the morning, I would start sitting meditation in the Chan Hall. During the seven-day Chan retreat, I worked hard. Meditation sessions were marked by incense sticks, each one burning for half an hour, and I could meditate through three sticks. Before the retreat, I had read the *Discourse Records of Chan Shifu Laiguo* and the *Discourse Records of Venerable Shifu Xuyun*. They both mentioned that during a seven-

day Chan retreat, we should set a timeframe for achieving liberation, and that through intensive and diligent practice, enlightenment is achievable. I was really wound up on the first three days, bent on achieving liberation within the timeframe of the retreat. On the fourth morning, alone in meditation in the Chan Hall, I suddenly relaxed and a doubt arose. The doubt was, “Who am I?” and it plagued me through that entire day and night. From the fourth morning to the fifth morning, I couldn’t sleep. I was gripped by doubt that I couldn’t cast off. Back then, I didn’t know I could go for an interview. Then a thought came to me that should this situation continue, I wouldn’t be able to go to work after the retreat. But after that thought occurred, the doubt perished.

The biggest benefit I gained from the seven-day Chan retreat was Shifu’s teachings, as they all embody the essence of Buddhism. On occasion, Shifu would admonish us, but every word of admonishment went straight to my heart, making me feel that my karmic obstructions were great. Repentance prostrations were quite helpful. That seven-day Chan retreat influenced my entire life, as my

original outlook on life was negative. As I was growing up I did not understand the purpose of life, or where we go after death. I was an introvert, loath to talk, and when I did talk, I mumbled. Since people couldn't understand me, I lacked the confidence to speak and grew passive. My way of thinking changed after that seven-day Chan retreat. I went from a negative view of life to a positive one. I felt that cultivation practices could transform me, and could help others, too. So I vowed to become a monk. I didn't become a monk to hasten my own attainment. After witnessing Shifu's arduous toil, I became a monk to repay his kindness and help him spread the Dharma. Shifu said, "The Dharma is so good, yet so few know about it, and so many people misunderstand it." Previously I didn't know how good the Dharma was, but after experiencing it, that confirmed it is the path I want to travel.

After learning about Buddhism, I had always thought, "In this world, there should be a career that doesn't take making money as its goal." But I did not know what it was. Then I came to know that it's called "being a monk," and sharing the Dharma with the world.



## The purpose of cultivation is to benefit sentient beings

Though the seven-day Chan retreat changed my views, it was after becoming a monk that my behavior changed. On one occasion while I was a novice monk, I was driving for Shifu and he spoke to me unexpectedly, saying, “Guo Qi, when a practitioner’s karmic obstructions manifest, they should recite Guanyin Bodhisattva’s name more, and prostrate before Guanyin Bodhisattva more.” That’s something I’ve always remembered. Shifu also said, “When *qi* moves, observe the soles of the feet.” This, I always keep in mind. Shifu actually meant that we should observe the soles of our feet during sitting meditation, but only when *qi* moves. However, I only heard the first part about *qi* moving, so whenever I meditated I would observe the soles of my feet. It was a pleasure observing my soles as *qi* would stream from them, and the body would lighten, floating effortlessly. I thought I had the technique right. But in actual fact, it was a *qi* deficiency instead of a feeling of lightness and tranquility. After some time, I began to catch colds or the flu easily.

One day while we were chanting the evening service, I was short of breath and fainted. As a result I got six stitches in my chin and a shattered kneecap. But they were just minor things. After the fall my blood pressure was low, my *qi* in disarray, and I could hardly speak. An examination showed that my blood pressure was less than 70 over 40. I kept feeling dizzy. I couldn't stand or lie down for very long, and my head would spin when I walked. A doctor of Western medicine said I should be on daily intravenous drip, while a traditional Chinese doctor had no treatment for me. Then I recalled what Shifu had said—I should prostrate before Guanyin Bodhisattva when a karmic obstruction appears. At that time I was unable to do sitting meditation, and could only prostrate to the Buddha. However, after I prostrated, I couldn't get up. Later, I had the idea to move quickly by standing up immediately after prostrating. But if I paused even briefly after prostrating, I couldn't get up. With that, I started from five prostrations per day, to 10 prostrations, and then slowly to 300 prostrations per day. While prostrating to the Buddha, in my mind I would silently recite Guanyin Bodhisattva with

all my heart. After a little over three months, the dizzy spells improved slowly and I made a vow that from that moment onwards, I must help more people and benefit even more sentient beings.

