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Teacher

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The Passing of Shifu and the China Journey

As we began to prepare this issue, the news came to us that our Shifu, the Venerable Chan Master Sheng Yen, had passed away. It is a sad time and we send our condolences to Dharma Drum practitioners, monastic and lay, wherever they may be. Such a time is nevertheless also one for renewed focus and resolve to activate the Master's Teachings in the world so that they may make a difference during these crisis years. We present various texts dealing with Shifu's Will, his obituary, memorial services and accounts of personal experiences of him as a memorial of a great teacher.

Last May and June several of our Leaders accompanied John Crook on a study tour of Chinese monasteries guided superbly by Rebecca Li, Shifu's key interpreter. Our journey ended in Taiwan at Dharma Drum Mountain thereby allowing us to meet Shifu, pay our respects to him and receive the blessing of his company. This was a journey during which we learnt much, received valuable teachings, met many fascinating people and began to truly appreciate the depth and presence of Chinese Buddhism in our time.

It is thus also appropriate that we share our discoveries with you at this time.

Chuan-deng Jing-di

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A Letter from the Abbot President

Dharma Drum Mountain, Taiwan

The Venerable Guo-dong Fashi, Abbot-President

Dear Dharma upholders and followers of Dharma Drum Mountain,

Amitufo.

Our guiding teacher in life, Master Sheng-yen (Shifu), passed away peacefully on February 3rd. 2009 at 4:00pm, in Taiwan. He relinquished his physical body and entered parinirvana amidst the recitation of the Buddha's name by his monastic disciples led by the Abbot President. With this letter, we are proceeding with Shifu's instructions to notify you of his passing as soon as it occurred.

Shifu once described the course of his life as being full of illness and difficulty, yet he was always full of gratitude. He said this about himself, "Although I led a very busy life, very seldom was I troubled by matters out of concern for myself." While advocating 'Protecting the Social Environment', Shifu pointed out that "Death is neither a joyful matter, nor an occasion for grief; rather it's an occasion for a noble and solemn Buddhist ritual." He stated in his Will in 2004 that, "Though nothing happens, we've grown old in our busy lives. We cry and laugh, all in emptiness. There is originally no self, so both life and death can be cast aside." Shifu viewed matters concerning ageing, sickness, birth and death with an open-mindedness, demonstrating the expansive breadth of his mind that transcends the vexations of birth and death. This is Shifu's most earnest admonition to us, and his spirit serves as an exemplary model for us all to emulate.

Shifu's tireless, lifelong mission of spreading the Dharma and bringing benefit to all sentient beings through his travels and undertakings could not have been realized without your involvement. Shifu was always grateful for all of the support and devotion that you have shown him throughout his life. As Shifu had instructed, we would like to convey to you on his behalf his utmost gratitude, blessings, and bid of farewell.

Under Shifu's leadership, Dharma Drum Mountain has developed into a well-established organization and it will continue to operate to carry on Shifu's legacy by way of DDM's ethos in making contributions to society and to all sentient beings. In addition, DDM's faithfuls; monastic or lay, are all under Shifu's orders to never dispute over matters regarding properties, funds, power, and positions. Rather, we are expected to uphold the standards of 'Compassion, Wisdom, Harmony and Respect', and to carry out the education based on the Four Kinds of Environmentalism. In accordance with Shifu's pledge: "Although the universe may one day perish, my vows are eternal. What I am unable to accomplish in this life, I vow to push forward through countless future lives. What I am unable to accomplish personally, I exhort everyone to undertake together," we shall be united in mind and vows and set out to spread the Buddhadharma to benefit all sentient beings. Let us transform our grief into the strength of making vows and repaying kindness by jointly perpetuating Shifu's vows of great compassion.

We've been truly blessed to have been able to study under Shifu. Today, he displayed for us the ease of being "Thus Come, Thus Gone." We know just like us, you all must also feel the deep sense of sadness in having to part with Shifu. Yet we must remember that although Shifu's physical body is no longer here with us, his Dharma-body has never left us, as his inexhaustible power of compassionate vows will forever remain in our hearts.

With palms joined,

Shi Guo-dong, Abbot President & the Sangha of Dharma Drum Mountain.

