

“I wandered through the city, a monk in old robes, sleeping in doorways, nodding with the homeless through the night in coffee shops, foraging through dumpsters for fruit and vegetables. I was in my early fifties, no spring chicken, but I was lit from within by my mission to bring the Dharma to the West. Besides, what did it matter? The lessons Donchu had taught me made it a matter of indifference to me whether I slept in a big room or a small room or in the doorway of a church.”

*From Footprints in the Snow:
The Autobiography of a Chinese Monk*
by Chan Master Sheng Yen,
Doubleday, 2008

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Cover photo by Chris Milson

From The Editor

I've just read a book by the Italian novelist Alessandro Baricco (author of *Silk*, soon to be a major motion picture) called *I Barbari, The Barbarians*, a collection of essays that examine the deterioration of the institutions of life that he holds most dear – literature, music, scholarship, wine, soccer (he's Italian, after all), civilization as he knows it. He treats the institutions as “villages” under attack by some new kind of creature, “mutants,” with something like gills instead of lungs, who do not simply destroy, but rather transform what they encounter into a landscape better suited to their transformed anatomy, one in which they will breathe freely but we (I clearly identify with the author), alas, may not. He uses this metaphor to examine the phenomenon of headlong cultural change, by asking and trying to answer a series of questions: Who are the barbarians? What do they want? What are the characteristics of the new artifacts they create, as opposed to those of our beloved dying traditions? And by what methods do they wreak what we old folks see as such havoc?

The analysis Baricco makes is complex, but I'll try to convey its essence through a couple of his examples:

Wine was made, for centuries, in a very few countries, by a small elite of artisans, who had inherited their unique land and their esoteric skills from generations of forebears, and who created a product that was profound, austere, difficult, unapproachable in its youth, unpredictable in its age, and reliably different from year to year, from hillside to hillside, even from bottle to bottle. Now wine is made ev-

erywhere, its quality is controlled by technology, it is immediately drinkable, its sensory appeal is extravagant, it all tastes the same... and sales have gone through the roof.

A similar thing has happened with books. Writers and intellectuals are fond of saying that what with TV and the internet people don't read anymore, but in fact U.S. book sales are up 60% in the last decade. What people don't read anymore is what we call “literature,” meaning those books that stand on their own as complete works of art, but they're reading the heck out of all the thousands of books that are by-products of other cultural artifacts – the insider tell-alls, the ghost-written celebrity autobiographies, the extended op-eds, the books based on the film. These are books that have no independent value; they hang like so many twinkling lights on the Christmas tree of popular culture, and begin to cloy as soon as their season passes, but we are writing and reading a huge lot of them.

But it is in Google that Baricco finds the icon of the cultural phenomenon he is trying to understand and identify. In the old epistemology, an idea was considered correct and important according to how well it corresponded to something identified as *the truth*, but in the world according to Google the very concept of information, of truth, of quality, of what is important and what is not, has been radically reformulated. The Google search leads not to the truth, as determined by an elite cadre of experts, but to the most popular hub, as determined by the pathways of links that make up the web. And once there the imperative

is not to stay for any length of time, but to alight and be off, following the web wherever it may lead. “The idea that understanding and knowing signify entering deeply into that which we study, until we discover its essence, is a lovely idea that is dying,” he writes. In the Googled world the truth “is not hidden in the depths, but dispersed along the surface,” and the act of knowing, thus redefined, has a specific name, coined in 1993: *surfing*.

“Never has a name been more precise,” writes Baricco. It’s not the *ding an sich*, the thing in itself, nor the depth of experience that matters, but the ever-shifting web of relations between things, and the freedom of movement that implies – sounds positively Buddhist, like emptiness made electronically manifest. On the other hand, lightly skimming over the waves from one briefly held notion to another sounds a lot like wandering thought – how are we to “penetrate through the heights and the depths, without omitting anything,” as Yuanwu taught, in a world where surfing has

replaced “stopping and seeing” as the road to wisdom?

And what will such a world make of Buddhism, and of an institution like Chan Magazine? Even if we were to become Chan Magazine Online – toward which the economics of printing and mailing already propel us – would not our mission define us as some kind of reactionary holdout, preaching stillness and contemplation to a growing legion of mobile multi-taskers for whom wandering mind is not the problem, but the goal?

Baricco makes it clear whose side he’s on, but he also recognizes that this kind of cultural shift has occurred again and again throughout history, that it’s always seen as catastrophe by the elders, and that things are more complex than nostalgic value judgment makes them seem. I wonder, though, what kind of Buddhism we can pass on to Gen iPod, and whether it, like so much modern merlot, will be as easy to forget as it is to drink.



Photo: Kaifen Hu

The Noble Eightfold Path

Part Two

by

Chan Master Sheng Yen

In the fall of 2003 and the spring of 2004 Master Sheng Yen gave several lectures at the Chan Meditation Center in Queens, New York, on the Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path. This article is the second of four in which Master Sheng Yen discusses the Eightfold Path as a liberation process. The articles are part of Master Sheng Yen's forthcoming book on the 37 Aids to Enlightenment. The lectures were orally translated by Dr. Rebecca Li, transcribed by Sheila Sussman, and edited by Ernest Heau.

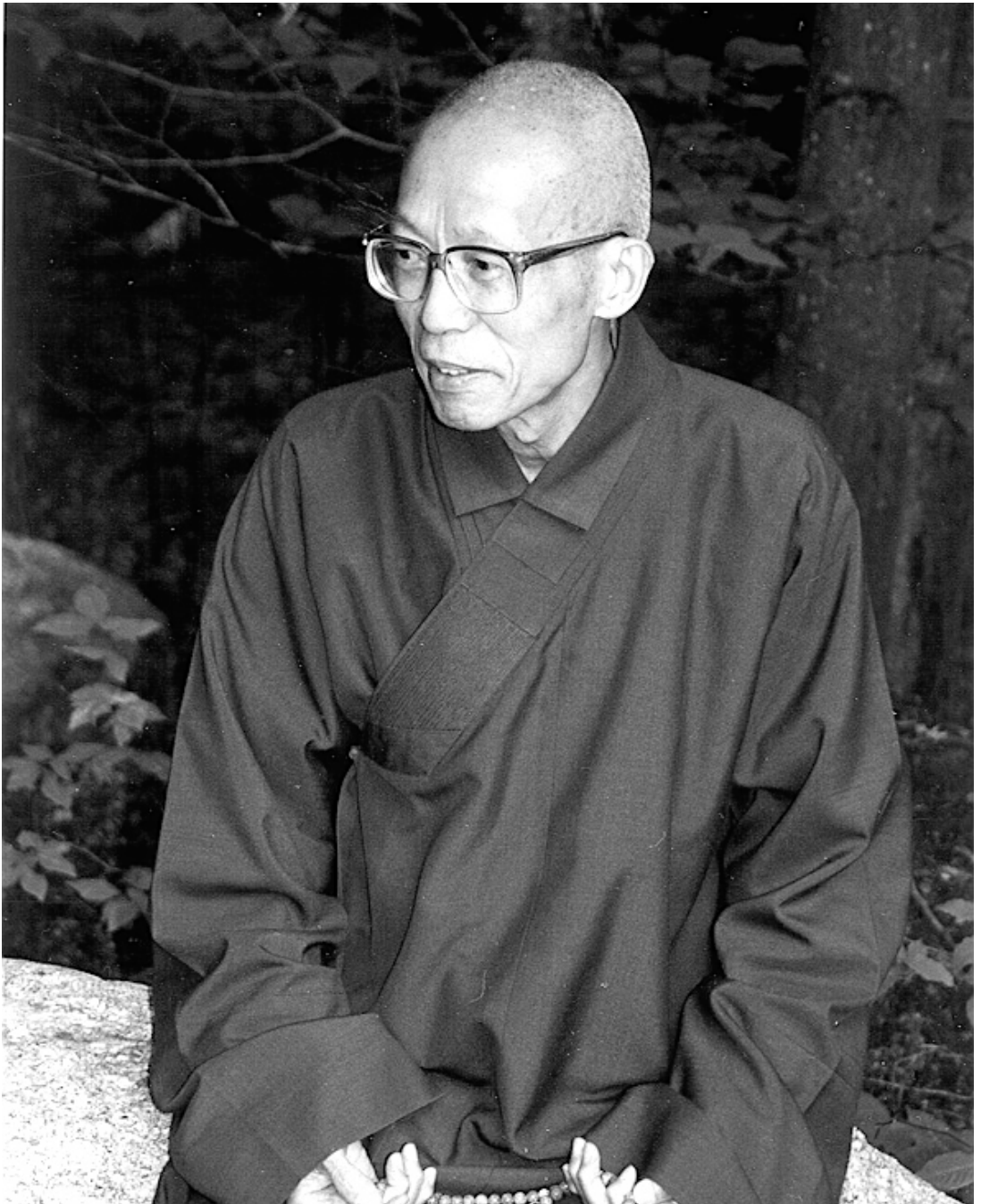
The Noble Eightfold Path can be seen from the point of view of the threefold division of Buddhist practice into precepts, samadhi, and wisdom. In this representation, the first two Noble Paths, Right View and Right Intention, comprise the path of wisdom. Precepts, or ethical behavior, include Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood. Samadhi, the practice of meditation, consists of Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. With that in mind, in this article we will discuss Right View and Right Intention, the Noble Paths of wisdom.

Right View

Right View is the foundation teaching of the entire Eightfold Noble Path. Without Right View one cannot properly practice the Eightfold Noble Path. For a practitioner, not having Right View is like trying to drive on a mountain road at night without headlights. With Right View traveling the Path is relatively easy — we understand that unless we culti-

vate the Path we will surely experience continued suffering. Unless we understand that we create the causes of our own suffering, we cannot appreciate the importance of practice. However, it is also within our power to create the causes and conditions that can end our suffering. So, both the aggregation of suffering and the cessation of suffering result from causes and conditions.

