

Chan | 禪 | Magazine

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“The definition of the sacred varies according to time, place, and individual. This is something of which we must be aware of in a modern, pluralistic, and globalized society.

"Most religions derive their understanding of the sacred from their faith in, and interpretation of, the holy scriptures and teachings on which they rely; some derive it from the revelation of religious experience. On the surface, all these understandings seem to come directly from the divine, but in reality their formation is influenced by a variety of individual, cultural and historical factors. Thus these understandings cannot be regarded as purely objective.

"For this reason, to manifest the tolerance expected in a pluralistic society, the definition of the sacred must be reinterpreted. Although there is only one highest Truth, this Truth has been experienced, transmitted and recorded by different civilizations, according to different perspectives, resulting in scriptures that reflect cultural differences. In order to save humanity from the danger of conflict and even annihilation, we must not only preserve the values of our own groups, but also respect the values of others?

--Chan Master Sheng Yen

World Economic Forum, New York

February 1, 2002



From the Editor		4
What is it? Questions from Readers	The Editor	5
The Fourth Paramita The third in a series of articles on the Six Paramitas by Chan Master Sheng Yen	Lecture by Master Sheng Yen	7
Song for the Year of Horse Poetry for the Chinese New Year	Master Jen Chun	12
A Guide to Sitting Chan Eleventh-century meditation manual by Chan Master Changlu Zongze	Chan Master Changlu Zongze	14
Calcutta Offering A poem.	Mike Morical	17
“Are You There” Retreat Report	D.S.	18
Sound The Saturday meditations	Katie Feucht	21
Untitled A poem.	Scot Ezell	23
The Past <i>News from the Chan Meditation Center and the DDMBA Worldwide</i>		
• Master Sheng Yen Speaks on Life and Death		24
• Master Sheng Yen Addresses World Economic Forum		25
• Chinese New Year at CMC		27
• John Crook and Simon Child Speak at the Chan Center		29
• Yoga at the Chan Center		30
<i>In Brief</i>		33

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From the Editor

You must be wondering what going on-Chan Magazine looks different again! Well, after a year of difficult transitions, a year of trial and error, during which we made more errors than we would have liked, this is finally what the new Chan Magazine is going to look like. Thanks to Virginia Tan, to our new Managing Editor, Cari Luna, thanks to Jihan Kim, thanks to Tasha Chuang and Juijung Lin and David Kabacinski and all the other volunteers who have helped along the way, we are finally done tinkering and fixing, and we are happy to be able to turn our full attention to bringing you the teachings of Chan Master Sheng Yen, the experiences of the Chan Meditation Center, resident Sangha and membership, and the news from Dharma Drum Mountain.

Thanks for your patience, and we hope you find this issue of the magazine useful.

The Editor

What Is It?

What Is It? and it's our invitation for you to participate in the ongoing dialogue here at the Chan Center. Do you have any questions about the Dharma? About something you read in the last issue? About experiences you've had in practice, or in daily life? Send them to us, or call on the Center's staff of Dharma lecturers, meditation teachers, scholars, and the resident Sangha; we'll publish them along with the best answer we can come up with. Send your questions to Chan Magazine, 90-56 Corona Avenue, Elmhurst, NY 11373, or better yet, email them to chanmagazine@yahoo.com.

Question: What about a guy who owns a liquor store? Maybe he doesn't drink, but he sells inexpensive wine and half-pints of cheap liquor that are definitely bought by people who harm themselves with it-it definitely causes suffering. What would Buddhism say about that? Is that breaking the precept against intoxicants? What about right livelihood? Would that be considered a wrong livelihood?

Answer: I'm a Buddhist practitioner, so I'm going to try and answer your question from the point of view of a fellow-practitioner, not from the point of view of your teacher or some kind of spiritual advisor. You're asking about the fifth precept, the precept against taking intoxicants, and about the fifth of the Noble Eightfold Path, right livelihood.

Precepts are not commandments. They appear similar to commandments because they are rules of behavior, but they are not meant to be used to judge or condemn the behavior of others. Rather, they are practices that we follow in order to reduce suffering by correcting our own behavior. Buddhists take up precepts voluntarily, as a way of reminding ourselves to avoid behaviors that will harm ourselves or others, and under certain circumstances, we can give the precepts back. If, for example, I take up the precept against drinking alcohol, but I want to be able to drink a toast at my son's wedding, I can give back the precept by simply telling someone that's what I'm doing, and then take it up again later. This is not so that we can give ourselves permission to behave badly, it's a reminder to remain clear, from moment to moment, about what we're doing.

Similarly, the path of right livelihood is also a practice that we take up, not a standard by which to judge others. The Buddha proscribed making a living by breaking any of the precepts concerning speech or action, the central idea being not to make a living in a way that harms oneself or others. But in the case of your liquor storeowner, we don't

know that he's on the Noble Eightfold Path; we don't know if he ever took up the precept. If he's not on the path, he can't be at fault for straying from it; if he never took up the precept, he can't break it.

If I, on the other hand, owned a liquor store, and I were making a living selling cheap booze to alcoholics, then I would certainly have to question my actions in light of the precepts I have taken, and would have to question whether I were following the path of right livelihood.

For me as a practitioner, I know there's a problem if I'm worried about the rightness or wrongness of the other guy. The proper question for me is, "What am I doing?"

The Fourth Paramita: Diligence

Commentary by Master Sheng Yen

This is the third in a series of articles by Chan Master Sheng Yen on the Six Paramitas, given at the Chan Meditation Center in Elmhurst, New York. This talk was translated orally by Ven. Guogu Shi, transcribed from tape by Tan Yee Wong, and edited by Ernest Heau with assistance from Tan Yee Wong.