Reply to the Venerable Abbot President

Chuan-deng Jing-di

Dear Venerable Abbot President and Friends in the Dharma,

It is with much distress that we hear of the death of our Teacher, Shifu and Patron of our Sangha. Although many of us were aware of his ill health, a death is always a shock. For me, Shifu was my spiritual father, my root teacher, and his departure brings feelings of loneliness and inadequacy as one generation passes to another. Yet also, there is immense gratitude. I have always been amazed that he passed the Dharma to me, a non-Chinese who cannot even read his language or speak it; yet, it is true, that sometimes when we met there was a direct participation with him in the Truth and this gives me courage to continue the work in the Great Matter. Shifu was to me an inspiration and a shrewd disciplinarian. He understood my wish to convey to our British Sangha the insights of Chan in ways that Westerners could best understand - and that has been my work now for years. Shifu always questioned me in depth and with challenging koan-like subtlety concerning my plans here. I am eternally grateful that my life coincided with his, we were the same age, and that I should have met him. I especially appreciated Shifu's essential simplicity. In spite of his attainments, his learning and his vast seniority there was always a flash of simple understanding between us.

It was an especial joy to introduce several local leaders of our British Sangha to him last June when we came to Dharma Drum, and to see him once more vividly himself and so present with us. My private moments with him then were an especial renewal of an understanding.

I have seriously considered coming to Taiwan for this ceremonial occasion but travelling with a very bad back and moving with a limp would cause more trouble than any help to you. I am to see a consultant next week and trust it will then be set right. Simon will be joining you. We are receiving much mail sending condolences.

I wish you, the Sangha and our friends at Dharma Drum all Dharma blessings at this time. We shall of course continue our deep relationship with you all.

John Crook.

The Venerable Chan Master Sheng-yen

A Brief Obituary

Chuan-deng Jing-di, John Hurrell Crook

On February 3rd 2009 at 4:00pm Taiwan time, the Venerable Chan Master Sheng-yen, passed away peacefully at Dharma Drum Mountain Founder's Quarters in Taiwan thus bringing to an end the life of perhaps the most influential Chan (Zen) master of our generation. At centres all over the world, communities are mourning the loss of their Teacher - 'Shifu'.

Shifu's health had been declining over the past three years. This rapid decline started from the time of the inauguration of the Dharma Drum Mountain World Centre for Buddhist Education, Taiwan, in late 2005, when Shifu received surgery to remove a non-functioning kidney, and the remaining kidney's ability to function became very poor. Since then, he had been going through weekly dialysis and various other treatments, making his body very weak. Over the following two years, his health condition has had ups and downs, and remarkably, in mid to late 2008, Shifu had been noticeably stronger and able to give many lectures and attend many public events. However, in late December, a routine check-up at the hospital revealed a problem. Yet, Shifu kept on with his agenda. Shortly after, he was hospitalized and his health deteriorated rapidly. His condition looked grave. After a few days it took a turn for the better,

and there was a visible improvement. Afterwards, Shifu continued to attend meetings and receive guests and also took a leave of absence from the hospital to visit the local Taipei monasteries and centres. Yet, soon his condition again deteriorated, fluctuating between good and bad. He returned to his home in the monastery that he had founded and passed away.

In 2008, Shifu published his autobiography in English carefully prepared by his closest disciples.¹ Here we read of a man who, like His Holiness the Dalai Lama, always considered himself to be a simple monk but who has accomplished a remarkable renewal of Chinese Zen Buddhism in Chinese communities throughout the world and extended its teachings to the West. His many books have augmented and corrected the earlier Western Zen understanding based on the previous contribution of Daisetz Susuki. Together with other masters such as Thich Nhat Hahn, Shunryu Suzuki and Jiyu Kennett, Shifu has created a Zen renaissance world wide thereby continuing the work of that great reformer Master Hsu-yun of the twentieth century in China itself.

Sheng-yen was born in 1930 near the estuary of the Yangtze River. Floods destroyed his father's lands and the family had to rely on a very small property and on fishing the river. This was a life of poverty soon to be made more difficult by the Japanese invasion of the area. As a boy, an old monk asked him whether he would like to be a monk. Although he had no idea what that meant, he grasped the opportunity and some time later went to school even while battles flamed around. Eventually he became a monk at a well-endowed monastery, Wolf Mountain, near Shanghai. Here he became enamoured with the Dharma with some insight into its significance. Soon however came more trouble and the eventual arrival of the communists. The monks, forced into poverty, kept going by offering funeral services in Shanghai. They received no training. Finding the only way out, Sheng-yen eventually joined Chiang Kai Shek's nationalist army and was thus able to move to Taiwan.