Soon after his enlightenment, the Buddha expounded the Four Noble Truths to his five original disciples. In this sermon he communicated just four ideas: suffering, aggregation, cessation, and the Path. Suffering is a fact of existence and is caused by our accumulating (aggregating) the causes of suffering. However, suffering can indeed be ended and the way to cessation is through the Path. Therefore, Right View is also precisely about the Four Noble Truths: understanding that this world is suffering, and knowing how we can depart from suffering.



The Origins of Suffering

As human beings living in this world we need to acknowledge and understand that in life there is suffering. Where does this suffering come from? What causes it? Suffering comes from the countless past lives in which we have been creating karma. We create karma and then we experience the retribution from that karma. At the same time, in this life we create more karma and as a result we experience more retribution. That is what we have been doing life after life — creating karma and experiencing retribution. When karma is created we call that “aggregation.” And when causes and conditions ripen, retribution is experienced as suffering. Therefore, we suffer because the causes of suffering still exist in

our lives, and being ignorant of this we create more karma. In trying to escape suffering we create more causes of suffering, and pursuing happiness we create more causes of unhappiness.

Therefore, to liberate ourselves from suffering we need to eliminate the causes of suffering. To stop a pot from boiling over, you remove the heat. If you want to stop suffering you have to remove what causes suffering — the creation of new karma. To depart from suffering, stop creating more causes of suffering. Put simply, that is the approach.

We can speak of two kinds of cause and effect: first is “worldly cause and effect” that brings about the aggregation of suffering; second is



Photo: Kaifen Hu

“world-transcending cause and effect” that brings about cessation of suffering. Worldly cause and effect is that which creates more retribution karma, and world-transcending cause and effect is that which does not create retribution karma. Those who do not understand how suffering accumulates can be said to be ignorant, while those who do can be said to have wisdom.

Understanding the aggregation of suffering is the wisdom of Right View but it is not yet the wisdom of cessation and liberation, not yet the wisdom of nirvana. The Sanskrit word “nirvana” literally means “extinction,” or in the Buddhist context, the state of non-arising and non-perishing. Having Right View is understanding that causes and conditions bring about the aggregation of suffering, and that causes and conditions also bring about the cessation of suffering. But this understanding is not enough for one to become liberated; one still needs to cultivate the Eightfold Noble Path.

Take a person who commits a crime and goes to jail. If he serves out his sentence, one day he will be free. Let’s say that before his sentence is served he tries to escape. He is caught and is sentenced to even more time in prison. Trying to put an end to his suffering by escaping, he creates more suffering for himself. Similarly, in order to be liberated from life’s suffering, one needs to cease giving rise to the causes of suffering. It is not enough to want to stop unwholesome behavior and attitudes, because we have created a lot of karma in numerous past lives. This karma manifests as habit in our present life, and though we want to stop unwholesome deeds, we still have ex-

tremely strong entrenched habits. That is why it is necessary to cultivate the Path. We need it to help us regulate our actions, speech, and thoughts so that we will stop generating more causes of suffering, and really bring suffering to a stop.

Unless we actually cultivate the Path, just understanding suffering and its causes will not help us that much. When we have problems we will still suffer, and we will continue to generate the causes for more suffering. Therefore, it is important to also understand the meaning of samsara, which is made up of the cycles of our previous lives, the present life, and our future lives. A new cycle recurs every lifetime that we live without attaining liberation. These cycles of past, present, and future lives make up the transmigration of birth and death, otherwise known as the nidanas, the Twelve Links of Conditioned Arising.

If we can understand how the links lead from one life to another, thus continuing the pattern of suffering, we will understand that to depart from suffering we need to cultivate the Path. That is how to generate wisdom and attain liberation. This transmigration will then cease because the first link in this chain, ignorance or *avidya*, will have been dissolved. The Sanskrit *avidya* translates in Chinese as “without brightness.” In the ordinary mind there is no brightness and no wisdom because it is obscured by vexations. If by cultivating the Path we eliminate vexations, then this ignorance will be eliminated as well, and wisdom will manifest. Once we eliminate ignorance the remaining links will not arise. In this manner, the cessation of the cycle of birth-and-death is accomplished.

Precepts, Samadhi, and Wisdom

In Buddhism, there are three approaches to cultivating the Path: upholding the precepts, cultivating samadhi, and generating wisdom. The first, upholding the precepts, has two aspects: regulating errors of the body and regulating errors of speech. Committing errors of the body means causing suffering to others with our actions; committing errors of speech means saying things that bring suffering to others. To cease causing further suffering through these kinds of mistakes, we need to constantly retake the precepts whenever we make such mistakes. This is what it means to uphold the precepts.

Merely upholding the precepts does not mean that one will no longer have vexation. It is also important to keep the mind stable and calm, so that whatever happens in one's body or environment, one's mind does not suffer.

Some uphold the precepts very diligently yet still have internal conflicts and serious vexations. For example, they may have a strong desire for something, but know that to uphold the precepts they should not give in to the desire. Still, if the desire is strong enough in their minds they will be vexed. This is particularly true for romantic and sexual desires. A man will desire a certain woman but feel that he should not even be looking at her. Or a woman will hear gentle words from a man, and feel that she should not allow herself to

feel attraction. Such people may be very pure in their actions and would not do anything unwholesome but these internal struggles are still vexations.

As long as there is desire one is immersed in samsara, giving rise to more and more suffering. The reason why we can have vexations even though we uphold the precepts is because we do not have a mind that is stable and calm, one that is not affected by the environment. Therefore, besides upholding the precepts, we should also cultivate samadhi to generate a calm and stable mind.

There are two approaches to cultivating samadhi: the gradual and the sudden. In the gradual approach one begins with the Five Methods of Stilling the Mind, then one proceeds to the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, progressing all the way through the rest of the Thirty-

Seven Aids to Enlightenment, ending with the Eightfold Path. This gradual approach proceeds step-by-step towards becoming liberated as an arhat. In this process one will naturally cultivate samadhi as well as wisdom.

Instead of going step-by-step through the Thirty-Seven Aids, the sudden approach of Chan proceeds directly to realization through such methods as *huatou* or Silent Illumination. Through these practices one can culti-

“THEREFORE I OFFER YOU THESE WORDS TO REMEMBER: ‘BEFORE LIBERATION ONE OUGHT TO FULFILL ONE’S RESPONSIBILITIES; BEFORE ATTAINING BUDDHAHOOD ONE SHOULD FIRST BE A GOOD PERSON.’ THIS IS THE WISDOM OF UNDERSTANDING THE REALITY OF PHENOMENA.”

vate a mind that is always in accordance with Chan samadhi. This is a direct way to attain a calm and stable mind, one that will not be affected by what's going on in the body or the environment. In the gradual approach, one first cultivates samadhi and the arising of wisdom follows; in the sudden approach, one cultivates and gives rise to samadhi and wisdom simultaneously.

So is it clear now how one departs from suffering?

Student: Cultivate the Path.

Sheng Yen: What path? One cultivates the Noble Eightfold Path. But what makes up the Noble Eightfold Path? The Path consists of the three disciplines of precepts, samadhi, and wisdom. Among the Noble Eightfold Path, Right View is the most important because it is the foundation for all the others. If one understands Right View, then the remaining paths will be relatively easy to understand.

Right View is a necessary aspect of wisdom but it is not complete without also understanding the reality of phenomena. In my autobiography I wrote that I wept when I visited my parents' graves after being away for many years. A journalist who read about this asked me, "Shifu, you are a highly attained monk. Why would you weep over your dead parents?" I said to him, "I am not a highly attained monk, just an ordinary person. When my parents died I couldn't even be by their side. When I returned, I could only find their gravestones. Knowing there was no way I could repay everything they did for me, all my feelings for them came to mind. It was impossible not to shed tears." Was I being ignorant or was there some wisdom there?

Recently I did a pilgrimage to some of the sites where the Buddha taught. In one place I saw a memorial to the place where a great brahmin asked the Buddha to teach him Dharma. Upon seeing the monument, I knelt down and couldn't help but shed tears. One of my disciples asked me, "Shifu, why are you so sentimental, crying at the sight of this monument?" I said that I was crying out of gratitude to Shakyamuni Buddha for remaining in the world after his enlightenment to teach the Dharma. Had he not done that, we would not be able to hear the Dharma and use it to help ourselves as well as others. Therefore, I am really moved and grateful to Shakyamuni. Is that ignorance or wisdom?

In 1977, when I had recently arrived in the United States, I received a call from Taiwan with news that my master Dongchu had passed away. I became very emotional and speechless. I just cried. A Dharma brother said to me, "Brother, you are not a child any more. That your old master has died is a fact of life, so why are you crying?" The thought that I no longer had my master made me really sad. But then I felt grateful to this Dharma brother for reminding me that it is normal for old people to die. It was ignorant of me to feel so sad, but I couldn't help it because he was my master.

From the perspective of Right View, these stories have to do with the wisdom that comes from understanding the reality that all phenomena, including birth and death, have their place. Whatever roles we play in life — as parent, child, teacher, student — we should fulfill our responsibilities. We do not just say, "Oh, dying is just proof of impermanence. If phenomena are empty and there is no self, why feel sad?" If one thinks this way, one is

truly ignorant. From the perspective of Buddhism, we have our relationships and we have responsibilities to fulfill. Denying their existence is an erroneous view. Before we are liberated we experience the causes and effects of the three times — past, present, and future — and denying that is also an erroneous view. On the other hand, affirming social ties as well as causes and effects is the Right View; it is the wisdom of understanding the reality of phenomena.

People fear death; they also fear the dangers in life, anticipating misfortune. Is that wisdom or ignorance? After returning to America from conducting a retreat in Moscow, I was very exhausted. One of the lay disciples took pity on me: “Oh, Shifu you are so exhausted, poor thing.” So she said, “Shifu, with this SARS epidemic, are you sure you want to go to Taiwan?” Now, I am old and do not have a robust immune system, so this person was apparently worried. I told her there was a time when a lot of planes were crashing and people advised me not to travel by air. I told them that if it were time for me to die it would happen whether I travel by air or not. If it’s not my time to die, that is because I still need to experience retribution karma. When it’s time for me to die it will happen. At the same time I am also very careful to take preventive measures. I am not going to Taiwan to get SARS on purpose, but I am nevertheless not afraid to go there. Is this ignorance or wisdom? If it is wisdom, it would be the wisdom of understanding the reality of phenomena.