IF WE ABSORB OURSELVES DILIGENTLY IN THE TASK WE WISH TO ACCOMPLISH, WE
WILL BE VERY SURPRISED BY HOW MUCH WE CAN ACHIEVE.

DILIGENT PRACTITIONER'S EYES ARE WIDE OPEN FOR OPPORTUNITIES TO
PRACTICE ANYWHERE AND AT ANY TIME.

The paramita of diligence nurtures zeal in one's practice. It is a keenness that does not fear demanding work, and is the antidote for laxity in practice. The Buddhist scriptures say that Shakyamuni and Maitreya both gave rise to bodhi-mind at the same time, but that Shakyamuni, the Buddha of this era, attained Buddhahood first, and that Maitreya will become the Buddha of the future 5.6 billion years later. Perhaps this means that Shakyamuni practiced with more diligence. [Laughter]

Vows and Aspirations

Without vows and aspirations it is easy to become lax. You may think all day long, "I should be more diligent; I should practice harder." But as the time draws near, physical discomfort, headache or fatigue may cause you to fall prey to laziness and give rise to thoughts such as, "I feel tired and I really need to rest. As soon as I feel better, I'll practice very hard." Attitudes like these come from laziness. We can give ourselves innumerable excuses for not practicing.

Once there was a lazy student who never studied. He made excuses throughout the year. In the spring it was a nuisance to study when the weather was beautiful outside. During the summer it was too hot to stay in and study. In the autumn he wanted to go out and enjoy the cool breezes. When winter arrived it signaled the end of the year, and he figured he might as well wait until the next school year to study. There is a Chinese poem that summarizes this attitude succinctly:

Springtime is not meant for study.

The heat of summer is good for sleeping.

Fall slips away and winter arrives,
Time for spring-cleaning to prepare for the New Year.

Diligence is pivotal for a practitioner who has generated the bodhi-mind of benefiting others. The thirty-seven aids to enlightenment include the four foundations of mindfulness, for which diligence in practice is essential. The thirty-seven aids also include the four proper exertions: stopping non-virtuous acts; not committing future non-virtuous acts; nurturing virtuous acts already committed; and doing virtuous acts in the future. These exertions all require diligence.

Making vows is essential to the Buddhist practitioner. They can be small, great or ultimate. A small vow can be just for a day; a great vow can be over a span of time. The highest form of vow is an ultimate vow that is made continuously, like the vow to attain Buddhahood for the sake of others. One perseveres in helping sentient beings regardless of health, or whatever calamity or obstacle may occur. Having made vows like these, one dares not become lax; one constantly reminds oneself to go forward.

When we reflect upon our own physical condition, we can see that our energy and life force are impermanent and limited. But with diligence and vows it is possible, even with limited resources, to accomplish unlimited results. We reap according to what we sow. Great effort will gain great results; partial effort will only get partial results. If we put forth no effort at all, we will get no results. The point is to believe we have the choice to exert all of our effort, and to accomplish our vows. If we absorb ourselves diligently in the task we wish to accomplish, we will very surprised by how much we can achieve. We will be amazed that we can do so much for so many people despite a limited physical body, and all due to diligence.

Among my disciples there are those who are diligent and those who are lazy. Some make excuses every time they are assigned a task. One disciple excuses himself by saying that someone more qualified should do the job. When I tell that he should adopt the bodhisattva spirit and practice diligence, he says that he is satisfied to become the last bodhisattva to attain Buddhahood. He once said, "Haven't you heard that Ksitigarbha, the Earth Store Bodhisattva, vowed not to accomplish Buddhahood until the last sentient being had attained Buddhahood? Well, let me tell you, I'm that last person. Everyone else can become a Buddha before me." His self-disparagement will lead to self-pity, and an overall negative perception about himself and his abilities. But in reality, he is simply lazy and causes trouble for himself and others. People like this rely on others to care for them, and drag everyone else's efforts down. As a consequence, they cannot gain genuine benefit from their practice.

Individuals who cultivate diligence have strong and healthy minds. A lazy mind will eventually drag a healthy body down. Because of it, afflictions of the mind will flourish. Those who have diligent minds will have healthy bodies and feel elation in the Dharma-their minds will be free from sickness.

According to one ancient treatise, there are three types of diligence. The first is likened to armor; the second is the diligence that is able to gather all virtues; the third is the diligence that benefits all sentient beings.

Diligence Like Armor

The diligence that is like armor manifests as fearless courage, enabling one to overcome all obstacles. One sees no enemy because nothing appears as an obstruction, and therefore nothing causes problems. One's diligence impels one forward fearlessly. Some people, when assigned a task, complain before even getting started. "Shifu, I see many problems with this." These weaklings see trouble rather than the opportunity to do something. But there are others who take all impediments and difficulties as part of the process of spiritual growth and learning. They do not perceive problems, they see opportunities to enhance their own skills, to become better at what they do. As a result, they always profit from the most difficult conditions. Such people are practicing the paramita of diligence.

Virtuous Diligence

The second type of diligence is that which gathers all virtues. "Virtues" here refers to the Dharma practices of the Four Noble Truths, the Thirty-seven Aids to Enlightenment, and the Six Paramitas. Practitioners who engage this type of diligence use the experiences of body, speech and mind and all the phenomena in the environment as opportunities to practice. Whatever they experience, whatever they see, their whole being is filled with the aspiration to practice from instant to instant. This is genuine diligence.