Actually, the appearance of that karmic obstruction was a good thing. Thanks to that incident, I can share it here with everybody today. If I had not overcome it, I wouldn't be here. My current mentality is to be able to see that every day of life is like a bonus, an extra day, and live happily every day. We should attend to the body as best we can, but what we really need to take care of is the mind. By making that vow, the power of that vow will continue to push you forward. Even while the body is weak, the power of your vow will support you. Call upon that strength to prop up your physical strength. The purpose of spiritual practice is to benefit sentient beings, and not for oneself.

There was another teaching that Shifu gave that's very important to me. He said to me, "Guo Qi, you shouldn't think about achieving enlightenment. It's impossible for you to achieve enlightenment." Actually, I had already let

go of thoughts about achieving enlightenment, and Shifu was simply reminding me again. Consequently, I made a vow that it doesn't matter if I achieve enlightenment—but I will help others to do so. Can a person who never attains enlightenment help others to achieve it? It's possible. Shifu once asked, "Does the coach of an Olympic champion also have to be an Olympic champion?" Not necessarily. As long as the coach's concepts and methods are correct, he too can produce an Olympic champion athlete.

## To vanquish afflictions, start with your own mind

Shifu's teachings incorporated both teaching through words and teaching by example. One time, there was a disagreement between two members of the monastic sangha. After Shifu found out about it, rather than criticizing them, he simply gathered all the monks and nuns for a talk. Shifu told us that his karmic obstructions were so heavy that he had no karmic blessings, nor did he have the ability to lead his disciples well. He could only show repentance to Guanyin Bodhisattva, and plead

with Her to give us wisdom. When Shifu finished, he returned to the Abbot's Quarters. A short time later, we received word from his attendant that Shifu was kneeling in penance in front of Guanyin Bodhisattva. We were very ashamed, and shocked, as we didn't think Shifu would do that. All the monks and nuns rushed to the Abbot's Quarters, but Shifu didn't know. While he was kneeling in front of Guanyin Bodhisattva, we knelt behind him. After about five minutes, Shifu realized we were there, and admonished us: "You are a bunch of foolish disciples. I was beseeching Guanyin Bodhisattva to bless you all, and you still came to interrupt." Shifu used that kind of "teaching by example" to instruct and lead us.

Shifu would also test his disciples in public. One time, after a three-day Chan retreat for corporate leaders, some of the participants stayed behind on the mountain. Shifu had me lead a group of people to follow his car to the designated Dharma Drum University site. Trying to be clever, I took a shortcut. But by the time we got there, Shifu's car was already there. On the spot, Shifu reprimanded me for being a fool, and making decisions

unilaterally without consultation. Actually, Shifu reprimanded me in order to check my reaction. As Shifu said, he only reprimanded those disciples who could take it, and wouldn't reprimand those who couldn't. So that time, I was happy he scolded me. I also realized that in spiritual practice, we should follow the radiant path of great enlightenment, and that there are no shortcuts.

I seldom privately asked Shifu about cultivation methods, as he had previously said that, "My methods are never hidden." Any method Shifu had, he had already taught us. He always took the opportunity during morning Dharma talks he gave to the monastic sangha at breakfast to tell us, "To vanquish afflictions, start with your own mind. If you have afflictions, repent more, and pray to the Buddha more. Don't rely on me when there's a problem. Learn to solve it on your own." Shifu trained his disciples like a bee-keeper, wanting us to learn to gather nectar on our own. In fact, early on, Shifu already knew that his health was not good, and that he could pass away at any time. He planned ahead in establishing the monastic sangha system, and laid the best foundation he could, in

every respect. That's why even after Shifu passed away, Dharma Drum Mountain can still operate in an orderly, step-by-step manner.

