

Welcome to Chinese Zen

An Introduction to Chan Practice

Chinese Zen, or Chan as it is called in China, is a way of life that encourages clarity of mind, compassion to all sentient beings and a wisdom that comes from going beyond the concerns of self. This short introduction welcomes those seeking to develop fresh approaches to personal experience and suggests a way of practice.

Buddhism originated in India some 2500 years ago as a result of a personal search for meaning by Shakyamuni Buddha who was born as a prince of the Shakya people of the Nepalese borderland. He experienced a deep insight into the nature of mind and life and taught others how to realise their own understanding. The teachings spread widely in Asia, to Tibet over the Himalayas, to SE Asia and Indonesia by the sea-lanes and to China by both the overland silk routes and by sea. Reaching Japan, Chinese practices developed further into Zen. In recent years, Buddhism has spread to Europe and the USA in all three major forms, the Theravada of Burma and Sri Lanka, Tibetan Buddhism and the Chan-Zen of China and Japan. The Western Chan Fellowship studies and practices the Chinese Zen from which the Japanese teachings have been derived.

The Insight of the Buddha. The essence of the Buddha's teachings is summed up in the Four Noble Truths of his first sermon. The Buddha's quest was to find a way beyond personal suffering, not through reliance on dogmas, creeds or philosophies but in actual experience based in insight. He ruthlessly exposed the nature of life realising that, due to impermanence and death, life can never be apart from suffering. This suffering arises primarily because we crave permanence, ego-enhancing credentials and safety: to go beyond suffering necessitates going beyond this craving, an endeavour that demands an examination of the self. The Buddha proclaimed:

- 1. Life is suffering*
- 2. Suffering is due to wanting, and especially wanting connected with the self.*
- 3. Suffering diminishes when this wanting is abandoned.*
- 4. The way how to do it.*

The key question is what is the way? The way cannot be told; it has to be experienced. We discover the way through meditation which in Zen is called Zazen. Through meditation we discover for ourselves that suffering is indeed due to self-concern and that wanting originates from the desires of the self. In meditation we are examining the basis of this 'self'. What sort of reality has it?

Problems. Enquiring into the self encounters problems. Where is it? What is it? Who am I? What is a person? We begin in infancy with bare experience; only gradually do we infer that there is a person who is the subject and creator of this experience. The self is therefore an idea built up by the mind. It does not have an objective existence as external things appear to do. It is a reference point within the processes of our thought. By solidifying into an apparent entity, the thought that creates the self becomes the pivot around which all other thinking revolves. The way we think determines the quality of our personal world. In Chan we say:

*If you want to meet the Buddhas of past present and future
only perceive that all realms of experience
are created solely by the mind. (Avatamsaka Sutra)*

Often we experience a sort of fog of muddled, anxious thinking that smudges over a purer consciousness. This is the effect of worrying self-concern. To attain insight, this has to be dropped so that basic awareness free from the imputation of self is exposed.

The Interdependence of Things. When we study the Dharma, the teachings of the Buddha, we begin to see that things are not exactly what they appear to be. Things appear to be separate, unitary, out there in the world as objects independent from one another. Reflection shows that this is not the case. Everything is actually related to

everything else through subtle and often complex patterns of cause and effect. Seen this way the cosmos becomes a vast process expressing itself through the apparent forms of things. We too are simply emerging forms that exist like clouds for a time and pass away into another condition.

A deep realisation of the relatedness of all things in a process of appearing and disappearing brings the awareness that we live as if in a dream, a virtual reality. We do not however need to feel alone or isolated. For we are indeed close to and flowing with everything. When this is deeply experienced it allows one to feel a closeness, a love, and a kindness to all creatures as we turn together in the great cosmic mandala. The isolated, possessive, selfish 'me' is simply an illusion.

Enlightenment. Within the Chan view an 'enlightenment experience' arises when the fog of self-concern evaporates. Although such an insight contains the truth, continuous training is usually essential if such an insight is to be built into a way of life. Some Buddhists talk of many lives before enlightenment is reached but in Chan there is no need to talk of many lives nor of obtaining anything. The task is to blow away the fog. The 'suchness' of things is then revealed in direct experience without the bias of interpretation.