However, there are also people who practice the Four Noble Truths, the Thirty-seven Aids and the Six Paramitas, but do so sporadically and not so diligently. They tend to separate their practice from their daily lives, and therefore give up many opportunities to practice. It is as if they are poised to get onto the Mahayana vehicle, and then they excuse themselves by saying, "Maybe I'll take the next bus. In this life it is too hard for me. Maybe in the next life I'll practice." The problem is that it is not certain when the next bus will come, or if it will ever show up again.

A diligent practitioner's eyes are wide open for opportunities to practice anywhere and at any time. If they miss an opportunity to practice they will chase it down and grab it. If the bus is pulling away from the stop, they will chase after it, unwilling to give up an opportunity to practice.

Compassionate Diligence

The third type of diligence is that which benefits sentient beings. This is the diligence of great bodhisattvas who will pursue sentient beings to heaven, hell, or any other realm of existence to ensure that they gain liberation. This kind of dedication to assure the liberation of ordinary people is very different from the romantic pursuits of men and women. Bodhisattvas don't want anything from sentient beings; they are not there to impose any ideas on them, or force anything upon them. They are there to benefit them, to make them feel secure and at ease and to provide them with opportunities to move toward liberation.

Practicing the Three Types of Diligence

The vocation of monastics is to practice these three types of diligence—the diligence likened to armor, the diligence that gathers all virtues, and the diligence that benefits others. The first type is to give rise to aspirations and to make vows that will be like armor to protect them from obstructions on the path. The second type is actualized through personal experience of the Dharma by engaging in virtuous deeds. The third type is actualized by taking the benefits that one has derived for oneself and sharing them with other sentient beings. This is precisely the undertaking of a monk or a nun—to make full use of their rare opportunity for practice and cultivation. If they miss the opportunity in this lifetime, they may not be monastics again in their next lives.

During my last visit with Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh at his Dharma center, I noticed that his disciples hugged each other. I asked them whether the monks hugged the nuns. They replied, "No, monks hug monks and nuns hug nuns." I further asked, "Why do you hug?" They explained that hugging is an expression of extending care to one another. It is a kind of closeness, of sharing and comforting between people. "That is what we practice." After hearing this, I thought to myself, "It must be a very good feeling to hug. After all, little kids like to be hugged. Adults also like to be hugged." Therefore, I hugged Thich Nhat Hanh when I bade him farewell.

In the Mahayana Code of Conduct for monastics, monks and nuns are strictly forbidden to hug anyone. The Buddha said that such a gesture is a sign of laxity, a loosening of one's diligence in practice. However, upon reflection, I thought that

Thich Nhat Hanh has very sound reasons for allowing hugging between his monastics. When people hug each other, they have a sense of sharing and it feels very good and comfortable. Besides, it is a natural part of Western culture to hug. Maybe that's why he has so many Western monks and nuns and I have so few. [Laughter]

Song for the Year of the Horse – Please Learn from the Horse!

Poem for the Chinese New Year by Master Jen Chun

Translation by Ken Chen and Wei Tan

English edition by David Berman

Prologue

Blazing and opening unexplored lands, galloping through empty space,
The white horse whinnies on its long journey-a worthy model for all.

(I)

The supreme horse sees but the shadow of the whip; he flies like a dragon,
Bursting through boundaries, revealing new regions, transmitting the two
human qualities.[\[1\]](#)

It was just such a horse that brought the Sutras to the East,
Thus, the light of Dharma shines brightly everywhere.

(II)

Gentle, kind, barely fed, demanding no reward,
Five admirable virtues [\[2\]](#) make a worthy paramita.[\[3\]](#)
Strong of bone, it springs to serve, wherever need arises,
Heroic, upright, wonderful, it freely spans the heavens.

(III)

A majestic neigh thunders through the autumn air,
Head erect, it roams the sky with unobstructed mind,
Nothing harbored, nothing held, dedicated, giving
Its blood and sweat [\[4\]](#), through wind and dust; a noble, mighty spirit.

(IV)

Marching on the long journey toward the rising sun,
Never wasting daylight, never hiding in the stable,
Paired hooves, paired wings, in every moment new, [\[5\]](#)
A truly worthy mirror [\[6\]](#) for humanity to view.

Epilogue

Eyes wide open in the bright, spring sun,
The horse, a dragon, lightning, spirit luminous and pure,
Strides through wind and cloud, and penetrates the horizon,
So quick, so agile, letting no dust alight.
(The light of wisdom burns through the illusion of the self;
The virtue of compassion gathers others to the path.)

Notes

[1] The two human qualities are: 1) Penetrating the principle, comprehending the phenomena, and distinguishing right from wrong; and 2) Educating the wild, ordering human relationships, and choosing the cultured over the coarse.

[2] The five virtues are: Never waste; never demand; never lack; never blame; never forget.

[3] Paramita: A vessel that carries one to the other shore, the shore of liberation.

[4] Giving everything without reservation; letting go of all desire.

[5] "The white horse is not a horse" is a profound teaching: Renew yourself every day; shine brightly every day; move forward every day.

[6] With strong resolution and pure virtue one acts decisively, firmly and vigorously, tasting the bitterness of diligence to deliver all beings.

A Guide to Sitting Chan

By Chan Master Changlu Zongze

Translated by Guo Jue

Chan Master Zongze Cijue Ji lived in the Changlu Monastery from 1086-1093. He was a teacher in both the Chan and Pure Land traditions; in 1089 he led a recitation retreat during which he encouraged both monastic and lay practitioners to chant Amitabha Buddha. The work translated here, originally titled "Zuo Chan" (Sitting Chan), strongly influenced the writing of Zen Master Dogen Zenji and the development of the Soto lineage in Japan.