For over a month before he passed, whenever Shifu was on Dharma Drum Mountain he would give a Dharma talk at breakfast, sometimes speaking for more than an hour. We saw that Shifu was in good spirits, and everyone thought his physical condition must be good. However, right after his talk, he had to rest immediately. Even though Shifu had already stepped down from his post as abbot, whenever the monastic sangha had a need he would continue to contribute, selflessly, never considering his own situation. This is also something I learned from Shifu: Wherever I'm needed, even though I may not feel well physically, I will go forth and share my experience.

## Diligence in educating disciples

Since becoming a monk, about half of my duties have been on Dharma Drum Mountain [current site of the DDM World Center for Buddhist Education]. During

the initial phase I oversaw the construction of temporary living quarters, and I would be at the worksite right after breakfast. I didn't pay much attention to time, and only realized it was noon when I saw the workers eating their lunch. At that time I didn't drink much water, so my throat would always feel dry and scratchy. Things were hectic, plus there were frequent meetings, and I neglected my health. As a result, physical problems cropped up. During a study group one evening I suddenly felt dizzy, and fell right out of my chair. After I fainted, I was still clear and conscious. But my eyes rolled back into my head, and the other participants quickly gathered around. While I couldn't move, I could still talk. So I asked one of the participants to press the acupressure point midway between my upper lip and the tip of my nose, and I slowly recovered. After hospitalization, I was diagnosed with a stress-induced duodenal ulcer. After that incident, I told myself to relax completely, and the situation then got progressively better.

In addition to supervising work on the mountain, I was also in charge of planting trees. It was seven years ago



that we started to grow the first two rows of cinnamon trees that you see upon entering the DDM Complex from Provincial Highway No. 2 (Yi). We also grew sakaki trees, which were transplanted from the site of Dharma Drum University. The sakaki tree, a member of the *Theaceae* family, is native to Taiwan. They have a lifespan of 50 to 60 years or more, and are quite tall. We transplanted more than a hundred of those trees to empty ground near Dharma Drum Bridge III.

Shifu had mentioned to the layperson in charge that the foundation in the area near Dharma Drum Bridge III wasn't stable. So any tree planted in that area would possibly damage the foundation, and if a tree fell it would be dangerous. Unfortunately, that message never got passed on to me. Later, I was with Shifu on a tour of the mountain and we came upon Dharma Drum Bridge III. Right then and there, Shifu severely criticized me, saying, "Trees cannot be planted here. Didn't you hear what I said?" One of Shifu's lay followers pleaded with him not to be angry. Shifu wasn't really angry, but was trying to educate his disciple. It shows how attentive Shifu was in

teaching his disciples. He was observing my reaction, and would make adjustments accordingly. While there weren't that many opportunities to be in our Shifu's presence, when the need arose, Shifu would proactively criticize, guide, and direct us.

## Step by step

I currently handle the Meditation Instructor's duties in the Chan Hall. In ancient monasteries, the person in that position was also known as the "head of the class" and was responsible for directing Chan practice, including giving guidance about Chan practice concepts and methods. The abbot would also give Chan practice instruction, but he was saddled with many duties and tasks that frequently kept him away from the Chan hall. Naturally the task of Chan practice instruction fell on the Meditation Instructor, and I've learned a lot from this position.

Over the past few years, I have represented the monastic sangha in exchanges abroad. In 2009 we were invited to Germany by a Vietnamese monk, a German

national, who was leading a chan practice group locally. The monk had trained at the Dharma Drum Mountain Chan Hall for a year and a half and had wished to spread Dharma Drum Mountain's Chan teachings on his return to Germany. I discovered that Chan practice was very popular in Germany, but traditional Chinese Buddhist practices like doing repentance prostrations and reciting the Buddha's name were, comparatively, less widely accepted. The Germans are a pragmatic people, methodical and orderly, which fits right in with Chan practice.

There are no shortcuts in spiritual practice. It must be approached with honest sincerity, one step at a time. Those with outstanding spiritual capacities like Huineng, the Sixth Patriarch, can hear the passage from the *Diamond Sutra* that says, "Abide nowhere, and give rise to mind" and immediately become enlightened. We've all heard that passage, but were not enlightened, which shows that we have lesser spiritual capacities. There is nothing wrong with having lesser capacities. As long as spiritual capacities are present, we can engage in spiritual practice. However, one must practice with honest sincerity, not just learn the

method and neglect to practice. Chan must be experienced personally to reap its benefits. Shifu said that as long as you practice sitting meditation every day for an hour in the morning and an hour in the evening, in three months, your body and mind will be transformed. That's how it was for me. Some changes were subtle. I wasn't even aware of them myself. But others saw them clearly. I became more at ease and happier. That happiness is called "Dharma joy." Practice should make us progressively happier, not more distressed.