In Taiwan after the usual military training, square bashing and so on, Sheng-yen became an officer in the Intelligence Corps. Although he had no understanding of the implications of the telegraphic material he was handling, the military would not let him resign his commission lest he betray national secrets. He began developing his practice in his spare time and visiting monasteries. Eventually he was able to go back to civilian life. On one occasion in desperation he sought the help of old Master Ling-yuan in whose helpful presence he relieved his mind and experienced 'seeing the nature' for the first time. Gradually he became known and through working on a Buddhist magazine eventually he joined a monastery mastered by the eminent monk Dong-chu who had previously been the Abbot of the famous Jian Shan monastery on a riverine island near Shanghai. Dong-chu taught him through vigorous confrontation, giving him pointless tasks to do testing his resolve and will. It was much like the ferocious way in which the Tibetan Marpa had taught Milarepa.

Shifu eventually undertook a six year solitary retreat in the mountains beginning with a long period of repentance leading into study, learning Japanese and developing a determination to study Buddhism at a university in Japan, there being no place of advanced Buddhist learning in Taiwan. He obtained his Doctorate at Rissho University but also undertook gruelling retreats in Japanese sesshins where his learning was ridiculed in true Zen style. He developed the wish to take Zen to the West but had his doubts because he knew no English. "Ha," said his Master, "Do you think Zen is taught by words?"

Shifu found a sponsor and began teaching in Toronto and New York. But his sponsor was disappointed. Shifu had less English than he expected and other disappointments between them flourished. Eventually a friend, C.T. Shen, arranged for him to live at the Temple of Great Enlightenment in the Bronx, New York. Although Sheng-yen had the qualities of a Master, the temple treated him as a mere novice monk giving him only basic cleaning work to

¹ *Footprints in the Snow; the Autobiography of a Chinese Buddhist Monk*. Doubleday 2008

do. Yet again, C.T Shen stepped in and had him made Abbot. Gradually a few, then more Westerners began coming to the monastery. Although Sasaki Sokei-an had taught Zen, especially from the Platform Sutra, in New York in the 1930s, Shifu was the first Chan master to teach contemporary Chinese Chan to Westerners on the east coast of the US. The only other such teacher in the USA at that time was Master Hsuan Hua over in California.

Then he was called back to Taiwan. Master Dong-chu needed help in his monastery and it took time before the arrangement of alternating time in Taiwan with time in America became stabilised. When Shifu returned to the USA, he needed to live near the monastery and not with his sponsor much further away. He had then to finance his own life but having no money, he became a wanderer, sleeping on the streets, or 'nodding with the homeless through the night in coffee shops, foraging through dumpsters for fruit and vegetables.' For a man then in his fifties living this way in a New York winter was a hard life. Yet again, C.T. Shen assisted him finding places where Sheng-yen could teach and hold retreats. Shifu has always said that living in this way was a training invaluable testing his resolve, ingenuity and determination. In any case, as he pointed out, his life had always been like that and the self-discipline imposed by Dong-chu's fierce training came to his aid.

Gradually a Chinese community with some Westerners formed around him and in time they bought a small building on Corona Avenue in Elmhurst in Queens. Although the present Meditation Centre on Corona is not in the same building, his presence in that area was established for many years. A pattern developed. Through his writings in Chinese and in English translation, he became known and through his personal charisma, Shifu grew into an influential figure in both Taiwan and New York. In Taiwan, he headed the Institute of Chung-Hwa Buddhist Culture and also inherited Dong-chu's monastery outside the capital. Donations flowed in and, given the economic success of Taiwan, the sums contributed were large. Shifu was able to obtain a large mountainous estate on which, gradually, a magnificent monastery has been constructed. It is now an architectural showpiece and a functioning Chan Centre and monastery complete with a seminary developing full university status. In New York, he likewise obtained a large estate in the Catskill Hills thereby creating a beautiful meditation centre in the woods. It must be said, however, that Shifu's poor command of English and his long stays in Taiwan limited the success of his mission among Westerners in the USA.

It was during this period that I first went to New York to 'sit' in an intensive retreat with Shifu. He was very interested in my own work in Britain and in the little centre I had created in Wales. After I had attended several retreats, he came over to Wales in 1989 and led the first of four retreats in Britain. My work with him developed into a close understanding and Shifu made me the first of his Western Dharma heirs in 1993. I helped him lead retreats elsewhere, guestmastering for him in Berlin for example. But he was also developing retreats in Poland, Switzerland, Russia etc. This was a time therefore of increasing international involvement. As his name became known, he represented Chinese Buddhism at numerous conferences; in an important public dialogue with His Holiness the Dalai Lama, thereby healing a breach with Tibetan Buddhism that had lasted for centuries; and finally co-chaired conferences of world religious leaders under the auspices of the United Nations.

Chan Master Sheng-yen had become an international figure. In his addresses to conferences, his approach was always one of complete sanity, carefully attuned to the world situation and presenting the Dharma in ways his fellow religious leaders could understand and to a degree accept.

