



A true pillar of Chan Buddhism in the West

Remembering Dr. John Crook

Dr. John Crook was an expert trained in the studies of Western psychology and animal behavior, yet he found the key to inner peace in the Eastern thought of Chan Buddhism. He was the first Western Dharma Heir of the late Chan Master Sheng Yen. During his lifetime, he carried the torch of spreading Chan Buddhism internationally, founded the Western Chan Fellowship that has more than 20 affiliates in the U.K., and devoted his life to teaching Chan meditation across Europe. Thanks to him, the seeds of Chinese Buddhism have been firmly planted and are now flourishing in the West.

■ By the Sangha of Dharma Drum Mountain

Dr. John Crook passed away on July 15th, 2011. He was 82. Born in 1930, he was a professor of psychology at the University of Bristol for many years, specializing in ethology and anthropology. John's path crossed with Master Sheng Yen's in 1985 when, in Hong Kong, he came across Master Sheng Yen's English book "Getting the Buddha Mind" in a bookstore selling Chinese Buddhist books. After reading the book, he decided to seek out Master Sheng Yen, who was teaching in New York at the time. Dr. Crook had begun teaching meditation in the U.K. by then but felt he needed someone more experienced to show him the way.

In May 1986, Dr. Crook attended for the first time a seven-day meditation retreat led by Master Sheng Yen in New York's Chan Meditation Center, thus beginning what was to become a lifelong relationship. Dr. Crook found immense joy in the experience. In the spring of 1989, he attended another meditation retreat led by Master Sheng Yen, on which occasion he received the permission from the Master to teach and to lead meditation retreats on his behalf in the U.K.

To help bring the Dharma to the West, Dr. Crook many times invited Master Sheng Yen to lead retreats in the U.K. During these retreats, often held in a simple farmhouse in rural Wales, Dr. Crook was known as the most dedicated host -- he arranged for room and board for all participants, planned and implemented the retreat schedules, handled the morning and evening boards and the bell, took on all administrative duties and tended to the needs of all those who were there.

In 1993, after a seven-day intensive Chan retreat in New York, Master Sheng Yen held a ceremony in which he gave Dharma transmission to Dr. Crook, formally making him a Dharma Heir and a holder of the lineage in the Chinese Linji (Rinzai) sect of Chan Buddhism with the name Chuan-Deng Jing-Di, meaning "Transmitting the Lamp Seeing the Truth". Master Sheng Yen advised all those present that there are four conditions that must be met before someone can receive Dharma lineage:

1. The person must have the correct understanding of the Dharma;
2. The person must have his own experience of practice;
3. The right conditions must exist in space and time, the circumstances must be appropriate; and
4. Help must be given to all those wishing to learn.

Master Sheng Yen then reiterated that without these conditions being fulfilled, a Dharma transmission would not be fruitful, and that he had decided to pass the Dharma lineage to Dr. Crook because he had seen firsthand Dr. Crook's personal abilities and development and was confident that he met all four conditions.

Dr. Crook did not fail Master Sheng Yen's affirmation and faith in him. He planted the seeds of Buddhadharma in the U.K. and across the Continent. Through his own work and his translation of Master Sheng Yen's writing, he introduced Master Sheng Yen to meditation centers not only in the U.K., but also in Warsaw, Moscow and Berlin. Throughout his life, Dr. Crook worked tirelessly to bring the Dharma to the West. Even when he was in his eighties, he continued to lead meditation retreats throughout the UK and travel to places as far as Poland, Norway and the United States to do so. In fact, he had planned on leading another retreat at the end of July. The Western Chan Fellowship, which he founded in 1997 based on the principles of Chan Buddhism as well as Western psychology currently has more than 20 affiliates in the U.K. and is tremendously influential in the development of Chan Buddhism in Europe.

Dr. Crook had pointed out in his writing that in the West, where principles of science, skepticism, individualism and competition are held supreme, Silent Illumination meditation, which does not offer dramatic effects but clarity, balance and the experience of self-nature, is most suitable for those seeking the path to understand oneself and one's relationship with the world. He had made Buddhism accessible to Westerners through presenting it from a Western mind.

While Dr. Crook is no longer with us, his words continue to ring true. The future of Chan Buddhism in the West is ever brighter because of his life's work.

※ *Dr. John Crook and the late Master Sheng Yen*

Year	
1985	Dr. Crook encountered in Hong Kong Master Sheng Yen's book "Getting the Buddha Mind," thus began his lifelong relationship with the late Master.
May 1986	Dr. Crook attended a seven-day meditation retreat led by Master Sheng Yen at the Chan Meditation Center in New York and invited Master Sheng Yen to teach in the U.K.
May 1987	Dr. Crook attended another retreat led by Master Sheng Yen at the Chan Meditation Center in New York.
April 1989	Master Sheng Yen was invited to lead a seven-day meditation retreat at the Maenllwyd Retreat Center in Wales. During the interview on the fifth day, Master Sheng Yen affirmed Dr. Crook's experience of "seeing the nature."
Nov 1989	Dr. Crook attended a seven-day meditation retreat led by Master Sheng Yen at the Chan Meditation Center in New York.
Nov 1990	Dr. Crook attended a seven-day meditation retreat led by Master Sheng Yen at the Chan Meditation Center in New York.
April 1992	<p>Master Sheng Yen led another retreat in the U.K., during which he congratulated Dr. Simon Child, one of the retreatants, on his experience on the retreat.</p> <p>At the end of the retreat, Master Sheng Yen met with Dr. Crook and Dr. Child and advised them the following: "To learn and to pass on the Dharma, one must spread the Dharma; to know and to appreciate kindness bestowed on oneself, one must repay such kindness. To give rise to the Bodhi mind is to follow the teaching of the Buddha, to benefit all beings is to repay the kindness of the Three Jewels."</p> <p>Dr. Simon Child later became another Western Dharma Heir of Master Sheng Yen's.</p>
June 1993	Dr. Crook attended a meditation retreat led by Master Sheng Yen at Chan Meditation Center in New York.