When we practice, we should remain relaxed and cheerful, and apply the methods conscientiously. When the causes and conditions are ripe, accomplishments and benefits will come about naturally. Practice also requires a straightforward mind. Do what needs to be done. Don't presume to be more clever than you really are, or try to be smart and take the easy way out. Practice must be solid and steady. The purpose of Chan is to help us let go of our attachments, and not grasp at external conditions. In fact, spiritual practice is not difficult at all. The real difficulty lies in most people's thinking—it's too complicated. They're

always taking what's simple and making it complicated. They think too much. They want to practice, but they can't. So practice isn't the real difficulty—it's being trapped by our own thinking.

Finally, I'd like to share a key portion of a speech that Shifu gave in his early years: "Appreciate other people's strong points and understand your own shortcomings. Learn from others' strong points and improve your shortcomings. Never be jealous of others' strong points and don't expose your own shortcomings." Everyone has their strong points. If we learn one strong point from each person, from 100 people we'll garner 100 strong points, and the more strengths we have, the closer we get to the perfect state of a buddha.

*(Talk delivered on May 29,2010  
at the Sheng Yen Education Foundation)*



## **Showing Gratitude: The Best Way to Teach by Example**

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Venerable Guo Qi

*Showing gratitude is the best way to teach by example.*

*After I was named Monastic Advisor of the Dharma Drum Mountain Fellowship*

*Master Sheng Yen made a point to remind me:*

*“Guo Qi, I’m getting old. We have a lot of lay Dharma supporters that have followed me since the early days who are also getting old. We must show gratitude to them.”*

## **Introducing the Speaker**

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### **Venerable Guo Qi**

Ordained as a monk in the year of 2000 and currently serving as the Dharma Drum Mountain Social Care Center's Managing Director, the Social Welfare and Charity Foundation's Secretary General, and the Fellowship's Monastic Advisor. The Venerable humbly mentioned that he has no special expertise in any of the above functions, but as they constitute his mission as conferred by the monastic sangha, he will strive to learn and fulfill his responsibilities.



I think the teachings Shifu gave us, which include his words and his deeds, are worth emulating. I'll start with a story.

There was a layperson, an office worker, whose father was hospitalized in the intensive care unit (ICU) due to a serious illness. However, he was not allowed time off to visit his father. The illness occurred as his company had a rush sales order, and everyone had to work overtime to fill it. Other than himself, there were no other relatives who could look after his father. Whenever he rushed to the hospital after he was done with his work for the day, the patient visiting hours would be over due to ICU visiting-hour restrictions. He was worried about his father, but unable to abandon his job. So how should he deal with the situation?

That layperson recalled that in one of his books, Shifu mentioned the Four Steps for Handling a Problem: Face it, Accept it, Deal with it, and Let it go. First, he adjusted his way of thinking so he could face and accept the situation. Then in order to see his father, he discussed

the circumstances with the hospital, hoping it would allow visitation beyond the regular visiting hours. The hospital agreed. That process allowed him to achieve a satisfactory solution in terms of both his work and his family.

After his father passed away, that layperson learned from his relatives that he was an adopted child and was not tied to his father by blood. As the background story of his adoption was also lost, he was unable to track down his biological parents. But it was a story he read in one of Shifu's books that helped him change his thinking. Shifu had once told a different layperson who found out his parents were not his biological parents that, "Other people have only one set of parents, but you have two. You have your birth parents, and you also have parents that raised you. That's also very good, as you have one more set of parents than other people." After he read that story, he immediately felt he was really very blessed. As we can see, Shifu's written words have a very powerful influence in spreading the Dharma.