A Special Transmission. In our habitual anxiety we use words and concepts and through these we communicate. Words express not the primary basis of experience but a secondary realm of interpretation based in labelling and argument, nouns and verbs. Language tends to perpetuate the feeling that things are truly there as they appear. The actual basis remains prior to words, indescribably, ineffably. Only poetry may suggest it. It can however be experienced.

Bodhidharma expresses this forcibly:

*A special transmission outside the scriptures
No reliance on words or letters
Direct pointing to the heart of humanity
Seeing into ones own nature.*

The task of Chan is thus an activity - not a matter of words, descriptions or arguments. The task may be approached and completed through meditation and through living a life more concerned with others than with oneself.

Meditation is the path to clarification. It has two aspects, calming the mind and insight into the nature of mind as a process rather than as a thing. Without a calm mind, insight cannot occur; without insight, the nature of experience is not understood. Calming the mind usually comes first, both for beginners and for experienced meditators. Insight arises when correct meditation is pursued. It may be a painful process, arduous, boring or stressful, since the habits and assumptions from which one is built must be challenged. Eventually practitioners experience joy in a new depth and clarity.

Meditation normally requires a disciplined approach. It is practised both formally, sitting on a cushion, and also informally by a mindfulness of one's everyday activities, sensations and feelings. Nothing lies outside the realm of meditation. Anything that arises is grist to the mill.

There are various methods to calm the mind. A basic meditation for a beginner is mindfulness of breathing following methods which are taught by practised teachers. An easy conscience, patience, work and concentration are also conducive to a calm mind. The opposites to these promote a disturbed mind and personal turmoil. Turmoil also arises from years of conditioning, events in earlier life and in previous generations. We inherit difficult karma from before our own lifetime as it rolls down from one generation to the next. We are each responsible for our own karma in the sense that only we can do anything about it.

As an aid to mindfulness the Buddha suggests a number of guidelines known as the Precepts. Practitioners of meditation accept these as an orientation to life. There are various presentations of the precepts but the main focus is on doing good for others rather than the evil of self aggrandisement, not killing, not stealing, no lying, no

damaging sex and no intoxication which may lead to the other errors. The errors are regarded as serious mistakes rather than as sins. Bad karma may be corrected through the practice of the good.

Insight arises when we abandon desire so that existential anxiety is greatly diminished or comes to an end. The thought process that endlessly generates the ego then comes to a stop. There is at such a time no thought creating self, no self-concern and we have let go. Where have we gone? To ask this is to start worrying again. One allows oneself to abide in a freedom wherein the whole world reflects. Depending on our personal karma such realisation may be easy or very difficult. With such insight comes the realisation that all our worries are inappropriate and unreal. One discovers a peace, a silence, a love, a vastness that is simple and spacious, without boundaries. Yet the thought that one may have achieved something starts the ego up again and the insight disappears. As the great teacher Dogen has said "When the opposites arise the Buddha mind is lost." Meditation is thus a training that needs to be worked at and practised. It is not something one talks about. It is something you do.

Compassion. As one drops the self so one sees others clearly. There is great pain in the world. Compassion for those in suffering arises with insight and one seeks to alleviate it in whatever way is appropriate to one's circumstance. It is also true that a feeling of compassion itself drives away egoism.

The Bodhisattva's Path. Deep training arises when compassion and insight mutually support one another. This is then the path of the Bodhisattva - one who seeks the release of others before him/herself. It is the aim of the Chan practitioner to walk the path of the Bodhisattva in whatever way it appears in one's life circumstance. This may involve political or social activism, spreading the teachings (Dharma), social work or counselling or simply the support of anyone in need. The essence is to assist others to their own realisations. Compassion must however also be directed at one's own suffering self. Unless one is working on one's own problems any work for others is likely to be inadequately understood.