For me, writing this, what I recall are his more personal traits. On retreats, he could be a hard taskmaster but always understood the limits to which he could drive the participants. It became clear that this approach was deeply compassionate. As Master Dong-chu had taught him, confrontation with the ego is essential if wisdom is to sprout. In interview, Shifu could

appear as a warm friend, as a critical schoolmaster, as a father, or present a remote even chilling distance after which one spent hours struggling to understand. Sometimes there was a depth present that left one groping to follow after him.

After his retreats in the UK, I was fortunate enough to be his guide for a few extra days. Once we drove through Wales to Hereford Cathedral, on through Oxford looking at the colleges and thence to London where we stayed in a 'pad' in Great Russell Street then occupied by my children in their late teens. Another time, I took him to see some of the amazing documents and paintings collected by Marc Aurel Stein in Dunhuang and Central Asia around 1900 and now kept in London. In Westminster Abbey, he bought the guidebook in Japanese. During these few days, Shifu was totally relaxed, a charming guest, a wonderfully insightful conversationalist and great fun to be with. At my children's pad, he noticed some unclean coffee cups hiding under a chair. He found this a great joke and humorously made good friends with my kids. In the museums, the bright ink of the ancient documents that often looked as if they had been written only yesterday delighted him. I was also able to drive him in terrible rainstorms up into the Pennine hills to visit Throssel Hole Abbey of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives. He spoke warmly with the monks and was very impressed by the life of this British monastery.

Shifu's death creates a tragic loss for all those who had the great good fortune to be taught by him but it is also an inspiration. His wisdom lives on in books, tapes, and video and in institutions. It is now the task of his Dharma descendants to take up the roles he has left for us to occupy.

The Will of Chan Master Sheng-yen

1. I was born in 1930 in the Jiangsu Province of China, and my family's surname is Chang. After I pass away, do not issue the obituary notice, make meal offerings, build the grave, stupa, or monument, erect my statues, or collect my relics, if any. Please invite one to three eminent elder Dharma masters to respectively preside over the rituals of sealing the coffin, bidding farewell, cremation, ash burial, and so forth. All this must be carried out in a simple, frugal manner, and never in an extravagant and wasteful way. In the mourning hall, only hang an elegiac plaque with the words "Quiescent Cessation Is Blissful" written by a calligrapher as an encouragement. Request people not to present flowers or elegiac couplets, but just recite "Namo Amitabha Buddha" to form pure affinities for rebirth in the Western Pure Land.
2. If, after I pass away, there is any cash offered to me by Buddhist believers and any revenue from my copyright royalty, they should be donated to Dharma Drum Mountain Buddhist Foundation and Dharma Drum Mountain Cultural and Educational Foundation. I have no personal properties during my lifetime. All my belongings have been offered to me by the general public, so they should all go to the Dharma center of Dharma Drum Mountain (DDM), and be handled according to both the codes established by the Buddha and my will, which has been notarized by the court.
3. All the Dharma centers that I have founded and have been in charge of belong to the Dharma lineage of Dharma Drum Mountain. Except that they are financially independent in their operation, they should adopt a unified mechanism with respect to the sustaining of DDM's Dharma tradition, education of talents, mutual loving care, and personnel arrangement. However, the branch Dharma centers overseas should take as its principle to have a uniform style of Chan and make use of local manpower, so that the pure, authentic Chan teachings will not decline and Chan practice will take roots and spread in societies of different cultures.

4. Whether the post of the abbot president of DDM's headquarters is assumed by one who is elected internally or is an eminent bhikshu or bhikshuni invited from outside of DDM's system, he or she, while succeeding to the post, also succeeds to DDM's Dharma orthodoxy, and shall inherit and carry on DDM's Chan lineage, and shall not relinquish the vision and aims of Dharma Drum Mountain, which all shall abide by permanently. The Buddha said, "I don't lead the assembly; I am a member among the Sangha." The abbot president is the Sangha's spiritual nucleus, as well as supervising and advancing the monasteries' operation and Dharma affairs of the Sangha, making sure that they are resolved and executed by monastic members in accordance with the Dharma, precepts, and regulations, and that all live in joyful harmony, diligence, and purity.
5. In order to avoid misuse and adulteration, any manuscripts of my writings which have not been reviewed by me personally shall not be compiled into books hereafter, except for those that have already been published and can be included in the complete collection of my works.
6. After I pass away, please request Professor Lin Qixian and his wife to complete the "Chronicle of Master Sheng Yen's Life" up to the time of my death, as historical materials for the reference of future generations. Therefore, please do not compile or print any commemorative collections and the like.
7. DDM's Sangha is entrusted to carry out the instructions in my will. Please perform the ceremony for my death not as a funeral, but as a solemn Buddhist ritual.
8. My monastic and lay disciples have nothing to dispute over regarding properties, funds, power, and positions. Rather they are expected to act in compassion, wisdom, harmony, and respect, and carry out the education based on the Four Kinds of Environmentalism. Virtuous followers, please cherish yourselves. We have the good karmic roots and blessed causes and conditions to walk the bodhisattva path together, and we have formed affinities while practicing under the guidance of innumerable Buddhas in our past lives. We will also be cultivating together the supreme enlightenment at the assemblies of innumerable Buddhas as fellow practitioners for one another in the right Dharma.
9. The wills that I made prior to this one can be used as a reference. However, this Will shall be the standard one.