## A precious opportunity for monkhood

In order to talk about my relationship with Shifu, we have to begin from when I became a monk. Before I became a monk, both of my parents had already passed away, and I had no siblings. My mother passed away quite early, and my father died after suffering from an illness. These events left me with plenty of emotional stirrings. After learning about Buddhism, I read from a sutra that joining the monkhood would allow me to pay a debt of gratitude to my parents, and also to all things, living and non-living. I was thinking then to myself that since my parents had passed away, there was no way I could repay to them my debt of gratitude. But if I became a monk, that should be a good way to repay my debt of gratitude to my parents, and also to all things, living and non-living.

Since I intended to become a monk, I was first interviewed by the Director-in-Chief. It was later decided I should first become a “live-in lay volunteer,” a volunteer on a long-term monastery stay. On the third or fourth day, a venerable informed me that Shifu wanted to see me. It was

only later that I realized that when any layperson vows to join the monkhood, Shifu will invite their family members to the temple and meet them for a talk. On the day I spoke with Shifu, he said, “Your life experience has been rather harsh. Since you are no longer young, you have to grab this opportunity.” Before anyone can join the monkhood, they have to submit an autobiography. Shifu had read mine and spoke those words. Shifu continued, saying, “After joining the monastic sangha, forget about further studying or enrolling in a Buddhist academy. There is plenty to learn from within the monastic sangha itself. Make the best of this opportunity. Come in and give it a try!” That’s what Shifu told me.

In August of 1999 I moved into Nung Chan Monastery, and shaved my head for ordainment in the year 2000. I am the last in the generation of monks whose name includes the Chinese character “guo,” and this has a rather special meaning for me. During the tonsure ceremony Shifu said that from then on, every ten years there would be a new name denoting each generation of monastics at Dharma Drum Mountain. Together with me at the

ceremony was a student from the Chung-Hwa Institute of Buddhist Studies who became the first monastic in the generation denoted by the character “chang.”

On the day of the ordainment head shaving ceremony, I had no family members present, but there were quite a number of visiting laypeople who sat behind me, and a number of them also lunched with me. It appeared that I had the greatest number of relatives present. From the Buddhadharma perspective, it is possible that every one of us may become related by either by blood or by marriage. This means everyone is related to me, and everywhere is my home.

In the early years, whenever Shifu travelled overseas, he would first show his concern by making a round of visits to the Chung-Hwa Institute of Buddhist Culture, the Dharma Mountain Cultural Center and the Administration Center. During that period of time, I was given the opportunity to drive for Shifu. While in the car, Shifu asked, “Guo Qi, when you left your family to enter the monastery, whom did you pay your respects to?”

The reason Shifu asked was because at the head-shaving ceremony, in the visitors galley, both of my parents' seats were empty. I replied, "I still pay my respects to my parents. I was visualizing them sitting there." Though Shifu's schedule was hectic, that simple sentence warmed my heart.

Prior to the formal opening of the DDM Complex Shifu would occasionally go up to the mountain for a short stay, taking walks at dawn or at dusk. On one of the strolls I accompanied him, and Shifu asked, "Do you know that originally, the monastic sangha didn't accept you?" Prior to joining the monkhood, I had little contact with the ordained monks and the sangha didn't know me well. In addition, I was over the age limit for ordination. As an interim, expedient measure, I was first allowed to be a live-in volunteer. It was Shifu who gave instructions that I was to be allowed to join the monastic sangha. That was an opportunity, given to me by Shifu. I treasure my relationship with Shifu. And as he said, I had to make the best use of that opportunity.

## **Cherish water resources, treat the natural environment well**

While I was still a novice, the first phase of the first Dharma Drum Mountain Project worksite had begun. The Monks' Quarters, Building III, and the Staff & Student Dormitory were all in operation, and they all needed oversight. The sangha assigned three monks to be in charge, and I was one of them. Later I also became the Monastic Advisor of the Project Works Office. Back then I had yet to take full ordination. So as a novice who hadn't taken the full precepts of a monk, being the Monastic Advisor filled me with fear and trepidation. But since this was the assignment given to me by the sangha, I treated it as a learning opportunity.