One who aspires to attain wisdom as a bodhisattva should first give rise to the mind of great compassion, generate great vows and cultivate samadhi diligently in order to deliver all sentient beings, without seeking liberation for oneself. With this mindset, one lets go of all phenomena and brings the myriad engagements [of the mind] to rest. Whether one is moving or resting, the body and mind should be unified without a break. One should eat and drink with good measure, not consuming too much or too little. One should sleep just adequately, without deprivation or idleness.

When one intends to engage in sitting Chan practice, one should find a quiet place, prepare the seat with adequate cushions, and then loosen any clothing that is tight. Having done so, one assumes a serene and orderly demeanor and sit in the full-lotus posture, i.e., placing the right foot on the left thigh, and the left foot on the right thigh. Alternatively, one can sit in the half-lotus posture, by placing the left foot on the right thigh. Then proceed to place the right hand on top of the left foot, the left hand on top of the right hand, with the thumbs touching each other.

Straighten one's upper body slowly and lean forward swaying the body to the left and to the right. After that, settle down and sit upright. Do not sit tilting to the left or right, or to the front or back. Allow the spinal vertebrae to align naturally like a stupa. However, do not stretch the body too much. That may result in the quickening of the breath and thus disturb the peace of mind.

The ears should be aligned to the shoulder and the nose to the navel. Let the tongue touch the upper palate. Close the mouth and the jaws together lightly.

Leave the eyes slightly open so that one will not fall into a stupor. The samadhi one attains will be the most powerful with the eyes open. In ancient times, many eminent monks practiced with their eyes open. Chan Master Fayun Yuantong also disapproved of engaging in sitting Chan practice with eyes closed. He referred to this as practicing

in the "ghost caves of the dark mountains". The meaning of his admonition is profound and only one who is accomplished realizes it.

After the posture is set, and the breathing calmed, one relaxes the lower abdomen.

Do not entertain any wholesome or unwholesome thoughts. When a thought arises, one should be aware of it immediately. With this awareness, the thought will disperse instantly. Eventually, one would cease to be involved with all phenomena, and one's practice would naturally become seamless. This is the essential technique of sitting Chan practice.

Sitting Chan practice is a Dharma gate through which peace and happiness can be cultivated. However, many people become sick engaging in this practice. This is because they do not know how to use their minds properly. If one applies the practice properly, one's body will naturally be light and at ease, one's mind will be comfortable and sharp, and one's awareness will be clear and bright. The taste of Dharma enriches one's spirit, bringing the pure joy of quiescence. For those who are enlightened, practicing in this manner is like dragons receiving water, and like tigers roaming freely in the mountains. For those who are not yet enlightened, practicing in this manner is like blowing air into a fire, there is no need to exert much effort. If they understand clearly and correctly, it is definite that they will succeed.

However, when one's practice advances, one may encounter more demonic phenomena, as there are numerous favorable and unfavorable conditions along the way. As long as one can maintain proper mindfulness in the present moment, nothing will become an obstruction. These demonic states are clearly delineated in various texts, including the *Surangama Sutra*, Master Gui-Feng's *Guide to Cultivation and Realization Based on the Sutra of Complete Enlightenment*, and the *Great Samatha-Vipasyana* [by Master Zhi-Yi]. In order to take proper precautions, one should not ignore these texts.

When one intends to get out of samadhi, move the body slowly and stand up in a gentle and peaceful manner. There should be no abrupt motions. Afterwards, one should protect one's samadhi power all the time, practicing expediently in all situations, as if one is protecting a little baby. That way, the power of samadhi will be attained easily.

One must know that the cultivation of Chan samadhi is most urgent. If one's mind cannot settle down in Chan samadhi, even though one may advance in the practice of contemplation, one will still feel lost. The extraction of pearls from the bottom of the

ocean is best done when there are no waves. When the water is disturbed, the task will become difficult. Likewise, when the water of samadhi is clear and pure, the pearl of the mind will manifest by itself. Therefore the *Sutra of Complete Enlightenment* says: The unhindered pure wisdom arises from samadhi. The *Lotus Sutra* says: One should go to a quiet place free of disturbance to cultivate and regulate one's mind. Let the mind settle and be immovable, like Mount Sumeru.

Therefore, it is through practicing in conditions that are quiet and free of disturbance that one can transcend the worldly and enter into the saintly. When one's life comes to the end, to be able to expire while sitting or standing, one must rely on the power of samadhi. For those who are determined to accomplish the goal of liberation in one life, it is possible that they may still be wasting time [even with their strong determination]. For those who keep on procrastinating [without giving rise to a firm determination], what can they do but to follow the force of karma [helplessly]? That is why the ancient masters have the following admonition: Without the power of samadhi, it is as if one is capitulating in front of the door of death; it is as if one merely closes one's eyes and returns empty handed, having roamed around like a vagabond. I hope that my fellow Chan practitioners will read this article frequently [and use what they learn to] benefit themselves and others, so that all will attain complete enlightenment together.

Calcutta Offering

Naked in solid rain,
she washes a taxi
with her tattered dress,
rubbing hard,
tensing muscles
in noodle arms.

At the end,
when the sun
is drying her
and the taxi driver
has pitched her a coin,
this trembling child
climbs into
her ashen washcloth
and buys a cup of tea.

She spills some
in the gutter
and offers the rest to me.



--Mike Morical

“Are You Sure”

Retreat Report by D.S.

"IT SUDDENLY CONNECTED THAT BEING 'SURE' SIMPLY MEANT BEING SURE THAT WHEN THE FOOT IS ON THE GROUND, THE FOOT IS ON THE GROUND?"

The December 2000 retreat was another invaluable opportunity to work on the method of silent illumination, benefiting both from Shifu's clear teachings on the method and from the conducive environment - meditating in the new Chan Hall, a wonderful group of people, and good organization.