	<p>Upon conclusion of the retreat, Master Sheng Yen formally transmitted the Dharma to Dr. Crook making him a 58th- generation holder of the lineage in the Chinese Linji (Rinzai) sect of Chan Buddhism. He was also the first Western Dharma Heir of Master Sheng Yen.</p>
Nov 1994	<p>Dr. Crook attended a seven-day meditation retreat led by Master Sheng Yen at the Chan Meditation Center in New York.</p>
June 1995	<p>Dr. Crook invited Master Sheng Yen to lead his third meditation retreat at the Maenllwyd Retreat Center in Wales.</p>
July 1997	<p>Dr. Crook attended the 3rd International Conference on Buddhism held in Taiwan by Dharma Drum Mountain.</p>
April 1999	<p>On behalf of the Berlin Society, Dr. Crook invited Master Sheng Yen to lead a seven-day meditation retreat in Berlin for the first time. Dr. Crook also participated in the retreat.</p> <p>When Dr. Crook asked Master Sheng Yen for his advice on how to propagate Chan Buddhism, Master Sheng Yen gave him the following principles:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Teach methods that have been taught by Master Sheng Yen himself; 2. Do not teach a combination of methods from different sects or schools; 3. Chan Buddhism does not violate the basic Buddhist teaching that while all phenomena are conditioned and empty of true nature, the law of cause and effect is not empty (i.e. operates.) The teaching of Chan Buddhism must not involve the supernatural, paranormal, or occult; otherwise one will easily go astray and deviate from the true path of Chan. <p>Master Sheng Yen also entrusted Dr. Crook with the mission to train the Chan meditation teachers across Europe as Dr. Crook had done in the U.K.</p>
June 2000	<p>Dr. Crook attended the first 49-day Silent Illumination Retreat at the Dharma Drum Retreat Center in upstate New York.</p>

July 2000	Dr. Crook invited Master Sheng Yen to lead a meditation retreat at the Gaia House in southern England. This was the fourth retreat Master Sheng Yen led in the U.K. on Dr. Crook's invitation.
June 2008	Dr. Crook and Dr. Child led a group of UK's meditation teachers to Taiwan's Dharma Drum Mountain for a visit, as part of a trip to trace the source of Chan Buddhism. Dr. Crook said of the visit: "I was delighted to be able to introduce to Shifu several leading meditation teachers from the UK. Shifu had not changed much and was so focused when he interacted with everyone. When I was alone with Shifu, I felt again the familiar rapport that I always shared with him."
Feb 2009	<p>Master Sheng Yen passed away. While unable to travel to Taiwan to attend the funeral due to his back and knee difficulties, Dr. Crook sent a letter of condolence to the Abbot President of Dharma Drum Mountain:</p> <p><i>For me, Shih-fu was my spiritual father, my root teacher, and his departure brings feelings of loneliness and inadequacy as one generation passes to another. Yet also there is immense gratitude. I have always been amazed that he passed his Dharma to me, a non-Chinese who cannot even read his language or speak it; yet, it is true, that sometimes when we met there was a direct participation in the Truth and this gives me courage to continue the work in the Great Matter. Shih-fu was to me an inspiration and a shrewd disciplinarian. He understood my wish to convey to our British Sangha the insights of Chan in ways that Westerners could best understand - and that has been my work now for years. Shih-fu always questioned me in depth and with challenging koan-like subtlety concerning my plans here. I am eternally grateful that my life coincided with his, we were the same age, and that I should have met him. I especially appreciated Shih-fu's essential simplicity: in spite of his attainments, his learning and his vast seniority there was always a flash of simple understanding between us.</i></p>

Feb 2011	To commemorate the second anniversary of Master Sheng Yen's passing, Dr. Crook and Dr. Child led the Western Chan Fellowship on a meditation retreat, along with 14 meditation groups in the U.K.
July 2011	<p>Dr. Crook passed away on July 16, 2011. Venerable Guo Xing, the Abbot of Chan Meditation Center and Dharma Drum Retreat Center, on behalf of the Abbot President of Dharma Drum Mountain and the entire Dharma Drum Mountain Sangha, offered his condolences to the Western Chan Fellowship.</p> <p>The Abbot President Ven. Guo Dong designated Ven. Guo Xing, along with Ven. Chang Wen, Director of Dharma Drum Retreat Center, and Ven. Chi Chern, a Dharma Heir of Master Sheng Yen, to attend Dr. Crook's funeral service to be held in England on July 29th.</p>