During that period of time, I had an opportunity to be in close contact with Shifu, accompanying him for meetings and worksite inspections. Though Shifu was a monk, his thoroughness and attention to the project details left me in awe. Shifu viewed the project as an organic living entity, not a lifeless material object, a concept that

can be traced back to its origin in the Buddhadharma. The Buddhadharma tells us that both direct and indirect karmic results are the training halls—the place of practice; the body constitutes direct results, and the environment constitutes indirect results. Direct karma thus pursues the path of practice leading to enlightenment within the indirect karma. Hence humans and the environment have an inseparable relationship, and as early as 2,600 years ago, Buddha was already a pioneer of environmental protection.

For the construction of the Dharma Drum Mountain Complex, Shifu travelled the world to observe university campuses and religious architecture, and also went on pilgrimages to China and India. Having studied in Japan for six years, he especially valued Japanese architecture's exemplary utilization of space, and instructed that Dharma Drum Mountain architecture follow suit. Shifu always said that interior spaces must accommodate multiple purposes, and that the architectural style should be as simple as possible. However, the simpler the architectural style, the harder it is to realize that style. Moreover, each individual



architect had different concepts and varying degrees of understanding. We all felt that Shifu had attained the level of the “unobstructed and all-pervasive” mentioned in the *Flower Ornament (Avatamsaka) Sutra*, and for both the architects and engineers, it was a huge challenge.

Shifu made many recommendations over the course of the project, such as the well-known story of the seven fruit fig trees. I will also share some of those stories here. Water resources were very important to Shifu. In his early years in China, he cultivated the habit of cherishing and respecting all natural resources. During the construction of the DDM Complex, Shifu made it a point to instruct the engineering unit to make the best use of rainwater. As the mountain on which the Complex rests is situated on Taiwan’s northern coast, it has a long rainy season and the rainwater is a very important resource. In addition, Shifu also instructed them to make the best use of the water resources from the two streams that encircle the mountain. Back then, the concept of efficient water utilization was uncommon in Taiwan and the relevant engineering technology was rare. Due to the unavailability of the

required technology, the engineering unit was in a bind. It took me quite some time to understand the issues of water utilization, and Taiwan had just started to develop new methods of conserving water resources such as rainwater collection and utilization, as well as water-saving devices. Later, these methods were all implemented, one by one, on the mountain. For example, all the sink faucets and toilets at the DDM Complex are water saving devices. In the Nuns Quarters, there is a rain collection system that routes rainwater to be used for various purposes including flushing toilets, irrigation, and cleaning.

Shifu had also thought about tap water on the mountain. Besides the water supplied to meet the DDM Complex's needs, Shifu had also considered that during the dry season, when supply was limited, there shouldn't be any conflict with the villagers below the mountain over water. That would allow the people in the village to have peace of mind about having an uninterrupted water supply. With his exalted character, Shifu always looked at every situation from the perspective of benefitting others. I recall that when we invited laypeople from the Water Conservation

Department of the Industrial Technology Research Institute (ITRI) to assist us with our water resources planning, and they heard Shifu's thoughts, they were all filled with praise and admiration.

In addition, there was an Academia Sinica professor who specialized in natural ecosystem research. He had participated in a seven-day Chan retreat led by Shifu, and said that during the retreat Shifu conducted a Great Earth contemplation ceremony, leading repentance prostrations to the Great Earth. After the professor finished the penance, he cried in shame. His expertise was in researching the natural environment, but he discovered that his understanding of the natural environment was nowhere near Shifu's. So showing gratitude and prostrating to the Great Earth was very exciting for him.

There was also a ceramic artist who created a depiction of the tale of the Buddha entering into the human world for Dharma Drum Mountain. During the creative stage, after Shifu had seen the sketch, he pointed to a small hawk that was hovering in the air in the drawing

and said, “There’s something not quite right about this bird. It doesn’t look natural.” The artist greatly admired Shifu’s observation of such fine detail. That’s another thing I learned from Shifu.

## Cherishing blessings & devoted contributions

In the years before the DDM Complex was officially opened, Shifu’s schedule was packed. But the first thing he always did after returning to Taiwan from America was to make a trip to the mountain to check on the construction progress. Before he was even recovered from jetlag, he would attend the meeting of department heads. I have seen Shifu nodding off when listening to reports. However, when a question was raised to seek his view, he was able to answer immediately. I wondered if Shifu actually fell asleep or not. He looked like he dozed off, but his train of thought was clear.