As a conclusion, I compose the following verse:

*"Though nothing happens,
we've grown old in our busy lives. ²
We cry and laugh, all in emptiness.
There is originally no self,
So both life and death can be cast aside."*

Bhikkhu Sheng Yen, Founder, Dharma Drum Mountain.

² See alternative, improved translation by Jimmy Yu in Valedictory Address, below.

The Ceremony of Moving the Casket

Simon Child

Dharma Drum Taiwan was offering a video stream so that fortunate ones could see the ceremonies in the Grand Buddha Hall during this period. Not many of us could receive this but Simon stayed up till 3am watching the ceremony of moving the casket from the Buddha Hall to the Crematorium. He wrote this to me afterwards. JHC

It was a grand and powerful ceremony. Most of the video up till now has simply been a view of the Buddha Hall with a background of Amitabha chanting and occasional switches to recordings of Shifu's talks. But this was a full TV documentary-style broadcast, with views from many angles, lots of close-ups of faces of the monastics and audience (including a full-face view of Zarko Andricevic chanting Amitabha), lots of broad sweeping views of the DDM complex, etc.

Monastics gradually lined up in perfect lines, and stood very still and silent. Technicians fussed around the altar area getting microphones in perfect placings. Lay persons were seated at the back of the hall, including Zarko and Carmen. The seniors filed in, in a very slow procession, to a background of Amitabha chanting. Abbot President Guo-dong Fashi was near the front of the proceedings but he wasn't the actual celebrant, I didn't recognise the person doing that. In fact I didn't recognise many people that I might have expected to be there, such as Guo-yuan Fashi, Chi-chern Fashi, Guo-gu, Chang-wen Fashi, etc, but the place was very full and they were no doubt lost in the crowd. I think I spotted Guo-xing Fashi briefly.

There were several short announcements in which I heard Shifu's name, each followed by a minute or two of standing silence. Then some chanting, the Heart Sutra I think since it ended with the Moho chant. Then a very slow procession (to Amitabha chanting) bringing in a large cloth carried at shoulder height by six monks. It probably took them 10-15 minutes to reach the coffin (one step to each Amitabha recitation) and they draped the coffin. Then they turned around and started moving the coffin equally slowly out of the hall.

Monastics all kneeled waiting for the coffin to reach them then they prostrated and later stood to file out behind the coffin, one monk leading the way carrying a photo of Shifu, and Guo-dong Fashi carrying what looked to be the memorial tablet.

As they reached the back of the hall the lay people in the hall likewise kneeled and prostrated. There was a big awning outside the Grand Buddha Hall to keep off the pouring rain, but beyond that all down the road nearly to the exit of the complex were thousands of lay people lining the road in rows perhaps two-deep and more at places, all wearing plastic macs, who prostrated as the hearse passed and then joined the tail of the monastics and lay people following the coffin. The procession went slowly through the DDM complex perhaps for half an hour with Amitabha chanting being broadcast throughout and heavy rain continuing. Many people weeping of course, perhaps the heavy rain was because Guanyin was also weeping.

The crowds thinned out near the exit of the complex, after the formal gate, and then the cars speeded up to go to the crematorium and the broadcast returned to static views of the Buddha Hall, now with hardly any people anywhere to be seen.

Valedictory Address, Master Sheng-yen
Feb 15th 2009, Bristol Chan Group Memorial Service
Chuan-deng Jing-di, John Crook

“Gaté gaté paragaté parsamgaté. Bodhi Svaha.”