Right View includes having the wisdom to accept the reality of phenomena. Just wanting to escape suffering would be failing in our responsibilities and denying causes and conditions. Wanting liberation without un-

derstanding the reality of phenomena is an erroneous view. Therefore I offer you these words to remember: “Before liberation one ought to fulfill one’s responsibilities; before attaining buddhahood one should first be a good person.” This is the wisdom of understanding the reality of phenomena.

Attaining the wisdom of nirvana is our ultimate goal but the wisdom of understanding the reality of phenomena is the process. The wisdom of nirvana is realized when one has attained self-understanding, self-verification, and self-enlightenment. When that happens, one has accomplished everything that one needs to on the Path. It is the complete realization of understanding the reality of phenomena. At this time there is no longer any arising and perishing of causes and conditions. This is the wisdom of nirvana.

Verification means that we completely understand that life arises from causes and conditions and also perishes with causes and conditions. We recognize two kinds of arising and perishing. One is the arising and perishing of the entire life of the body that we now have. This begins with conception in our mother’s womb and ends with death. Second, within one’s life, there is also the moment-to-moment arising and perishing of microscopic events in the tissues and cells of our body. This is the process by which we grow, mature, get old, and deteriorate both in mind and in body. This is all due to the moment-to-moment arising and perishing that goes on within the larger arising and perishing of birth-to-death.

Two years ago I met an elderly practitioner who could recite the entire Surangama Mantra, which is very long. I said to her, “It’s very



good that you can recite the entire mantra even though you are an older person.” She said, “Oh, this mantra is nothing; I can recite the entire *Surangama Sutra*.” She has known the mantra since she was young, so she knew it by heart. A year ago I met her again and learned that she was no longer reciting the Surangama Mantra, but another shorter mantra. I asked her why she was not reciting the Surangama Mantra anymore. She said, “Oh, the Surangama Mantra is way too long and wordy. I’m reciting a mantra that is more concise.” But the truth was that she could no longer remember the whole mantra. This past spring I saw her again and this time she was reciting an even shorter mantra, the Mantra of the Deceased. I am afraid that next time

I see her she will only be reciting Amitabha Buddha’s name. Within the larger arising and perishing of one’s life, there are many smaller arisings and perishings and memories are among them.

Therefore, the idea of arising and perishing refers not only to our entire life; more important, it also refers to every moment of our life. With the wisdom of nirvana we understand very clearly that in every mental, physical, and environmental phenomenon, there is simultaneous arising and perishing. As soon as dharmas arise they are already perishing. Each of you here, do you believe that in every moment, there is constant arising and perishing in your body? In fact, if this were not the case, you would not even be alive. For living things, there must be motion and change. If there is no change, there is no life. As long as we are alive there is metabolism: cells and tissues constantly moving and transforming. How about when we’re dead? Actually, when we die we change even faster. Therefore, those who have realized nirvana, those who have attained self-verification, clearly understand that everything that arises simultaneously perishes. Whatever arises is on its way to perishing. But from whence do things arise? Things arise out of causes and conditions.

This is different from the view that we are all creatures of a God, and when we die we return to that Creator. The Buddhist view is that everything arises and perishes due to causes and conditions. The Buddhist scriptures do not deny the existence of a God who created everything; rather, a deity would have been born out of myriad causes and conditions along with the universe. In Hinduism, this is the Brahman God-King who lives until the death of the universe. When the universe

disappears, the Brahman God-King disappears with it. This Brahman King God does not experience human mortality and therefore appears eternal. From the perspective of a buddha this world is only one of myriad worlds all of which arise and perish eventually. Buddhists do not say that belief in God is superstitious. However, from the Buddhist perspective even such a God must experience birth and death. Therefore, in the wisdom of nirvana there is a very clear understanding that all phenomena, even universes, experience arising and perishing.

So if one looks at the stage between the birth of the universe and its death, there is arising and perishing, and within this period there are also infinite momentary arisings and perishings. Take planet Earth, which is undergoing constant moment-to-moment arising and perishing. These changes occur on other planets

as well. One can only completely attain this wisdom after one has realized nirvana, which is why it is called the wisdom of nirvana.

To the question, "From where does everything arise?" the wisdom of nirvana answers that things do not arise from anywhere. Rather, everything arises from causes and conditions. So when we think, "I'm from Taiwan, or India," it is as if there were something from these places that could come to America. There is something that comes from those places but from the perspective of the wisdom of nirvana that something arose from the coming together of causes and conditions in every moment. I was born as a result of many causes and conditions coming together, including karma that I created from previous lifetimes. Then there were my parents, the environment I grew up in, whatever I consumed growing up, that's how I arose. According to



Photo: Kaifen Hu

physiology, our body replaces all its cells every seven years, so if I stayed here for seven years, only eating Western food, after seven years, I would have a Western body even though I would still look Chinese. You see the point: our body is undergoing arising and perishing all the time.

Several years ago a mother brought her teen-aged child here. When I asked him, "Are you Chinese or American?" this boy said, "I'm American." And I asked, "How about your mother?" "Oh, she's Chinese." Upon hearing that the mother was very upset: "This kid can't even remember his own heritage!" I said to her, "Well, he is right. He grew up here in America, he eats American food; everything he has experienced is American. Of course he is American. And you came from China and grew up in Taiwan, your experiences all came from Chinese society. Of course you're Chinese." Upon hearing this, the child was very happy: "I'm right, I'm American."

So according to the wisdom of nirvana, all phenomena are the way they are because of the coming together of causes and conditions. But as phenomena arise they also perish. And to where do they perish? They don't perish to anywhere; they become new causes and conditions for further arising and perishing. From the perspective of the wisdom of nirvana, there is no place to which phenomena perish. Nirvana means extinction, no arising, and therefore, no more perishing.

Right Intention

The second of the Noble Paths, Right Intention, is also referred to as Right Thought, Right Discrimination, or Right Enlightenment. The essence of Right Intention is us-

ing the Right View that one has acquired. One could say that when we have Right View, Right Intention should follow. This does not mean just thinking about it abstractly, but understanding it through the practice of meditation, or dhyana. With the resulting clarity and stability of mind, you will be able to understand phenomena from the perspective of the Four Noble Truths. For example, normally we are pleased with our body, but at times the body is also a burden and a source of suffering; it is not entirely under our control — we get sick, we age, we die. Or, trying to relieve or suppress the problems of the body may result in more suffering. Observing the body and the mind with Right Intention, we come to understand that impermanence is at the root of suffering. This is an opportunity for some wisdom to arise, but an intellectual understanding of suffering is not enough to liberate us from suffering. One also needs to perceive that suffering is illusory and empty, and so is the self that suffers. Only when we thoroughly penetrate this understanding of emptiness and no-self can we depart from suffering.

I met someone who felt that his life was filled with so much suffering that he saw not much point in living. He saw his body as falling apart, capable of dying anytime. From his point of view, one may just as well have committed suicide to escape suffering. Is there wisdom in thinking this way? Actually, while having some understanding of impermanence, he does not understand that there is also emptiness and no-self. Theoretically, understanding impermanence should lead one to understand emptiness as well as no-self, but that is only conceptual. Without experiential realization of emptiness, this person is unable to see that there is no self behind the

suffering. He does not understand that wanting to end one's life is actually clinging to the self because it is a self that wants to escape.

There can be no true realization of emptiness when we cling to the self. To truly realize emptiness one needs also to give rise to bodhi mind. In fact, emptiness and bodhi mind are two sides of the same coin; one cannot truly realize one without the other. Trying to realize emptiness without giving rise to bodhi mind can only result in a nihilistic kind of emptiness. That will not help one depart from suffering nor experience liberation.