The Vows. In Chan, the vows of one on the way are:

I vow to liberate all sentient beings

I vow to cut off endless vexations

I vow to master limitless approaches to Dharma

I vow to attain supreme Buddhahood

Sometimes one may feel such vows to go far beyond human possibility. Yet one does not enter any quest with the notion of stopping half way. The grail may be far away but there is no hesitation. A warrior does not enter a battle with the idea of partly winning. A farmer does not plant seeds to see the crops half grown. Whatever the difficulties, the Zen practitioner persists in the courage of the warrior or in the faith of the skilled farmer. Each vow is a personal question, a 'koan', that lasts a lifetime. What is it to do thus?

The Western Chan Fellowship provides a programme aimed at helping Chan practitioners to realisation whether they be beginners or 'old hands'. Traditionally, Buddhism has been a monastic way but today few have an intention of becoming a monk or a nun. Our task is to develop a lay Zen of authentic practice, one that integrates with everyday life without falling into the traps that daily life entails. In principle monk and layperson only differ in their training and the severity of their vows, essentially we are all the same faulty human beings. To create an effective lay practice is therefore a task of our time.

Our view is that only through intensive experience can a layperson understand the transformations of mind that are open to a serious practitioner. A little meditation twice a week or once a day may be helpful but will not take one far. Certainly something more is needed if one is to participate in the enlightenment project of the Buddha.

The fellowship consists of a number of small city 'cells' distributed around the country and led by trained meditation instructors. After some practice in meditation individuals attend one of our intensive retreats conducted in a remote 'monastic' cottage in the hills of Wales where we have converted a barn into a fine meditation hall.

The retreats are graded to suit people of differing training and inclination.

The **Western Zen Retreat** focuses on fundamental life questions such as "Who am I?" and enables participants to go through a detailed reconsideration and recalibration of their lives in the context of Zen teaching. These retreats have a marked psychotherapeutic component and are suitable for anyone resolute enough to wish to confront feelings of loss, grief, alienation or despair. This tough self-confrontation provides an opportunity to enter the World of Buddhism directly rather than through the longer path of hearing teachings, following monkish vows or reading books.

The **Chan Retreat** is modelled on the monastic retreats of ancient China as taught by our patron Master Sheng-yen. The retreat provides thorough training in meditation techniques and extensive teaching in Zen. We prefer individuals to have done a Western Zen Retreat before attempting this orthodox event.

The **Mahamudra Retreat** includes a tantric component focussing on practices of compassion and teaches the subtle approach to meditation of the Tibetan yogin. These retreats are for practitioners who have established a firm view and wish to deepen their experiential understanding.

In this way individuals can move through a progressive series of events in their cultivation of the Buddha way. We begin to get to know one another on the path and form a community of friends dedicated to the realisation of a common understanding through the acceptance of our individuality as persons in the world. We hope this will be a small contribution to the troubled times as we turn the first page of another Millennium facing many difficult organisational, economic and ethical decisions. The wisdom of the Buddha provides a firm refuge from which we can explore these themes.

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Suggested Reading

Master Sheng-yen

Getting the Buddha Mind: on the Practice of Chan Retreat.
1982 Dharma Drum. ISBN 0-9609854-0-9

Master Sheng-yen

Faith in Mind. A guide to Chan Practice.
1987 Dharma Drum. ISBN 0-9609854-2-5

Master Sheng-yen

Dharma Drum. The Life and Heart of Chan Practice.
1996 Dharma Drum. ISBN 0-9609854-8-4

Master Sheng-yen

Illuminating Silence. The Practice of Chinese Zen.
2002 Watkins. ISBN 1-84293-031-1

New Chan Forum, the house journal of the Western Chan Fellowship, contains Dharma talks, retreat reports, poems, artwork, social criticism on Buddhism in the West, etc. Published two or three times a year. Back issues are available from Jake Lyne, 13 Belle Vue Terrace, York, YO10 5AZ at £4.00 each, or a subscription is £10.50 for three issues.

The Western Chan Fellowship Website <http://westernchanfellowship.org> has much reading material including back-issues of New Chan Forum.

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