Here we have the great mantra of the Heart Sutra but today it is Shifu who is “gaté gaté - Gone Gone” and we meet together to mourn this great loss. He has been my personal guide and our patron for many years. Perhaps also he has been the greatest Zen master of our generation. Not only has he introduced Chinese Zen throughout the world, spoken diplomatically with the Dalai Lama thereby helping to integrate differing approaches to the Mahayana, attended conferences of World religious leaders at the United Nations but, most importantly, he has brought together the Chan teachings into a fresh unitary lineage at his monastery of Dharma Drum.



Chan Master Sheng-yen, June 2008

Yet the mantra ends with “Bodhi Svaha” – Wisdom arise! So at this time we must also bow in gratitude for the life of this man, a simple monk who has thought so deeply about the problems of humanity. Together we need to renew our focus on the great teachings he has left us and recall the long lineage that he has continued into our time.

Perhaps for us in a British Sangha, one of the most important aspects of his teaching has been the clarification of problematic issues arising from the history of Zen’s arrival in Europe. Shifu was able to help here following his long solitary retreat and his subsequent period of research in Japan. The great Daisetz Suzuki, right until near the end of his life, only presented to the West the approach of the Linji school (Jap: Rinzai) of Japanese Zen in which koans and hua-tous are the prime methods used during meditation. When eventually the West discovered the Caodong (Soto) school, some arguments developed about what was proper Zen. This dispute had arisen in China in ancient times between monasteries competing for support and

subsistence. The stories are well known. We find them in the Platform Sutra and again later, in the apparent disputes between Masters Hong-zhi and Ta-hui. We now understand that although there were political motives undoubtedly involved, the prime issue was merely a preference in meditation method – there was no fundamental dispute at the level of Dharma. Indeed, while disagreeing about method, it is clear that Ta-hui and Hong-zhi were friends. Never the less, these divisions in lesser minds promoted a dispute that has come down to our time. Shifu examined these issues carefully. Already in Japan, under the leadership of Master Harada, an approach integrating these schools was developing and Shifu had attended retreats with a successor of Harada, Master Bantetsugyu. He was therefore aware of the need for reconciliation.

When I received transmission in 1993 Shifu gave it to me in the Lineage of Linji, saying that that was the only lineage with an intact sequence of names. Further research, however, enabled him to correct our understanding of the Caodong lineage. Since Shifu himself was teaching and offering retreats using methods from both schools, Silent Illumination from Hongzhi and Hua-tou from Koans from Ta-hui, he then created an integral lineage including both approaches and updated my own transmission. This is the Dharma Drum Lineage, containing both Linji and Caodong, which we inherit from him today and within which both Simon and I are Dharma Heirs. (See further, Li, Rebecca (ed) 2002. *Chan comes West*. Dharma Drum Publications)

A further Dharma clarification has arisen from Shifu's meeting with His Holiness the Dalai Lama, going a long way to sort out a long stand-off between Tibetan and Chinese Buddhism and restoring Dharma good will between them. This is very helpful for those of us who have additional interests in the Tibetan approach.

I have been so fortunate in my life to have met such a teacher. Shifu was so alert, so focussed and at heart so deeply compassionate, yet often very strict and confronting in his personal teaching. When I first met him he introduced his retreat with such bleak authority that I wondered whether it had been wise for me to come. Yet, I soon realised this was a front to get participants truly focussed on the seriousness of their endeavour. Shifu could be quite a trickster. As he said when he first came to The Maenllwyd, that he had come not so much to give us enlightenment, that was ridiculous, but to show us how confused our minds were! He was very good at that.

On my first visit to New York I had told him about the Western Zen Retreat. This interested him and we had much discussion about it. After I had done several retreats with him, he agreed to come over to Wales to teach us. What a privilege! After that, the best we could do was to create the Bristol Chan Group to continue with what we had learnt. I have so many memories of Shifu: kindness itself; humour; profound thought and mutual delight in conversation; sudden rejection of my mistakes; sometimes quite fierce confrontation leaving me angry and disturbed until I suddenly saw his point and dropped my egoic reaction. What insights, what teaching! Sometimes he taught very indirectly leaving me to puzzle over what had happened between us. This was very insightful, causing me to reflect again and again until I got the point. I am still getting it today!

To illustrate Shifu's style, I will use a story I recently received concerning an encounter experienced by an early student, Merrick Lex, at the Queens' meditation centre in New York. Lex wrote:

“I continued to study with Shifu when he visited NYC. In either late '79 or early '80 the building for Dharma Drum Meditation Centre had been purchased, and we started to fix it up. One day, Shifu took me to the picture window downstairs and asked me to open up the old metal security grate that was spanning the window. I did that and we saw that the window was completely covered with grime and grease. It was a

depressing sight. "I want you to clean that window up," Shifu said. He took a single edge razor blade out of his sleeve where he had been hiding it and gave it to me. I looked at the tiny blade and then at the huge window and must have looked pretty forlorn, but I set to cleaning it up. After many hours of scraping and wiping with rags, I finally had it cleaned up and spotless both inside and out. I was standing and admiring my work, when Shifu came in and asked me to get to work on the basement.