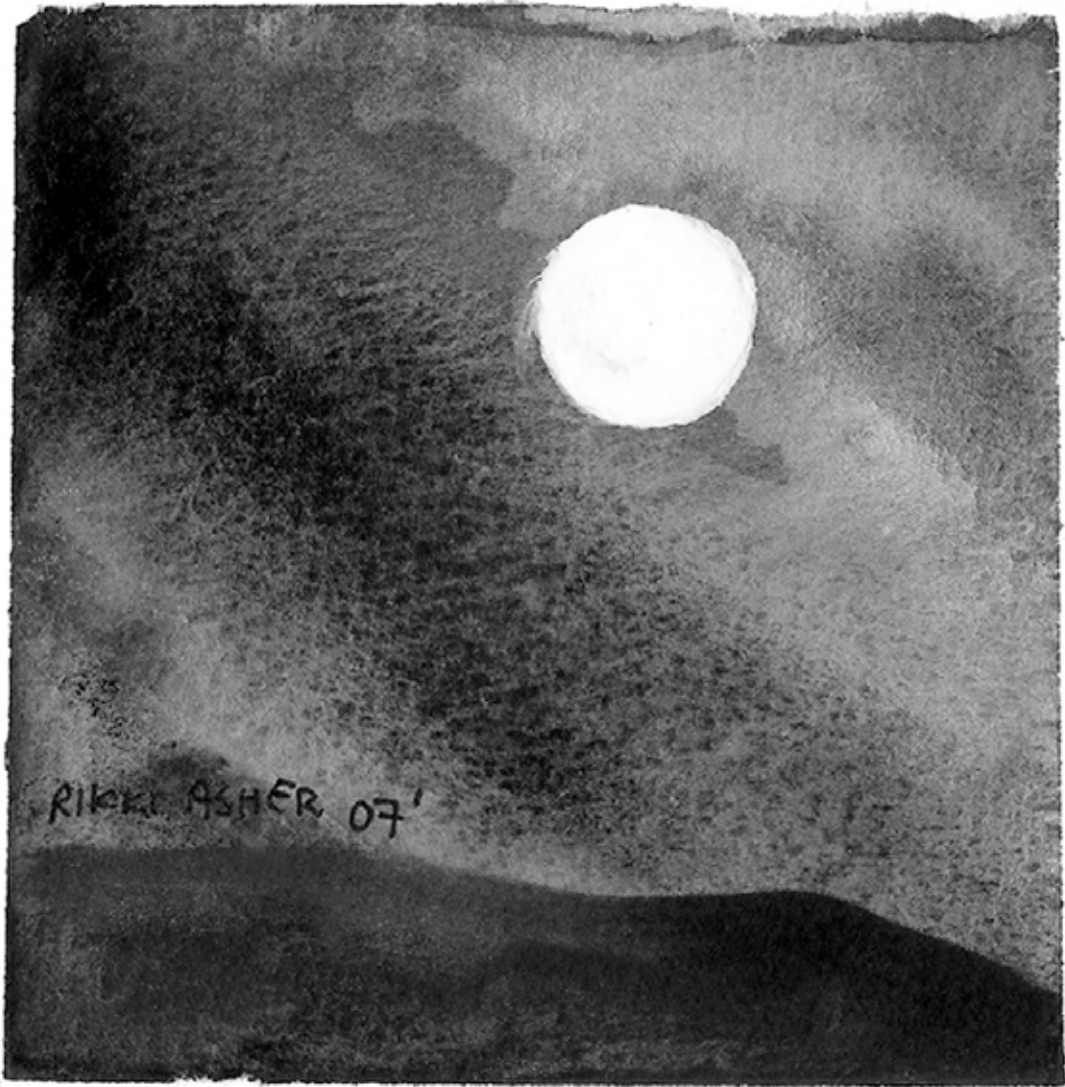
The mind of bodhi is not centered on one's own problems, so when we are suffering, at that moment, we are more concerned about the suffering of others. When I am ill, I use Right Intention and think about an infinite number of beings who are suffering more greatly than I am. This way I hope to use the power of my vows to help deliver people from suffering. In that moment, of course I haven't really decreased anybody's suffering, but just by giving rise to that thought I am already suffering less. So, giving rise to bodhi mind and thinking about the suffering of others can definitely help to decrease one's suffering. For example, if you feel that you lack certain necessities, remind yourself that many have even less. In your bodhi mind, give rise to the wish that they will all have a better situation soon, and that you will form an intention to help those who have less than you. You will find that this thought will bring warmth to your mind and you will feel less unfortunate.

On one seven-day retreat, a participant was in so much physical pain that she felt like she was in hell. Feeling that practice was not for her, she was about to leave the retreat. I said

to her, "Perhaps you can go back to the Chan Hall to deliver other sentient beings." "How am I supposed to deliver sentient beings?" I told her, "When you go back to the Chan Hall, tell yourself that you are there to sit well and inspire your neighbors to practice diligently." She accepted my suggestion and went back to the Chan Hall. There, she thought, "My body aches, but if I am not willing to go to hell to help others, who will?" By thinking this way, she had a very good retreat.

After studying Buddhadharma and the teachings of suffering, impermanence, and no-self, someone can conclude that they have experienced emptiness. While thinking that, this person may continue to suffer a great deal. This person understands that everything is empty and without self but their suffering is there and it's real. So with all this understanding of emptiness and no-self, there's still a lot of suffering. What is missing here? What is missing is bodhi mind. When you have bodhi mind, you will not be so concerned about yourself. When you put the welfare of other sentient beings at a higher priority than your own, you will naturally be less concerned about yourself. When you are not so attached to your ego, you are already experiencing no-self and realizing the nature of emptiness.

Emptiness does not mean that there is nothing there; it is the idea that you are not so attached to your self-concerns. When you are less attached to yourself, you can begin to have a true understanding of emptiness and are able to give rise to wisdom. When you can do that you are on the path towards liberation. You will be able to depart from the five desires of wealth, sex, fame, food, and sleep, and truly be able to depart from suffering.



“Full Moon”
Painting by Rikki Asher

A Buddhist Pilgrimage to Mainland China

by

Rebecca Li and David Slaymaker

Rebecca Li is a professor of sociology at The College of New Jersey. She began practicing with Master Sheng Yen in 1996, became one of his principal translators in 1999, and is now a Dharma teacher-in-training and member of the board of directors of the Dharma Drum Retreat Center. David Slaymaker is a professor of biology at William Paterson University. He began practicing with Shifu in 1995, has served on the board of the Chan Meditation Center, and is also now a Dharma teacher-in-training. Rebecca and David were married in 1999.

In May of 2008, we were very fortunate to join a group of sixteen on a Buddhist pilgrimage to Eastern mainland China led by Drs. John Crook and Simon Child, two of Master Sheng Yen's Western Dharma heirs and the guiding teacher and secretary, respectively, of the Western Chan Fellowship in the UK.

Our trip consisted of two legs, the first a “northern” leg from Beijing to Datong to Wu Tai Shan, and the second a “southern” leg along the Yangzi River from Nanjing to Shanghai to Ningbo. The first leg consisted of an interesting mix of city monasteries of both Chinese and Tibetan lineage, the Yungang Grottoes, and again both Chinese and Tibetan monasteries on Wu Tai Shan (the holy mountain of Manjushri). The second leg consisted primarily of historically famous Chan monasteries. Finally, we ended the trip with a visit to Master Sheng Yen (Shifu) at Dharma Drum Mountain in Taiwan.

Beijing to Wu Tai Shan

In Beijing we visited two famous monasteries. One was Lama Temple, which had originally been an imperial palace but was converted into a Tibetan Buddhist monastery in the early 18th century because the Qing imperial family practiced Lamaism. This site was stunningly beautiful for its grand buildings and intricate façades, and an inspiring first stop because of the many people of all ages carrying out devotions and making offerings.

Our second stop in Beijing was Fa Yuan Si (Source of the Dharma Temple), originally built in the 7th century and completely rebuilt during the 15th, now both an active monastery and the central Buddhist seminary for mainland China.

Prior to 1949, Fa Yuan Si had been a vinaya (precepts) temple. At that time, monks and



The pilgrims at Qixia: Rebecca Li, first row, far left; David Slaymaker, last row, far left.

nuns studied at one of 70 or more seminaries located throughout China. A few years after the 1949 revolution, however, all those seminaries were closed. Then, in 1956, the government allowed one seminary to open at Fa Yuan Si, and it remained the only seminary in China until well after the Cultural Revolution, primarily training government-minded monastics to administer the few open monasteries and to conduct diplomacy with neighboring Buddhist countries. Knowing this history, but not Fa Yuan Si's current status, we did not know what to expect.

When we arrived, however, a senior administrator agreed to show us around, and we found the monastery grounds old and impressive, with a large collection of very ancient Buddhist artifacts saved from the many monasteries that had been closed. The seminary also proved quite active, with 40 resident monastics, 90 student monks in the four-year seminary program, and 20 graduate students carrying out scholarly Buddhist research.

One thing that impressed us was what our host said about studying the Dharma: that it

requires a lot of thinking and effort to properly understand Buddhism, and that studying these dense texts is a much more difficult Dharma door than meditation, because sitting is easy! This may have been to balance our group's bias toward meditation, but Shifu's writings also note the importance of engaging in serious Dharma study. Our host said that all practices are equally good – meditation for some, reciting Buddha's name for others, and for some the study of Sutras and commentaries. "The Dharma is boundless," he said; it can be approached from many angles.

Finally, Rebecca spoke with a researcher at the seminary who said that Shifu's *Essence of the Vinaya* and *History of Indian Buddhism* were both used as texts in the seminary.

After our time in Beijing, we took a five-hour train ride west to the Yungang Grottoes, a collection of Buddhist cave carvings begun in 460 CE and finished in 524 CE, near Datong, which had been the capital of the Wei dynasty (398-494 CE). While the spectacular carvings have been repaired throughout history, two significant benefits have befallen the caves recently. First was the Communist govern-



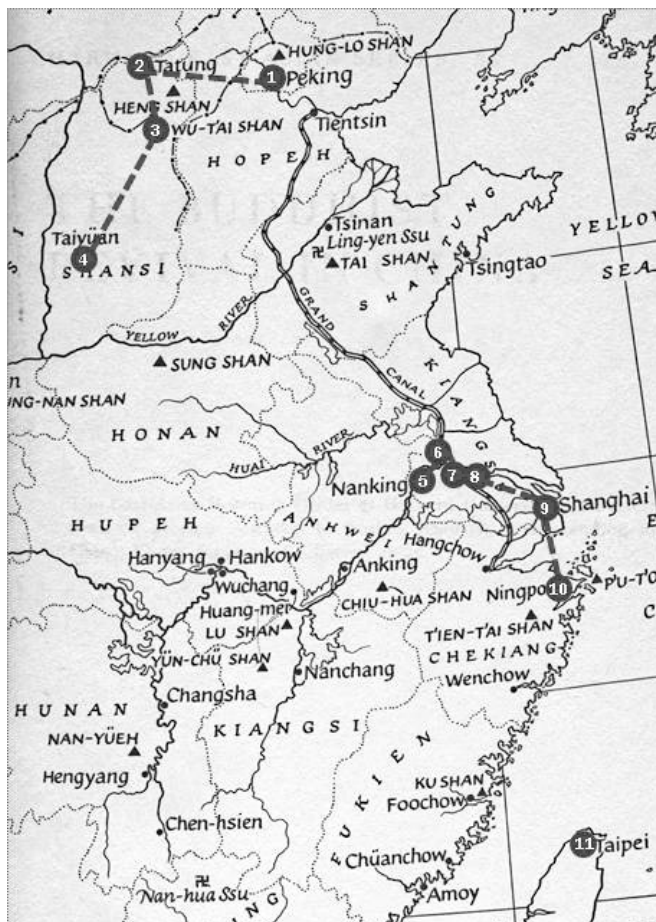
The Yungang Grottoes

ment's recognition of the caves as an important cultural site in 1961, which spared them during the Cultural Revolution. Second, Datong is coal country, and a coal road that used to pass right in front of the caves has been rerouted, greatly slowing coal dust exposure and the associated erosion. Of course, wind and sand and time still take their toll.