During this retreat I had my first experience being timekeeper. Before my turn came, I dedicated some time to observing how the experienced timekeepers did their work - trying to pick up tips on leading exercises, hitting the wooden fish, and when verbal instructions are really necessary. When my turn came, however, I found I was quite nervous, not only because of being in front of a large group of people, but also because the timekeeper sets a degree of the atmosphere in which others are to practice, and I did not want to disturb that atmosphere any more than necessary.

Because of this nervousness, during the day's first early morning session I did speed a bit through the morning yoga exercises, and also forgot about the morning prostrations. Nothing really bad happened, but I did not feel very confident, and I'm sure it showed. After the morning session was over, Guoyuan Fa Shi asked if I still wanted to be timekeeper. I told him I did, but that I am a slow learner, and it will just take me a while to get in the groove. Guoyuan Fa Shi's reply was, "Slow is okay. Slow, but sure."

This last word, "sure," made a strong impression, and it kept impressing itself on my mind for some time to come. At first, I thought that being "sure" meant being sure of myself, so I went about breakfast very intentionally, with a strong willful focus in every action. This did awaken my spirit, which was useful, and did make me feel more sure about myself. But this intense approach did not make me very calm or relaxed. Also, I wasn't ignoring wandering thoughts as Shifu had told us to do; this self-willful type of method seems to suppress wandering thoughts instead.

After breakfast, while walking back to the Chan Hall, it suddenly connected that being "sure" simply meant being sure that when the foot is on the ground, the foot is on the ground, and when lifting the foot, I am lifting the foot- simply being sure of the

body and mind in the present moment. When my mind would wander from the "task at hand," as Shifu calls it, I would ask myself, "Are you sure?", and thus return the mind to the body's present action. In fact, this simple present moment type of sureness gave rise to a very unique sense of "confidence." However, I would not call it self-confidence, and to be honest, I would not even call it confidence at all. It was just clear action, without doubt or confidence - feet on ground, bottom on cushion, hand picking up spoon, jaws chewing. I practiced "being sure" for the rest of the retreat and found a real peace and Dharma joy in it. I did of course continue to have more than plenty wandering thoughts, and when my thoughts wandered there was always doubt, elation, frustration, conceit, desire, confusion, etc. But when the mind was just sure of the task at hand, there was no problem. Because of the method, the mind was protected from mistakes.

Shifu once compared putting down our vexations via the methods of Chan to getting leaches off of our body with salt. Normally, we would try to pull the leaches off forcefully, just like trying various forceful ways to make our self, our ego, feel confident, or to make our wandering thoughts disappear. But pulling off leaches can lead to infections, since part of the leach may be left behind, thus causing more problems than even the leach itself. Similarly, even if we make our selves feel confident by acting differently or trying to view our selves or the world differently, what new images have we created for our selves and what new afflictions do these "new" selves have? It's just like when we fight against wandering thoughts, and a new set of wandering thoughts and new vexations are created. In Chan, we pour salt on our body instead. By pouring salt on our body, the leaches will fall off naturally, in their own time. This way, although it will take time, they are sure to fall off completely without causing us any new problems. Pouring salt on the body is analogous to applying the Chan method; in this case the method of silent illumination (or "being sure"). When the mind is on the method, there is neither self-confidence nor doubt; the mind is on the present, and wandering thoughts just come and go while vexations dwindle away in their own time. The method does not cause any new afflictions. "Being sure" (or silent illumination) is pouring on salt. When using this method, it is very refreshing not to worry about one's presentation, one's ability, or one's confidence.

Just taking part in life as life presented itself moment by moment was very rewarding - but also not easy for me to maintain. My silent illumination practice during retreat was off and on. However, this inconsistency provided a stark and clear contrast between the ease and Dharma joy of silent illumination practice and the heavy burden of self-centered thinking. Seeing this contrast so clearly, and realizing the

effectiveness of this Chan method, I came away with a refreshed and renewed faith in myself and the practice. Now for the real practice... to keep the method in daily life!

Sound

A report from the regular Saturday all-day meditations at the Chan Meditation Center by Katie Feucht

This story is about sound.

I know of no place where sounds are more amazing than down in Elmhurst, Queens at the Chan Meditation Center. (Chan is Chinese for Zen.) I have some sweet friends there that are special angels.

Being a Zen student one discovers that sounds are very important. The discipline includes just sitting and listening; listening to the sounds of now; listening with the whole being, not with just ears alone. Even the cells of our bodies are always listening. There is immense peace in just listening without making comments or judgments about it-like, "I don't like that," or, "What a lovely bird sound."

Every Saturday from 9am to 3pm a small group of Zen students meets for meditation. The Chan Center provides a nice room on the second floor of their temple for this. It is a tough sit. There are 9 half-hour sitting sessions with 5 minutes of yoga or silent walking breaks in between. We all go out to eat and talk with great enthusiasm afterwards. The main catch to all this is that the building is on a downtown street corner and the noise of horns, boom boxes, buses and sirens is relentless.

It's no quiet retreat in the country. But this unbelievably still space in the center of the profusion of city sounds is an oasis of wonder. We all love it somehow.

One particular Saturday all was going well and I was filled with peace and subtle joy which is a familiar response in meditation for me. It was around 11am. Downstairs, next-door somewhere, a baby began to cry and cry. It was a young baby in a crib, I imagined. It was a grating, troubling sound. Even more troubling was that it didn't stop. The crying kept going for 3 sitting periods. I felt the sound in every part of my body. At first it was just nothing but painful. On and on it went. I sent love and light and folded the baby in my heart. I felt I had never loved anyone or anything more. The baby became part of me. Then abruptly the crying stopped. I was shocked.