When I next came to the building about ten days later, somebody had painted the old metal grate with bright gold paint. Shifu asked me to take a look at it with him, then he asked me to open up the grate again. When I opened it, I discovered that the painter had not taken care to cover the glass window, which was now splattered with blobs of gold paint from top to bottom. My beautiful clean window! I turned around with a look of shock on my face. Shifu was only smiling at me for a moment, then, he slowly took the razor blade back out of his sleeve, handed it to me, and walked away in silence. I was filled with surprise, frustration, and finally humour and burst out laughing. Then I set to work to scrape the whole window again! And so it went with my greatest teacher!"

Shifu has followed a long tradition and left us his final verse at the close of his will. It reads:

*Busy with nothing, growing old
Within emptiness, weeping and crying
Intrinsically, there is no "I"
Life and death, thus cast aside.*

There is so much one could say about this verse. Some of us may 'get it' immediately. Others may not yet be ready for it. For me, it reveals both the clarity of his being and of his teaching. Rather than talking about its inherent philosophy, I would like to present a brief prose-poem written earlier that seems to sum up my feeling as I read what he has said. This poem symbolizes Shifu's gift of clarity that is always available for us. Let us open ourselves to his clarity and then sit for a little while with it – as it were under the light of the Moon.

"Knowing the full moon was shining and the hoar frost sharp, I went out in to the garden closing the door on the yellow light of the room behind me. Suddenly, a different world; silent, frozen literally into stillness, everything either dark or silvery bright where the moonlight landed, black shadows looming where it did not reach. Looking back at the house now massive in these contrasting shades, it seemed a presence as if unknown to me – as if I were some stranger in a realm often available but seldom visited. Surrounded by stars, some brilliant against deep black, some tiny almost blinded by the moon, Orion was hanging in its iconic place: a great spread of sky constrained by lines, shades, shaped shadows and the sheer bulk of the emptied house; the bird seed holder so far below, motionless, without a visitor; no one there, simply a witness to where the vast silence of outer space touched down upon the lawn."

Burying Shifu's Ashes

Simon Child

When I heard that Shifu's death was imminent, I wondered whether I would be able to get to the funeral, but given the nature of my work it is very difficult to take time off at short notice. In the event I was not able to attend the cremation service seven days after death, but was able to travel to Taiwan for the last of the major services which took place fourteen days after death, the Burial of the Ashes. My travel took me about 25 hours to get there and another 25 hours back, with three flights in each direction, and in between I spent less than 48 hours at Dharma Drum Mountain, so it was literally a flying visit but I was glad to have been able to attend.

DDM knew that his passing would be a major social event and had planned well for it. Indeed I understand that last autumn they had trial runs at some of the planned ceremonies and arrangements, and showed videos of these to Shifu for his approval.

This planning paid off and it seemed that all the arrangements were appropriate and effective, and very necessary given the numbers of mourners involved – an estimated 30,000 attended DDM for the ceremony of the burial of the ashes, an estimate likely to be accurate given that 10,000 people had pre-registered to attend and many others turned up without prior registration. Correspondingly DDM had prepared 20,000 boxed lunches for the mourners who started arriving at DDM at about 8am for the 1pm ceremony, and who were seated closely packed on plastic stools in one of the many halls in the DDM complex, each provided with a service book and a plastic mac in expectation of rain, and each hall having a video screen displaying the ceremony in progress.

A streaming video broadcast had been setup on DDM website shortly after his death and continued for 14 days. This forewarned me of the scale of the occasion because I had seen one of the earlier ceremonies on this video-link, that of the coffin leaving the Grand Buddha Hall to go to the crematorium, and had seen how literally thousands lined the roadways of DDM, all prostrating at the side of the roadway as the hearse passed by, disregarding the pouring Taiwan winter rain except for the wearing of their plastic macs. Even so it was rather different being there in person, part of it all, as events unfolded.