The statues were exceptional. Their size, level of detail, diversity of images and themes, and the expressiveness of the faces and postures were all very impressive and inspiring. There is much on-line information about the caves, and the Winter 2008 issue of *Buddhadharma* contains an article about the caves by Bill Porter (Red Pine).

We also went to the Upper Hua Yen Monastery in Datong, which Shifu had visited in 1991. He had been quite surprised that the dozen monastics and couple dozen lay people there in this remote part of China had heard his audiotapes from Taiwan, and read his book *Common Questions When Studying the Dharma* in Chinese. And in fact, when we entered this monastery, the first thing we saw was a lay person copying on a chalk board Shifu's teachings on liberation from a small booklet!

From Rebecca's discussions with a monastic at the temple, they integrate Pure Land practice with Chan, which is typical of all the Chinese Buddhist monasteries we visited. The monks recite the Buddha's name in the



recitation hall, and do sitting meditation in their own rooms. They are so busy with administrative work during the day, however, that if they wish to practice sitting meditation they have to stay up quite late. For reasons not elaborated, the monastery does not hold retreats.

Finally, we set off for Wu Tai Shan (Five-Peak Mountain), which we reached by crossing a 9000-foot pass at the East Gate. We stopped at the top of this pass and hiked to a peak where many Tibetan prayer flags were blow-

ing in the cold, strong wind, and we sang a Tibetan mantra for crossing a pass and recited a Manjushri mantra, Wu Tai being the holy mountain of Manjushri.

Mount Wu Tai houses both Chinese and Tibetan Buddhism together, sometimes in separate and sometimes in the same monasteries, in the latter case with monks of both lineages living and practicing side by side. Most of the monasteries are concentrated in a beautiful wooded valley at around 7000 feet.

While there, we visited three popular monasteries: White Pagoda Temple, Xian Tong

Si, and Pu Sa Ding. All three were busy with visitors (pilgrims and tourists). White Pagoda Temple is an active Tibetan monastery, and an exceptionally beautiful one, with a 270-degree view of the surrounding valley. Xian Tong Si is the earliest and largest monastery on Wu Tai, the site having been first developed as a temple in 58-75 CE. The temple's architecture today is from the Ming and Qing dynasties, 14th century to 1911.

It was at Xian Tong that we found our first living Chan Hall. We first noticed it by following a stream of monks passing through the monastery and into a building with its door



White Pagoda Temple

covered by a very heavy cloth. While we could not see inside, the sign outside was quite clear: Chan Hall. We asked a monk about it and learned that the monks were in a three-month retreat, and that unfortunately we would not be able to look inside. We were surprised to learn that lay people are never allowed in, nor even novice monks, nor nuns. In fact, no Chan Hall on Wu Tai lets lay people in. The monk said that as far as he knew, Gao Min Si was the only monastery in China that allowed lay people to sit in their Chan Hall. Fortunately we would visit Gao Min Si on the second leg of our journey.

Chan monasteries in China, at least in recent centuries, had by rule excluded laity from their Chan Halls, with the modern Patriarch Xu Yun being an exception. Evidently allowing lay people into the Chan Hall reduces a monastery's reputation, and the only reason Gao Min Si could do so was because their reputation was already so high. We were disappointed, but it definitely made us appreciate what we have at DDRC in New York and at Dharma Drum Mountain in Taiwan, where lay people can practice side by side with monastics in intensive Chan retreats, and it inspired us to make better use of the opportunities we have.

Inside the Buddha Hall at Xian Tong we met an older patch-robed monk who offered to answer our questions. When asked about Chan compared to Buddha's name recitation, he said that practicing Chan is difficult and that without the guidance of a master one could get into difficulty, while reciting Buddha's name is the safest and easiest method for all to practice. He reminded us that even great Chan masters had used and recommended this

method. He also told us they use this method in their services and asked if we would like him to demonstrate. Of course we said yes, and he did an amazingly engaging version of the slow four-step recitation – Namo, Ami, Tuo, Fo – and then the faster two-step version – Amitufo, Amitufo – both done while circumambulating. We would later do this ourselves as part of morning services at the two monasteries where we stayed.

A number of us were inspired by this special monk to try the recitation method during the rest of our trip. Why is this significant? Because many of us, perhaps all of us, did not frankly think much of the practice of Buddha's name recitation prior to meeting this monk. But after hearing his emphatic teaching on the virtue of this practice, some of us made a vow to give it a try, and we gained a better understanding and appreciation of this proven and effective method.

The third temple we visited on Wu Tai was Pu Sa Ding, a monastery of mixed Chinese and Tibetan practice that highlighted the challenges to Tibetan Buddhism in mainland China. The predominantly Mongolian monks of Tibetan lineage do two hours of sutra recitation each day, and perform 3- and 5-day pujas (devotional/offering/repentance ceremonies). They have no teacher, however, to give them lectures on the Sutras, because as Tibetan Buddhists they are not allowed to receive teachings in a group – they must study on their own. In fact, most of the Chinese Buddhist monasteries we visited are struggling to establish themselves because they lack old masters to guide them, but the Tibetan Buddhist monasteries struggle with even further restrictions.

Our real treat on Wu Tai Shan, however, was the chance to have an audience with Hua Yen Master Meng Can at Pu Shou Si, where he acts as guiding teacher. John Crook's friend Eva, who is Taiwanese, was able to use her contacts to arrange our meeting with the 90-plus-year-old master. Pu Shou Si is a nunnery that is not open to the public, and is usually not open to men at all (the master and his attendants excepted), built by a nun who left home in 1940, and expanded by two of her disciples to include a seminary. In fact, it reminded some of us of DDM in Taiwan, with the large scale of ongoing construction and the large number of nuns with exceptionally dignified demeanors. It was clearly a place of practice, particularly compared to the hybrid monastery-tourist sites that we had previously visited.

We met with Master Meng Can for about 45 minutes, and among other teachings he offered some advice on "letting go," saying that we must learn to let go even of our bodies,

families, and careers. He explained that this means we must understand these are "not me," and that we must live seeing that nothing belongs to us. The master gave a really helpful example to illustrate his point. Many people think of him as accomplished, being the head of a large monastery, but he said, "None of this is mine. I only live here." This is the attitude of "letting go," fulfilling one's responsibilities without putting the self in it.

When we were leaving, we asked about their evening service and were invited to return at 7pm. After putting on our robes and being lined up according to rank and robe-type, we joined approximately 300 nuns for the service. The discipline and quality of the service were superb and inspirational.

Pu Shou Si was our first taste of what many of us would call a truly practicing monastery, that is, a community where everyone is of the sincere mind to practice, discipline was deep and pervasive, and the environment was sol-



Gaomin Si

emn yet warm. At the other locations we had visited, deportment was generally loose, and while we had met individuals like the patch-robed monk who were quite inspiring, many residents had been obviously distracted, and sometimes rude. The tourist nature of these other sites was surely a factor, but we felt that the lack of a strong central authority – an old guiding master – was also key. Of the monasteries we visited, only those that had such a guiding master also had an inspiring, solid atmosphere of practice: Pu Shou Si, Gao Min Si, and Dharma Drum Mountain.

Following the Yangtze: Nanjing to Shanghai to Ningbo

The southern leg of our journey included a series of historically important monasteries – all Chinese, and mostly Chan. Of these, four were reputed to have had the best Chan Halls in mainland China prior to 1949: Gaomin Si, Jinshan, Tianning Si, and Tiantong Si. Two of these – Gaomin and Jinshan – had been the two “model monasteries,” meaning that their Chan Halls had been the strictest and most austere, the most desirable in which to live and attend retreat, and had turned out many of the most cultivated and/or famous monks of the time. Those who had trained in these Chan Halls were highly respected and moved up the ranks quickly; they were very much sought after to lead the Chan Halls or be the abbots of other monasteries.

Like Pu Shou nunnery, Gaomin Si is not a tourist site. In fact, our bus driver got lost trying to find it. When we arrived we had a pleasant and simple lunch with the receiving monk, and he was surprised and impressed to hear that John and Simon were Shifu’s Western Dharma heirs. Because there have been

some monastic exchanges between Gaomin Si and DDM, Shifu is well known there. There are seventy-some resident monastics at Gaomin, and monks and nuns practice together in this monastery – an unusual situation in mainland China. In their three-month winter retreat from mid-October to mid-January, however, there are 500-600 people attending, with about 300 staying for the entire three-month retreat, including monastics and lay people. Not only is Gaomin Si’s Chan Hall the only one that allows substantial lay participation, it is the only one that allows women to participate! With only one Chan Hall in all of China for women to join in intensive sitting practice, you can imagine the gratitude many of our participants felt to Shifu and to Buddhism in the West for its inclusiveness.

After lunch, we checked into our dormitory rooms where we would stay the night, each very spacious with two beds and a private bath, two hot water jugs, tea, and fresh fruit. And we thought the nights in the monasteries would be rough! With the beauty and peacefulness of the atmosphere, it was far better than any hotel.

While waiting to meet with the old master of Gaomin Si, Master De Lin, our hostess, the nun who would care for us during our stay, talked with us for a while and eventually came to the topic of our trying on the monastic robe. At first we all just tried to change the subject! But she insisted that we should wear it for the meditation sessions and soon she returned with a huge suitcase full of outer monastic robes of all shapes and sizes, one to fit everyone in our group. She told us that the robe is called the “garment of liberation”, and that by wearing it perhaps we would develop an affinity for leaving home in a future life.

Master De Lin, 90-some years old, had studied with Masters Xu Yun and Lai Guo, and is a Dharma Heir of Master Lai Guo. He very generously gave us more than an hour and a half of his time. He discussed the importance of maintaining a strong practice outside of retreats, this being the “key issue” if one wishes to make progress, as he put it. His main point was that to cultivate the Buddha path, first one must not engage in any unwholesome deeds whatsoever, including no thoughts of attachment, and second one must engage in all wholesome deeds possible, and one must do so to perfection.