The sense of loss was immense. Then I was flooded with a sense of Oneness with everything. I almost fainted with joy in wave after wave. I glimpsed our Oneness. I had felt it so deeply I would never be able to doubt it again.

So, I am grateful for the lessons given. Sometimes they are not ones I'd choose for myself but that doesn't decrease their value or blessings.

Thank you again.

Untitled

My heart is not at peace
but somewhere something is --
peace is the slow drone
of the way things are
as the world turns beyond you --
mountains fold and flow,
strands of desire fall
tangled in the rain.

--Scot Ezell



The Past

News from the Chan Meditation Center and the DDMBA Worldwide

Master Sheng Yen Speaks On Life and Death

The Tuesday evening meditation group that meets on East 82nd Street in Manhattan welcomed Master Sheng Yen on November 6, 2001 for a special talk. Although the topic for, "Life and Death Issues from a Chan Perspective," was chosen much earlier in the year, his words of insight and encouragement came at a particularly appropriate time in light of the tragedies of September 11th.

Shifu opened his talk by explaining that the basic simplicity of Chan is a support for us in conducting our lives in a joyful, stable and positive manner. Although many people's minds tend to fluctuate between cherishing life and avoiding death, he reminded us that from a Chan perspective life and death are inseparable from our experience of every day. He reminded us that in all of human history we have never found a single person who has not died.

Shifu described life as being the boundless extension of limitless lightness. Although many people regard life as being a finite span of a certain number of years, he refuted this view as an incorrect understanding of life. He emphasized that there is also the spiritual component, which can exist forever.

He contrasted the tangible, visible aspects of life with their intangible spiritual aspects; he contrasted reincarnation based upon karma versus reincarnation based upon an intentional vow; he explained that with each lifetime one's wisdom and merit are changing and growing.

Shifu explained that one can enhance this limitless life through engaging in sincere Chan practice and making good use of every lifetime. In this way we can boundlessly extend this limitless lightness.

Many people who are struggling with the loss of a loved one have come to Shifu with questions such as, "Our family is good, why should we be suffering this loss?" He explained that everyone comes to this

world with a mission, and when the mission is accomplished that person will leave.

He likened it to a group of people who are traveling together on a bus; at some point one person gets off and continues traveling on a different bus. It may not be easy to accept that this person has a different destination, but it is unreasonable to insist that he or she would not. We nevertheless feel sad when they get off the bus; this is the normal reaction. So how do we stop the suffering?

Shifu suggests that we try the following, and in times of distress could even repeat it to ourselves as a kind of four part mantra: Face it; Accept it; Handle it; Put it down.

A member of the audience asked Shifu to explain what he meant by "put it down." Shifu responded that after you have used your wisdom and any resources that you can mobilize to solve the problem, you should then put it behind you. He further advised that even if you find that you are incapable of handling it, you still must put it down rather than continuing to suffer. By way of example he said that if you were to be shot by an arrow, the wound would never heal if you were to keep stabbing yourself with another arrow. You finally must put it down.

Lindley Hanlon closed the talk by thanking Shifu for once again coming to speak with us, and thanked Rebecca Li for translating, as well as the audience for their participation and inspired questions.

Master Sheng Yen Addresses World Economic Forum

On February 1 and 2, 2002, Master Sheng Yen attended the World Economic Forum (WEF) in New York. The WEF invited religious leaders representing different religious and spiritual traditions from all over the world to discuss issues related to religion at this meeting. Master Sheng Yen was the only representative from the Buddhist tradition.

During the first day of meeting, several private meetings among the religious leaders were held. In one meeting, the topic of discussion was

the role of religious leaders in the use of moral resources internationally to construct a genuine cultural dialogue and the search for common values to connect different communities. Religious leaders were asked to prioritize the important issues in the world. Poverty, the widening gap between the rich and the poor, and environmental crisis were among the issues raised.

Besides the private meetings, Master Sheng Yen also attended a session titled "Biotechnology: Translating Ethical Concerns into Regulation." The participants and presenters of the session, mostly scientists and scholars from other related disciplines, were delighted to hear the perspective from a Buddhist master. When invited to express his views, Master Sheng Yen pointed out that Buddhism is not opposed to research on genetic engineering and manipulation. This is because we believe in the law of causes and conditions. When causes and conditions are ripe for a certain phenomenon to occur, it will and it is okay. However, such research must be guided by morality, and not by commercial interest of profit or by the desire to satisfy the curiosity of scientists. In conducting such research, we must first consider the possible unintended or long-term consequences and only proceed when potential negative consequences can be kept to a minimum.

At the working dinner on "What is Sacred in Today's World?", Master Sheng Yen was among the few religious leaders appointed to serve as discussion leaders. In his speech, Master Sheng Yen pointed out that "humankind must understand that the notion of "sacred" is interpreted differently in a multicultural pluralistic world, and that we should strive to seek for harmony. He asserted that such harmony can only be found by discovering the commonality within difference, and accepting the difference within commonality. This view was echoed by other religious leaders during the round-table discussion that followed the speech.

On the second day, the religious leaders met privately to discuss the possible formation of a Council of Religious Leaders in WEF. Religious leaders discussed whether they felt such a council should be formed, and if so, what its purpose and actions in the near future should be. There was a general agreement that such a council would help introduce the religious perspective to the WEF's work and thus

benefit all people. A steering committee will be formed to discuss the details of the council's formation.