In 2005 the monastic sangha arranged to have me to travel to Thailand with Shifu. The purpose of the trip

was for Shifu to receive an honorary doctorate awarded by Mahachulalongkorn Buddhist University, and also attend the opening ceremony of the Thailand chapter of the Dharma Drum Mountain Fellowship. I was assigned to be Shifu's attendant on a temporary basis, and was very nervous because I was unfamiliar with his daily routine. Several interesting incidents occurred. One incident involved me doing Shifu's laundry. His clothing was of the older style. Unlike the current elastic waistband pants, his pants had a drawstring. When I washed them, I did not realize the difference, and did not watch out for the ends of the drawstring. After I washed them, the ends had slipped into the drawstring holes. The next day while Shifu was changing, he realized what happened, and did not scold me. Instead he simply took the pants and attempted to coax the drawstring out. While he was doing so, Shifu was also teaching me how to do it. At that moment, I was so embarrassed that if there was a hole in the ground, I would have crawled into it.

I had heard that Shifu's handwriting was very small. But it was during the Thailand trip that I saw Shifu's

notebook for the first time. The notebook was very small and convenient for travel. And the characters he wrote were really the size of ants, small and neat. From this we can see how rigorous Shifu was and how he treasured things. I had also heard that Shifu would reuse a piece of tissue paper five or six times before discarding it, unlike many of us who discard it after a single use. I believe this had to do with Shifu's experiences during his early years.

The current generation doesn't really cherish blessings and treasure things. Because it's too easy to get things, we do not know how to cherish resources. Therefore, we are really blessed with good fortune. Those who are blessed must recognize blessings, cherish blessings, nurture blessings, and sow the seeds of blessings. In his teachings, Shifu always mentioned that all of the blessings a person receives are not the result of their own actions. Some are the result of causes and effects in the surrounding environment. Hence while we are receiving blessings, we must understand how to contribute. All the teachings Shifu gave us were based on applying the essence of Dharma to our daily living. He communicated in contemporary

language, and through his own actions.

During the Thailand trip I also saw Shifu's respect for elders. For example, there was an older Buddhist monk of Chinese descent who made a special trip from northern Thailand to Bangkok just to meet Shifu. When Shifu saw that older monk, he immediately bowed and prostrated before him. Shifu still felt inadequate respect was paid towards the older monk. Since the older monk had been ordained longer than Shifu, how could Shifu let him travel for their meeting? From this incident, we can see how important these etiquette details were to Shifu.

## A Thankful Shifu

Showing gratitude was one of the most important teachings that Shifu gave us through his own example. To all those who had taught him, from his Master and his Master's predecessors on Wolf Mountain, to the teachers at the Buddhist Academy of Jing An Monastery, Shifu was very grateful. On one occasion, the sangha assigned me to visit the Venerable Master Shou Cheng, who was one

of the Shifu's teachers at the Jing An Buddhist Academy. The Venerable Master had also attended the Dharma Drum Mountain opening ceremony, and was one of the venerables who conducted the "eye-opening" ceremony for the Grand Buddha Hall's three Buddha images. When I paid my respects to the Venerable Master on behalf of the DDM Sangha, he said, "You are really blessed as you are able to follow your Shifu. During your Shifu's time at the Jing An Buddhist Academy, he was the youngest, but he was the smartest, and the most hardworking, too." However, Shifu had told us he was the dumbest.

Shifu was also very grateful to the preceptors who prepared him for his ordination. He believed that without those preceptors, he wouldn't have been able to grasp the essence of the precepts, and wouldn't have been able to become a monk again. Although it may be hard for everyone to imagine, Shifu was also very grateful to all his disciples who became monastics. Whenever Shifu returned to Taiwan from the USA, he was always grateful for us, his monastic disciples. Even when he was away, his disciples persevered, living in harmony and making the monastic



sangha more systematic.