The master also talked extensively about dealing with wandering thoughts, and how treating them like the enemy is ineffective. Instead we must replace those habits of mind with wholesome, liberating habits of mind, such as reciting Buddha’s name. Finally, he talked extensively with us about the practice of silent illumination, which he acknowledged had basically disappeared from mainland China, leaving huatou and Buddha’s name recitation as the two primary meditation methods. Nonetheless, his insights and directions regarding silent illumination were useful to us all.

The next day we were able to join in a session in their Chan Hall, a hybrid-traditional style in that it is hexagonal rather than square or rectangular, and because of the number of participants they encourage for their winter retreat, there are three concentric rings of meditation platforms. The schedule for the session, however, was typical of the traditional style. We started by circumambulating the Buddha shrine in the center of the hall, with people walking either slowly or quickly. Then a signal brought the circumambulation to a

stop and everyone took a seat on the meditation platforms for a 45-minute sitting period; another signal noted time to leave the Chan Hall for restrooms and then return for circumambulation until the next sitting. At the beginning of the second sitting, the large sliding wooden doors to the Chan Hall closed with a loud crash, letting the participants know that they were now cut off from the outside world physically, and should also be mentally. The effect of these crashing doors was indeed isolating and inspiring.

After the morning session, some people talked with the head monk about huatou practice, while others strolled the monastery for a view. Leaving Gaomin Si later that day – leaving such a place of committed practice – was a quiet affair for some of us. Nonetheless, we were off for Jinshan in Zhenjiang.

Like Gaomin Si, Jinshan had been one of the two model Chan monasteries in pre-Communist times. Today, they couldn’t be more different. Although Jinshan does two seven-day Chan retreats a year, it is basically a tourist site. The crowd was immense, there were many knick-knack shops on the grounds (although not in the monastery proper), and to be honest, the monks were not very friendly. This is understandable considering that these monks, who had perhaps left home hoping to cultivate the Dharma, were instead asked to run ticket booths, or to keep people from taking pictures in a Buddhist theme-park. Despite all this, we noticed a few monks trying to study books while manning their posts.

Large monasteries, like Jinshan, once had large property holdings, and supported themselves by leasing land to farmers and collecting their annual portion of the harvest.



The Chan Hall at Tianning Si

Financial independence allowed prominent monasteries to focus on religious cultivation instead of having to spend all their time performing services for the dead or blessing new homes and businesses. Under communism these monasteries lost all of their land; those few that remained active either shifted much of their energy to commercial production of some sort or found themselves dependent on shrinking donations (due to the danger of donors being associated with the “superstitious”). Today, some large monasteries have re-opened, but few receive enough donations to allow them to shut their doors to tourism and concentrate solely on practice.

Our next stop, moving further east along the Yangzi, was Tianning Si in Changzhou. In the early 1900’s Tianning was the largest Buddhist Monastery in China; it was then destroyed during the Cultural Revolution, and today it is basically a tourist site. We do not recall seeing a monk on the premises, and cannot say if any reside there.

After Tianning, we continued to travel east to Shanghai, where we visited two city temples. This day, however, was the first day of the new lunar month, so many, many people, Buddhists and non-Buddhists, were attending the temples to pray, offer incense, and ask for blessings. It was an amazing experience to witness firsthand how much the devotional aspect of Buddhism is a part of daily Chinese life, and how much the previous restrictions on religion had been relaxed in recent years.

After visiting Longhua monastery, we visited the famous Jade Buddha monastery. On the way to see the famous jade statue, Rebecca spotted a plaque reading “Buddha Selection Hall”. We walked through the gate into an empty courtyard, and discovered that just off this courtyard was the Chan Hall...with its doors wide open. Unlike the rest of the monastery, which was crowded beyond capacity with people, this area was quiet and calm. So we entered the Chan Hall, did our prostrations, took some seats, and did a lengthy meditation. On the wall, there were two signs: one saying, “Look after the huatou,” and the other, “Who is reciting the Buddha’s name?”

Finally, we headed to our last location in China – Tiantong Si in the hills outside of Ningbo, most famous for being the monastery, and Chan Hall, where Dogen attained his en-

lightenment in 1225 before establishing the Soto sect of Zen in Japan. While none of the buildings from that period remain, in the early 1900's Tiantong was among the four best Chan Halls in China, and housed about 250 monks.

There were three Chan Halls at Tiantong; only the oldest of the three is still in use, which according to our monk-guide is the oldest extant Chan Hall structure in China, with at least much of it dating to the 1700's. This was a truly traditional Chan Hall, with sleeping platforms behind the sitting platforms, and even a few monks napping back there. The room was fairly dark, with a large stone floor, and a heavy silent feel. We were told that although they lack a guiding master at the monastery, a number of monks live in the Chan Hall and follow an intensive schedule. Some stay for weeks, others over a year. But it is self-imposed; for teachings, they are occasionally visited by a master, or they go to receive teachings elsewhere. Mostly they study the *Teachings of Master Xu Yun* to guide their practice, and use the huatou, "Who is reciting the Buddha's name?"

Of the other two Chan Halls, one is now a monastery museum and the other a gift shop, where we saw a monk watching kung fu soap operas on TV. Tiantong seemed to sum up the state of Chan as we had encountered it in China. Many monasteries only serve as museums, others are struggling to find their practice in the midst of tourism, and only a few have managed to isolate themselves enough to focus solely on practice. Older, deeply experienced masters simply don't exist in large numbers in China, so most of the monastics we encountered were striving to do their best without such guidance, while others, it

seemed, had given in to the trying circumstances, and had been reduced to simply managing tourists. We left Tiantong Si and mainland China with the heartfelt wish that the new generation of Chinese monastics would succeed in establishing themselves deeply in the teachings and practice, and bring the benefits of the Dharma to the people of China.

Dharma Drum Mountain, Taiwan

Our final stop, and the proper way to end such a journey, was Dharma Drum Mountain in Taiwan to see Shifu. After a short discussion with Shifu, seven of the pilgrims took refuge with him. John and Simon met with students of the Sangha University, where they discussed their own backgrounds in Buddhism and their relationship to Shifu and his teachings. We had lunch with a number of the monastic leaders, and were given a first-rate tour of the DDM campus.

Even though most of our group had never been to DDM, arriving there felt like coming home. This is indeed our Dharma home. While the buildings at DDM are not ornate like those in the large monasteries we visited in China, everything on the DDM campus, along with the monastics and lay volunteers we met there, embodied the spirit of Shifu and of Chan. It was deeply inspiring to come home and to be reminded what great vows can do for our practice and for our ability to help others. After witnessing the travails of practitioners in China, we simply cannot help but feel deep gratitude in our hearts for Shifu's tireless effort to spread the Dharma and to establish places of profound practice. Now that Shifu is ill and cannot travel, it is time for us to pick up the load and carry on Shifu's great vow in all the small ways that we can.

The Past

News from the Chan Meditation Center and the DDMBA Worldwide

North American Development Forum

By David Slaymaker

One hundred and twenty people associated with CMC, DDMBA, DDRC, DDMA Vancouver, and DDM Taiwan met from August 21-24, 2008 for the North American Development Forum, with the theme of “One Heart, One Vow.” The forum was meant to bring together leaders and long-term participants from the North American Dharma Drum community in order to build a stronger network among members and to seek some consensus on general future directions for the organization in North America.

After an evening of introductions and reunions on Thursday, Aug 21st, the first full day of activities was Friday. Following the official welcome by the forum’s organizer Guo Chan Fa Shi, CMC’s new abbot, Friday’s activities revolved around two presentations by Guo Kuang Fa Shi, the Provost of DDM Taiwan. Venerable Guo Kuang started by noting that Master Sheng Yen’s having reduced his role as an administrative leader in the organization, the future of DDM will depend on the entire community’s having a shared focus, like many branches of a tree working from the same root. After lunch, Venerable Guo Kuang gave a more detailed presentation of

the constituents of that root – the core values, or guiding principles, of DDM.

DDM’s core values were presented first from the perspective of traditional Buddhadharma, i.e., working to transform greed, hatred, and ignorance into joy, happiness, compassion, and right view, for the benefit of all living beings. To work toward this transformation, DDM specifically pursues “Four Ways of Protecting the Environment”: 1) Protecting the spiritual environment (the mind); 2) protecting the living environment (one’s immediate environment and close relationships); 3) protecting the social environment (society); 4) protecting the natural environment (nature). The core of these four guiding principles is the first – protecting the spiritual environment. Furthermore, these four types of protection are taught and spread to others through academic education (at DDM Taiwan’s universities and associated scholarly programs), universal loving care education (social services, charity work, and care for the sick and dying), and universal outreach education (the teaching of Buddhadharma in all its guises and applications). In addition to the four guiding principles of environmental protection, three parallel guiding principles of DDM are: 1) to uplift the character of mankind; 2) to create a Pure Land on earth; 3) to propagate and sustain Chinese Chan Buddhism. Together with the four Ways of Protecting the Environment,

these make up the root which guides the activities of all of Dharma Drum.

Following Guo Kuang Fa Shi's presentation, participants thought over and discussed these principles in small groups, and in the evening the entire group was able to ask questions about them and to share ideas about the direction of DDM based on these values.

On Saturday, the group was visited by Shifu via video teleconference, during which, despite some technical glitches, the group was able to hear and speak with Shifu in real time. Shifu reiterated that Protecting the Spiritual Environment is the core value of DDM, and said that this means using Chan practice to protect the mind from all forms of pollution. Shifu also talked about the history of the whole organization and the need for everyone to support future activities and progress.

Following Shifu's talk, Ms. Dena Merriam, founder of the Global Peace Initiative of Women and an organizer of national interfaith gatherings in the U.S., spoke about the current status of Buddhism in North America, noting that Buddhism has now become a major influence affecting the lives of tens of millions of people. Ms. Merriam also spoke about the need for a great influence of compassion and wisdom in North American culture and society, and thus the need for a greater Buddhist voice in America. She also noted the need for Buddhism to directly address issues more important to the North American culture, such as fear, the economy, and the environment.