At a working lunch, Master Sheng Yen met with social entrepreneurs who engage in various social services through secular, volunteer organizations all over the world. They discussed whether the spiritual dimension of religion is still necessary, or just the good intentions of social entrepreneurs will suffice when working to improve the conditions for people around the world. Master Sheng Yen pointed out that religion is very much necessary. It is through spiritual practices that one attains inner peace, which gives one the inner strength to accomplish challenging social services. Without such inner strength, one can have the best intentions and moral ideas when engaging in social services. However, when one encounters difficulties and obstacles, vexations will arise and one will not know how to handle them. It is through spiritual practice that one learns to handle these emotional afflictions.

After the last discussion of the day ended, Master Sheng Yen gave an interview at a press conference attended by journalists from the Chinese press of the New York area and Taiwan. Once the interview was over, Master Sheng Yen promptly departed for Taiwan and returned to the busy schedule waiting for him there.

Chinese New Year at CMC

Chinese New Year 2002, the Year of the Horse, was celebrated with blessings, entertainment and lunch, at the Chan Center in Elmhurst on February 17. Master Jen Chun blessed us with a Dharma talk and his encouraging words for the new year. He asked us to examine the virtues of the horse: daily brighter, galloping farther, strongly resolute, genuinely virtuous, decisive, firm, vigorous. He encouraged us to emulate the horse in our strong determination to polish the bodhi-mind.

We then received Master Sheng Yen's blessings from Taiwan via videotape, expressing his best wishes to us all for the new year. He reminded us that although the series of natural and manmade disasters of the past year have put many minds ill at ease, we have at the same

time broadened our characters, our spirituality and world perspective through our disaster relief work in Taiwan and New York. Shifu emphasized that relieving difficulties for those in distress advances our maturity in the bodhisattva's way.

At the close of morning service, we proceeded downstairs to discover that the cooking volunteers had once again prepared a delicious variety of vegetarian dishes. Then the afternoon program was off to an exciting start with a martial arts display led by kung fu teacher Gao Xian, with his students from the Kao Kung Fu Academy. Using some of the forms displayed in Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, he explained that all can enjoy a boost to personal strength and good health through the practice of Chinese Kung Fu.

A cheerful song about springtime from the choir was followed by a Chinese street puppet show by the Little Bodhisattvas. The children, their parents and staff offered a delightful performance using five puppets to portray a tale of the Three Jewels: Buddha, Dharma, Sangha. Good fun and laughter for all.

A highlight of the afternoon was the elegant presentation of music and dance by Cheng Sheng Hua, offering her modern dance interpretation of Praise for Valentine. She was accompanied on er hu (a Chinese two-string instrument) by Chou Ping. Their graceful collaboration was greeted with a loud round of applause, and was followed by a dramatic comedy presented by the bodhisattvas of the Chan Center. Entitled "Journey of a Stone Monkey" and led by tai chi teacher David Ngo, four volunteers dramatized the hilarious difficulties to be overcome when helping out at the Center, undeterred by heat, personality conflicts, and the awkward transport of bulky boxes.

We ended the day with a fun sing-along led by Joe Hsia and the New Jersey DDMBA Chapter, with many familiar songs. The Dharma Drum Mountain Choir closed the program with a memorable song written by Shifu offering words of encouragement.

The entire afternoon program was emceed by David Kabacinski and Mina Tang, who both did a great job in keeping the events rolling smoothly along.

Guoyuan Fa Shi brought the day to a close by thanking all of the members and volunteers for their dedication, work, donations and arrangements; as well as offering his appreciation to Master Jen Chun and his disciples for their participation and spiritual support.

We join Guoyuan Fa Shi in these thanks and appreciation, wishing a happy and prosperous New Year to all!

John Crook and Simon Child Speak at Chan Center

On March 14, 2002 Drs. John Crook and Simon Child spoke at the Chan Meditation Center in Queens. Drs. Crook and Child, both of whom have received transmission from Shifu, are associated with Shifu's United Kingdom affiliate, The Western Chan Fellowship. Their talk, entitled "Emptying the Barrel: A Western Zen Retreat," described certain methods they have developed, at Shifu's suggestion, to help bring the Buddhadharma to Westerners.

Dr. Crook said that while the fundamentals of the Dharma are the same everywhere, the best way to transmit the Dharma may differ somewhat from culture to culture. Shakyamuni himself often spoke of the need to use "expedient means" in teaching, and Buddhist history demonstrates that each culture will find its own ways of expressing Buddhism.

Drs. Crook and Child then described certain methods they have developed for use by Westerners, and which they would use in the Western Zen Retreat to be held at the Dharma Drum Retreat Center at Pine Bush from March 15 through March 20. These methods involve adaptations of the traditional Chan methods of gong'an and huatou to certain Western therapeutic techniques.

After the talk there was a lively question and answer period. The evening concluded with some socializing during which the audience of about fifty people had a chance to meet the two speakers personally.

Yoga at the Chan Center by Dr. Rikki Asher

Yoga relaxes the body and mind, and is a natural compliment to Chan sitting meditation. Hatha yoga postures instill energy and help one experience physical, mental, intellectual and spiritual well-being.

I taught a series of yoga classes at the Chan Center on Saturday afternoons in February and March. This is actually the second series I taught at the Center. I am pleased to have had the opportunity to work with the members of the class. They worked hard and were sincere in their practice. Reports from some participants reveal benefits they derived.

As a musician, yoga is a perfect exercise for relaxing my body from practicing my instrument. I usually have to practice at least two hours everyday. Yoga is very relaxing and beneficial to my body aches, especially for my back. My body is much looser and more relaxed than before. I didn't know my body was so tense and non-flexible. I wish that we could have a second term to learn more yoga postures. I enjoyed the approach. Of course, I must try and practice Yoga everyday and make it become part of my life. -- Y.H.