Shifu was also grateful to all the laypeople who support and uphold the Dharma. After I took over as the Monastic Advisor of the Dharma Drum Mountain Fellowship, Shifu made a point to remind me that he was getting old. He went on to say that, “We have a lot of laypeople in the fellowship that have followed me since the early days, and they’re getting old too. We should show gratitude to them.” Wherever he went, Shifu always carried a sense of gratitude and appreciation. If something went wrong, or some process wasn’t complete, Shifu was still grateful and bore all the mistakes and errors on his own shoulders. Shifu himself said, “If a disciple makes a mistake, the problem is on me, for I have not taught them well.” That touched me very deeply, and also serves as a reminder to be vigilant.

Shifu would also face and admit his own mistakes. He once said that when he was younger, he had written some pretty critical articles, like criticism against Christianity. Sometime later, a Christian layperson wrote to Shifu and

asked how he could be so critical of Christianity. Shifu replied with a letter of apology saying that he was young and impetuous when he wrote that kind of article, and would never do that now. In fact, admitting mistakes takes courage. For most of us, it's not easy to admit mistakes, but Shifu was magnanimous. From the Chan point of view and according to Chan concepts, a mistake is a mistake, so there should be no worries or obstructions. However, are we brave enough to face up to our own mistakes? Or is pride preventing us from admitting our mistakes? This is also something I learned from Shifu's behavior.

From my observations, at any given place or given time, Shifu lived in the moment. Shifu dealt with everything that happened with intense focus. As his schedule was packed, there were many things he had to deal with, one right after another. When one issue was dealt with, he would focus immediately on the next issue. As there were no worrisome obstructions in Shifu's mind, after something was dealt with, he would let it go. But a disciple whose mind and heart still hadn't adjusted might think that Shifu changed too quickly.

In his later years Shifu was ill but still lived in the moment, and when experiencing pain from an illness, he used a practice method to deal with it. I myself have experienced bone fractures, and using practice methods to deal with the pain is really not easy. However, we must always be grateful to all the circumstances that give us opportunities for reflection and training.

## Shifu's care and concern

In 2008, in an un-mindful moment, I took a fall while in the city of Taichung and fractured the top of my thigh bone. After an operation, I had to rest for a while up on Dharma Drum Mountain. Unexpectedly, Shifu, ill-health and all, still came to visit and show his concern for me. The first thing Shifu said when he saw me was, "You're working off your karmic obstructions." Shifu then asked the Managing Director of the Bhikshu Sangha, "Is Guo Qi being given too much work? Should his workload be adjusted?" To this day, I'm still touched by the care and concern that Shifu showed.

From Monastic Advisor for the Project Works Office during my novice days to my current position as the Monastic Advisor of the Dharma Drum Mountain Fellowship, I have always approached my tasks with a learner's mindset, as I know I'm not the best person for these positions. As Shifu said, "If there is no ox for the job, use a horse instead." If an appropriate person can't be found for the job, just go do it, and if there's something you don't understand, go learn it. The monastic sangha is a wonderful place as there are many opportunities for multi-faceted learning. I am very grateful for the backing of all of our lay supporters who continue to this very day to undertake the arduous task of upholding and protecting the Dharma. Everything that I've shared today is rooted in what I have seen and learned from Shifu himself, and his words and deeds are certainly worthy emulating.

*(Talk delivered on May 12, 2010  
at Sheng Yen Education Foundation)*

## ***Appendix***

### **Dharma Drum Mountain Pocket Guides to Buddhist Wisdom**

*E-1 Meeting of Minds*

*E-2 In the Spirit of Chan*

*E-3 A General Introduction to the Bodhisattva Precepts*

*E-4 The Effects of Chan Meditation*

*E-5 The Meaning of Life*

*E-6 Why Take Refuge in the Three Jewels?*

*E-7 The Buddhadharma in Daily Life*

*E-8 A Happy Family and a Successful Career*

*E-9 Chan Practice and Faith*

*E-10 Establishing Global Ethics*

*E-11 Wu Ming Exposes Ignorance*

*E-12 The Buddha Mind, Universe, and Awakening*

*E-13 The Dharma Drum Lineage of Chan Buddhism*

*E-14 Master Sheng Yen*

*E-15 The Six Ethics of the Mind*

*E-16 Living in the 21st Century: A Buddhist View*

*E-17 Encounters with Master Sheng Yen I*

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