Saturday afternoon and evening the participants broke into small groups to discuss various directions DDM North America (as a

whole) should take. While each small group had a particular focus, most of the groups overlapped in their ideas, showing that overall there was a fairly clear consensus on the major directions that might benefit the organization: 1) To clarify the relationships between the various North American organizations, including communication channels and transparency of function; 2) To develop a well organized database for keeping records of participants and their contact information, and volunteers and their skills, that is linked up for all of North America; 3) To increase the care, oversight, and training provided for volunteers across North America; 4) To provide ongoing opportunities for people to learn and study the Buddhadharma, and to train those interested in helping to teach and spread the Dharma to others; 5) To improve outreach that will increase the number of young and Western participants ("Western" in the cultural, not the ethnic, sense); 6) To better utilize those lay members within the organization who can currently help teach Dharma and/or meditation to accomplish objectives #4 and #5.

Finally, on Sunday morning, participants had a final chance to submit input on the major objectives put forward by the group, and to comment on the forum itself. In her closing remarks Guo Kuang Fa Shi noted again the guiding principles of DDM and encouraged everyone to work together to move the mission of DDM forward in North America.

A Royal Gift

On October 12th a ceremony was held for the presentation of the Phra Sassada Buddha statue in the Grand Buddha Hall at DDM's World

Center for Buddhist Education in Taiwan. The statue is a gift from the King of Thailand.

The Phra Sassada Buddha statue is one of 19 statues created by Thai master craftsmen in commemoration of the 80th birthday of His Majesty, King Bhumibol Adulyadej of Thailand. It weighs 125 pounds, and measures 50 inches high and 28 inches wide, with a depth of 18 inches. Each brass statue veiled in gold is to be enshrined at Buddhist organizations in 19 different countries. DDM is the first organization to have received this honor.

DDM founder Master Sheng Yen, Abbot Guo Dong and Deputy Abbot Guo Hui were all present to witness the ceremony. Other honored guests from Thailand included Phra Tham Varajaraya, Phra Prom Wachirayan and Phallop Thiarry.

Prior to the start of the Thai *Kai Guang* consecration ceremony, Thai Venerables held a special ritual in the Grand Hall, chanting Sutras to bestow blessings on the King of Thailand, Master Sheng Yen, the Sangha and the people of Taiwan.

An atmosphere of serenity prevailed with devotees chanting *Namo Amitofo* as the ritual began with the removal of the veil by Venerable Guo Dong, Venerable Guo Hui, Phra Tham Varajaraya and Phra Prom Wachirayan.

Master Sheng Yen expressed his gratitude to the King of Thailand for his generosity and to the Thai Venerables for escorting the statue and its relic all the way from Thailand. He noted that although there are many different Buddhist sects in the world, they all hold Buddha Sakyamuni in common as their founder, and all Buddhists are united in sharing his

teachings to promote peaceful co-existence in the world.

Venerable Guo Dong also expressed his appreciation, affirming that Buddha is the incarnation of equanimity, peace and compassion, and urging everyone in attendance to emulate the Buddha's compassion to bring about a society at peace.

Pointing at the Moon in New York

On September 13, 2008, the Chan Meditation Center in New York celebrated the Chinese tradition of the Full Moon Festival. In attendance were some 120 people, including Venerable Jinyi, Venerable Chuanhui, Venerable Mingkuan from the Fo En Monastery and Venerable Zhilung from the Pu Zhao Monastery.

In his opening remarks, Venerable Guo Chan, Abbot of the Center, said that in the Buddhist scriptures, the pure mind is often portrayed as the bright moon, a moon covered by a dark cloud suggesting adversity. But if one can cultivate a joyful mood through positive practice, the pure mind will gradually be revealed, even in times of adversity.

The evening's events included Taijiquan, the Dong Chu Chorus, Chinese Fan Dancing, sampling vegetarian cuisine, games and the introduction of both the Chinese and English publications of Master Sheng Yen. The program ended with a Moonlight Chan Meditation for all present, led by Venerable Guo Xing of the Dharma Drum Retreat Center.

Buddhist Exchanges in China

Last September a DDM delegation led by Abbot Guo Dong embarked upon a seven-day ex-

cursorion to encounter Buddhists in China. Before they departed, Master Shen Yen reminded each member to keep a clear mind for exercising Chan during the tour.

The delegation was due to visit Buddhist monasteries and masters in cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Nantong and Jiashan, with the aim of promoting exchanges between China's Buddhist communities and Dharma Drum Mountain in the future.

The travelers were greeted at Beijing International Airport on September 22 by officials of China's Administration of Religious Affairs, who took the opportunity to express their keen appreciation for DDM's agile humanitarian relief efforts in earthquake-stricken regions of Sichuan Province.

In addition to visiting China's Buddhist communities, the delegation also planned to meet with Taiwanese businessmen and their families to convey blessings from Master Sheng Yen and share Dharma wisdom.

Exchange With Rissho University

On September 7th and 8th a delegation of 47 Buddhist scholars and students from Japan's Rissho University visited Dharma Drum Buddhist College (DDBC) and the DDM World Center for Buddhist Education. Master Sheng Yen was on hand to give them a warm welcome.

The next morning scholars from Rissho and DBC took part in an academic forum at the Library on the development of Buddhism in Taiwan and Japan, along with current efforts to propagate teachings of Japanese Buddhism in Chinese-speaking societies.

The delegation was headed by Professor Mitomo Kenyo, head of Rissho University's Department of Buddhist Studies, and a longtime friend of Master Sheng Yen. The two teachers signed an agreement to establish the institutions as sister schools for future academic exchanges.

2008 Youth Camp in Vancouver

In late August, DDM Vancouver hosted its 2008 Youth Camp under the leadership of Venerable Guo Shu, Venerable Chang Yi and Venerable Chang Xing, offering an excellent opportunity for young people to learn about Chan practice.

In the course of the 3-day event, Venerable Chang Yi taught students how to relax their minds using methods such as Chan meditation and the Eight Form Moving meditation.

Venerable Chang Xing, who had just returned from earthquake-stricken Sichuan Province, shared with students what he had experienced there. He told them he had been able to share the feelings of pain and sorrow felt by families of earthquake victims, and more importantly, that life really is impermanent. He urged them all to grasp each moment of life and contribute compassionately to society.

Venerable Guo Shu taught that our circumstances do not exist naturally but arise as a result of many different causes and conditions. Therefore, if we could be more humble and show appreciation for our surroundings it could curb the arising of arrogance in our minds. We could develop a sense of inner peace, becoming more compassionate and better able to contribute positively to society even in adverse situations.

On the last day, all participants promised to meet again next year and made a vow to do their best to assist people in need in the future.

Sangha Education Exchange

With the aim of fostering Sangha education, seventy Buddhist venerables from mainland China, Thailand and Vietnam visited DDM's World Center for Buddhist Education in Taiwan late last August.

They were warmly received, on behalf of Master Sheng Yen, by Abbot Guo Dong and Deputy Abbot Guo Hui, who made plain their enthusiasm for closer exchanges in the future.

At lunch, Abbot Guo Dong availed himself of the opportunity to thank Venerable Jing Yao and the All Buddhas and Sanghas Association for donating NT\$500,000 in support of DDM Sangha Education, and offered an overview of the Six Ethics of the Mind campaign.

By the end of the meeting the consensus had been firmly established that educational exchanges offered great promise, and all looked forward to future encounters.

DDBC to Host Buddhist Conference

Dharma Drum Buddhist College (DDBC) has taken part in its first conference of the International Association of Buddhist Studies (IABS).

The IABS was established in 1976 and has held conferences every 3 to 4 years. Venerable Master Sheng Yen was one of the founding members of this initiative during his early

period of teaching Chinese Buddhism in the United States.

The six-day conference started on June 23rd at Atlanta's Emory University, with some 450 international Buddhist scholars in attendance presenting 325 research papers.

The DDBC delegation, led by Venerable Hui Min and represented by distinguished scholars from DDBC and the Chung Hwa Institute of Buddhist Studies (CHIBS), addressed issues involving Chan and initiatives for the promotion of Chinese Buddhism, as well as the use of technology in contemporary Buddhism in Taiwan.

A highlight of the conference was the presentation by Professors William Magee and Marcus Bingenheimer on the digitization of Buddhist scriptures as carried out by the Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association (CBETA). DDBC's substantial involvement in this project prompted keen interest, particularly of scholars from Denmark and Bhutan.

Partly in recognition of these distinguished efforts, DDBC has been awarded the honor of hosting the upcoming 16th IABS Conference for the international Buddhist community in Taiwan in 2011.

Choosing Life

The 2008 International Caring for Life Awards were presented by the Dharma Drum Humanities and Social Improvement Foundation (DDHSIF) September 6th at the Grand Hotel in Taipei.

Those present included DDM founder Master Sheng Yen, DDM Abbot Venerable Guo Dong,

Paul Cardinal Shan Kuo-hsi, Secretary General of DDHSIF Dr. Lee Shen-Yi, and Professor Brian L. Mishara, President of the International Association for Suicide Prevention.

Master Sheng Yen said, "Life is precious. Committing suicide cannot solve our problems. From a Buddhist perspective, no matter what form it takes, suicide always results in intense suffering."

He explained that Taiwan's suicide rate is ranked third in Asia, with four thousand people choosing to end their own lives each year. In order to foster awareness of the preciousness of life, DDM has been collaborating with the media to promote the idea of caring for life.

Master Sheng Yen went on to say that none of us are really alone, and none of us lack relationships and support. Our lives are interwoven with those of others in a web of relationships. Hence, we all bear some responsibility and duty towards our fellow participants in this web. Each one of us should cherish our life and make good use of it, upholding our responsibilities and duties as best we can.