Yoga really helped me to relax my mind and release my tense muscles. During the yoga classes, my bad dreams faded away and happiness filled my mind. It was like cleaning the attic. Yoga was a relaxing, challenging, and fulfilling form of exercise. I wish the yoga classes would last a bit longer. -- A.Y.F.K.

I am a very nervous person with no patience at all. After learning the yoga postures for four weeks, I feel more relaxed in my soul and can control my emotions better. After practicing yoga a few times, my body is not as tense as before. Some of my friends told me that my complexion is better than before too. That is something I never expected from yoga. Sometimes during work, I feel so overloaded and my temper almost explodes. By inhaling and exhaling deeply, I feel that I can get rid of my nervousness and anger slowly. I truly believe that one day I will become an easygoing, and

easily satisfied person if I keep practicing the yoga postures. My friend told me that meditation is also very helpful for relaxing the body and mind. I look forward to taking more yoga lessons with meditation to enrich my life experience. -- L.P.

Yoga is a Sanskrit term. Its definition implies its purpose: to unite the mind, body, and spirit to improve health and to enhance the overall quality of life. As the students have expressed, yoga can increase energy and reduce stress. Before we began the poses, the class read the Heart Sutra aloud as a group. Afterward, I read excerpts from Shifu's book, *There Is No Suffering: a Commentary on the Heart Sutra*. For beginners the issue of pain and tension in muscles becomes quickly apparent. I believed that the Heart Sutra could offer some relief and reminded students that the pain is temporary and connected to the mind. This book was a wonderful guide to explore the idea that "suffering is a psychological state," and that "pain is not always the cause of suffering, and not accepting physical pain always leads to suffering" (2001, p. 40). The last report was written by a very good friend, and longtime lay member of the Center, Nancy Makso. She explained the impact yoga had on her body and insights related to the Heart Sutra as a result of the class.

For the last few weeks, I have been attending a yoga class at the Chan Meditation Center. I went primarily because I wanted to enhance the few poses that I already know and practice in my morning routine. I have attended a number of meditation retreats and have learned some stretches, poses, techniques. I have also attended random sets of yoga classes throughout the years. Secondly, I attended because my good friend Rikki was teaching the class. She and I met in 1978, when we frequented intermediate meditation classes together in the Bronx.

The yoga classes coincided with Lent, a season I still respect as a Catholic. What that means is that my already simple life becomes even simpler. I avoid conspicuous entertainment and fun foods. The first is harder than the second. This year I also attempted a liver cleansing diet for two weeks after

attending a lecture on the benefits of eating grains and green bitter vegetables, beans and herbs. I was able to stick to it, and when I attended two classes in the midst of this diet, I found that my body reacted to yoga more positively. My mind was clearer, and I gradually became more flexible.

I looked forward to doing the yoga classes. It was wonderful that she had us read the Heart Sutra in the beginning of each class. She then read the benefits of the practice and the proper attitude. We went through the same postures from the previous classes, with a few new ones added as well.

*Last week, she mentioned that she borrowed an audio tape from the Chan Library of Thich Nhat Hanh's Heart Sutra Lectures. I asked to borrow it. I now understand that not only is the sutra an explanation of Sariputra's awakening, it is also a celebration. Many years ago, when we read the English translation it read: Gone, gone, gone beyond, gone all together beyond. Hail the awakening. To tell the truth, I never really got it [until now]. Thich Nhat Hahn explained that all of us will be going to the other shore: the shore of enlightenment. Together we will go and celebrate the arrival. I appreciate the celebration of sentient beings eventually arriving and waking up to their true nature. -- **Nancy Makso***

It has been a pleasure to teach this yoga class and to see the courage, faith and perseverance displayed in the students each week. Class members expressed how through yoga they effectively relieved stress, tension, bodily ills, and achieved a personal balance in their lives. It is my hope that they will continue to practice and there will be another occasion for me to teach Yoga in the near future.

In Brief

First Presentation of Beginners' Dharma Class

In January 2002 members of the Dharma Lecturer Training Program presented the Beginners' Dharma Class for the first time.

Approximately twenty students attended the course, which is designed to provide students with an introduction to certain core beliefs of Buddhism, using Shifu's pamphlet on the Four Noble Truths, "Setting in Motion the Dharma Wheel," as a textbook.

The course consists of three two-hour classes. It will be presented again in June 2002. Please see the Future section for specific dates. Anyone interested in attending should contact the Center at (718) 592-6593.

Three-day and One-day Retreats

A three-day retreat was held from February 21 to 24 at the Dharma Drum Retreat Center. Twenty-eight participants attended this retreat. A one-day retreat was held at the Chan Meditation Center on March 30. It was attended by twenty-seven participants. Both retreats were conducted by Guo-yuan Fa Shi.

The DDRC Retreat Scholarship Fund

The Dharma Drum Retreat Center Scholarship Fund was established to provide full or partial scholarships to practitioners who want to attend the seven-, ten-, or fourteen-day retreats, but cannot afford the expenses. To be qualified, interested candidates must have previously attended at least one seven-day retreat with Chan Master Sheng Yen either in the U.S. or abroad, and must be in good physical and mental health.

Qualified applicants will be selected for each retreat. Candidates from abroad are welcome to apply. Please request an application form via fax (718) 592-0717 or write to:

DDRC Retreat Scholarship Fund
Chan Meditation Center

90-56 Corona Avenue
Elmhurst, NY 11371, USA

Chan Magazine would like to hear from you

How's your practice going? How has it affected your daily life? Have your experiences inspired you to make any art, or write any poetry? Whatever it is, we'd like to see it, and possibly share it with the rest of you by publishing it in the magazine. Please attach your submissions to an e-mail and send it to chanmagazine@yahoo.com.

With our gratitude,
The editors