Professor Mishara stated that the real challenge lies in the development of effective suicide prevention strategies. Each year, more people die by suicide than in war, terrorist attacks and homicides combined. Yet many change their minds at the critical moment. Prof. Mishara called for research into the reasons for this vital change of attitude so more people can be steered away from suicide. He noted that prevention programs often focus on young people and tend to overlook other high risk groups such as the elderly, who have the highest suicide rates in most countries.

Dr. Fredrick F. Chien, Chairman of the Awards Committee, explained that a total of 68 individual and group award nominations had been received. He noted that after reviewing only a few nominations he found himself overwhelmed by the candidates' extraordinary stories, and said that committee members were frequently moved to tears as they processed the nominations.

When the process was over, the award winners were:

Special Contribution Award: Professor Brian L. Mishara

Wisdom Award: Chen Ming Li

Compassion Award: Wu Xin-An

Group Award: The Taiwan Association for Victims of Occupational Injuries

Windfall for Sichuan Relief Efforts

To help with DDM's reconstruction projects in China's Sichuan Province, last July Mr. Robert Tsao, Chairman of United Microelectronics Corp. (UMC), donated 20 million yuan to DDM.

At Mr. Tsao's behest, DDM will transfer the funds to China's Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Strait for the reconstruction of 40 primary schools badly damaged by the earthquake last May. Mr. Tsao donated an additional 10 million yuan for DDM's providing spiritual guidance to quake victims.

Mr. Tsao is a longtime associate of Master Sheng Yen, and these donations are in line with Sheng Yen's view that "the more you give or contribute to your country, its communities and others in need, the more wealth you will possess."

DDM Launches Reconstruction

On August 21st Venerable Guo Pin, Deputy Abbot of DDM and leader of relief efforts in Sichuan Province, signed contracts with officials of Xiushui Township to rebuild the town's elementary school and health center.

The reconstruction projects aim to build safe, high-quality and beautiful facilities for residents of Xiushui, which was severely damaged by the earthquake May. Seventy percent of the buildings in the town were crushed.

Although the school buildings were destroyed, some 1,800 students at the First Xiushui Elementary School escaped unscathed from the quake, which reportedly took 200 lives and left 2,000 injured. At present, students are continuing their studies in temporary structures.

DDM's donation of RMB\$15 million will be used to rebuild the entire facility, consisting of class buildings, dining halls and an athletic field, as well as dormitories for students and teachers. Structural engineers from DDM will ensure the safety of the new school.

With an additional RMB\$16 million, DDM is planning to provide medical facilities in a new health center that will include a Public Health Pavilion and a Medical Pavilion, as well as Ordinary and Special Wards.

DDM Donates Tents

On August 22nd a DDM relief team returned to Chenjiaba township in Sichuan Province, which suffered severe earthquake damage last May, to distribute fifty tents as temporary shelter for quake victims.

DDM relief teams have visited the town many times in the past few months to distribute supplies to the local community and provide medical treatment to the injured. This latest visit was warmly welcomed by local residents, who have experienced an acute shortage of medicine, housing and other necessities because of the town's remote location.

DDM Deputy Abbot Venerable Guo Pin has said that Chenjiaba is in urgent need of assistance and DDM will do its best to support residents through this difficult time.

Future Relief Efforts in Myanmar

Last July 13, Mr. Kuo-Kai Chen, executive director of Dharma Drum Mountain Social Welfare and Charity Foundation, accompanied by volunteers, met with local officials of Myanmar to plan further relief and reconstruction projects in areas affected by Cyclone Nargis. The meeting was the result of the Foundation's successful relief operations in Myanmar over the past few months.

On a visit to the remote regions of Dan Lan and Kwan Gyan in the Irrawaddy Delta, Mr. Chen reported that although the capital Yangon was on the road to recovery, people living in these more remote regions were facing harsh living conditions, without potable water or electricity.

The reconstruction projects will build or restore two schools, one hundred shelters and two monasteries that were devastated. The group will also set up a center in Yangon to provide spiritual counseling and Chinese language classes, as well as scholarships for other studies. The projects are expected to cost over NT\$14 million.

The Future

*Retreats, classes and
other upcoming events.*

*To subscribe to our new e-bulletin of Chan
Center activities, please send an email to:
chanmeditation@gmail.com*

At Dharma Drum Retreat Center in Pine Bush, NY

Phone: (845) 744-8114
E-mail: ddrcc@dharmadrumretreat.org
Website: www.dharmadrumretreat.org

*Schedule is subject to change. Please check
the website for updated information.*

**Open House – Presentation: *A Pilgrimage
to Chan Monasteries in Mainland China***
Saturday, January 10, 9:30 am – 12 pm

Beginner's Mind Retreat
Friday, January 16 – Sunday, January 18

Chinese New Year Celebration
Sunday, February 1, 9:30 am – 3 pm

One-day Retreat
Saturday, February 7, 9 am – 5 pm

3 – 10-Day Introduction to Chan Retreat
(Retreatants may choose to stay for 3, 5, 7 or
the full 10 days.)
Friday, February 13 – Sunday, February 22

Introduction to Meditation
Saturday, March 14, 9:30 am – 12 pm

One-Day Retreat
Saturday, March 21, 9 am – 5 pm

Overnight Retreat
Friday, March 27 – Saturday, March 28

Regular Weekly Activities

Thursday Evening Meditation
7 – 9 pm; Sitting, walking, moving medita-
tion and discussion.

Wednesday Study Group
7 – 9 pm; Reading and interactive discussion
of important Chan Buddhist texts; instruc-
tion in applying the concepts in daily life.

Sunday Service
9:30 – 11:30 am; Sitting, walking and mov-
ing meditation; Dharma talk; chanting.

At Chan Meditation Center in Elmhurst, Queens, NY

Phone: (718) 592-6593
E-mail: ddmbaus@yahoo.com
Website: www.chancenter.org or
www.ddmba.org

Weekly Activities

Monday Night Chanting
7 – 9 pm (On the last Monday of each month
there is recitation of the Eighty-eight Bud-
dhas' names and repentance.)

Tuesday Night Sitting Group
7 – 9:45 pm: Sitting, yoga exercises, walking
meditation, Dharma discussions, recitation
of the Heart Sutra.

Saturday Sitting Group

9 am – 3 pm

Sitting, yoga exercises, walking meditation

Sunday Open House

10 – 11 am: meditation

11 am – 12:30 pm: Dharma lectures

12:30 – 1 pm: lunch offerings

1 – 2 pm: vegetarian lunch

2 – 3 pm: Chanting (Second Sunday of the month, chanting of the Great Compassion Dharani Sutra; last Sunday, renewal of the vows of the Bodhisattva Precepts.)

(Please pre-register for meditation classes.)

Dharma 101 with David Slaymaker

Buddhist basics via the Four Noble Truths, in three Saturday sessions, March 7, 14 and 21, 9:30 – 11:30 am.

Taijiquan with Instructor David Ngo

Thursdays, 7:30-9:00 pm, ongoing,

\$25 per month, \$80 for 16 classes.

First Thursday of the month is free for newcomers.

Classes

Beginners' Meditation with Nancy Bonardi

Five hours of training on two Saturdays, January 31 and February 7, 9:30 am – 12 pm.

Intermediate Meditation with Rikki Asher

Saturday, February 14, 9:30 am – 3 pm.

Special Events

Chinese New Year Celebration

Sunday, January 15, 10 am – 3 pm

“Zen & Inner Peace”

Chan Master Sheng Yen's weekly television program, Sunday, 7 am, WNYE (Channel 25)



Photo: Guang Lin

Chan Center Affiliates

Local organizations affiliated with the Chan Meditation Center and the Dharma Drum Mountain Buddhist Association provide a way to practice with and to learn from other Chan practitioners. Affiliates also provide information about Chan Center schedules and activities, and Dharma Drum publications. If you have questions about Chan, about practice, or about intensive Chan retreats, you may find useful information at an affiliate near you.

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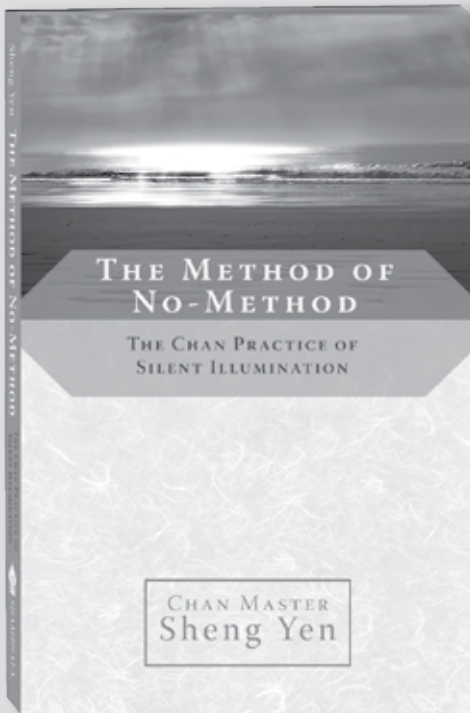
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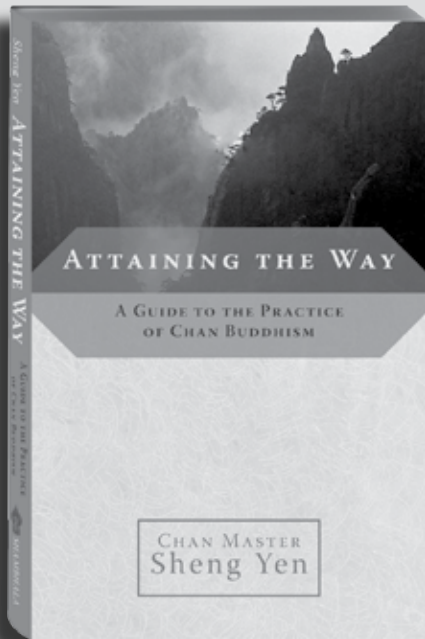


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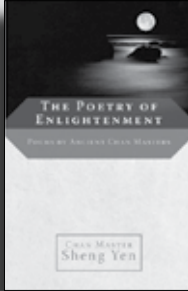


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