In a sense, despite the scale of it, the whole affair was designed to continue Shifu's teaching, emphasising frugality, harmony, ecology, non-attachment, in accordance with requests in his Will ¹:

I arrived on the Saturday evening before the Sunday Ashes ceremony, and soon after arrival went to visit the Grand Buddha Hall. Over the preceding 13 days I had seen on the video-link the activities in the Grand Buddha Hall where Shifu's body initially 'lay in state' for two days for 10,000 people to file past and pay their respects, then the coffin lay there for five days, then after the cremation the casket of ashes was placed on Shifu's chair and nearby were other objects such as his incense stick (kyosaku). At most times in the hall a 20 year-old recording was playing of Shifu himself leading Amitabha recitation, and sometimes those present recited as well and sometimes they sat silently. Sometimes the Amitabha recitation stopped and a video was shown of a past talk by Shifu and all present bowed to the image of Shifu on the screen.

On the Sunday the DDM complex became progressively more and more crowded, yet in a very well-organised and harmonious manner. Buses were timed to arrive approximately one per minute and their parties were guided by flag-carrying volunteers to their allocated seats in

¹ See especially paragraph one, in the Will reproduced in earlier pages of this journal and also online at: http://www.ddm.org.tw/event/master_shengyen/en/will.html

one of the halls. A dozen TV outside broadcast vans assembled near the Grand Buddha Hall. Security teams, some carrying briefcases and 'guitar cases' checked the place thoroughly prior to the arrival of the President and Vice President of Taiwan, and continued to escort the President throughout the day. Boxed lunches were supplied to those sitting patiently for hours on their plastic stools.

John was unable to travel to Taiwan because of back problems, so I was the senior of the three Western Dharma Heirs present, representing John and the WCF, as well as myself. Also present were Zarko Andricevic from Croatia and Gilbert Gutierrez from USA. We were to be given a key part in the ceremony, participating in the actual burial of the ashes. Shifu had been quite precise in his instructions in his Will, that there was to be no retention of 'relics' following his cremation – part of his teaching has always been to counter some tendencies to superstition in 'folk' Buddhism, such as offering of incense (this is not allowed at DDM) and collecting of relics. Hence all the ashes from the cremation had been ground into fine powder so there were no substantial relics, and the ashes divided into five portions in biodegradable paper bags with biodegradable ties. These were to be buried in five holes, the idea being that very soon the ashes would return to the earth and be indistinguishable from the mud of the burial area – this bird would leave no trace ².

The 'Eco-friendly' Memorial Garden is government property and religious ceremonies are not allowed and so there was to be no chanting or other religious trappings. We were given our instructions as to how this simple ceremony would be performed. Each of the five packets of ashes would be buried by a group of three persons: the first person would receive a packet, pour the ashes into the hole in the ground, and then place the bag and the tie in the hole; the second would place a flower into the hole; and the third would place some soil on top. The first three packets would be buried by monastics, the fourth by we three lay Dharma Heirs of Shifu, and the fifth by the President and Vice-President of Taiwan together with a senior member of the DDM trustees.

Although we were to precede the President and Vice-President at the burial ceremony, protocol quite reasonably placed them higher than us in the seating in the Grand Buddha Hall for the preceding thanksgiving ceremony, but only just higher and we were seated right next to them. So I found myself in the third seat, next to the Vice-President who had been a follower of Shifu and who introduced himself to me, and we had a bit of a chat before the ceremony began. Further down the row, below we three, were other dignitaries such as the Minister for Religion.

The Thanksgiving ceremony itself was quite simple. It was presided over by an old master from another organisation, an old friend of Shifu, together with two other older masters. There was a chanting of the Heart Sutra, then each of the masters presented a four-line verse composed for the occasion. The third master sung his verse and then sung a eulogy. Then the President of Taiwan presented a posthumous citation to Shifu, and gave a short Thanksgiving speech. We had been given an English translation of his prepared speech, but apparently he did not keep to his text and gave a longer more personal speech than scripted. Then a short video of Shifu was played.

The burial party filed out of the Grand Buddha Hall, with those monastics delegated to participate leading the way carrying the ashes, and then the President and VP, and then we three, then followed the rest of the DDM Sangha. Our route was again lined with mourners two to three deep on both sides of the road, all prostrating as the ashes passed them, and as they rose from the prostration I could see that probably 80% of them were weeping.

² A reference to the last line of the verse 'Lancet of Sitting Chan', by Chan Master Hung-chih (J: Hongzhi)

After a little way we left the road and went to a hillside path and from here the public had been excluded since the path was only just wide enough for us to walk two abreast. The walk to the burial area probably took us about 20-30 minutes in total, and then we found ourselves in a circle around a small area of grass and small trees, and there were five markers in the grass indicating five pre-prepared small holes. After standing for a minute's silence, one by one each group of three filed up and performed their burial, closely watched by TV cameras, then the whole group circumambulated the area and then filed back down the hillside. As we did so some monastics were already completing the filling of the holes and re-turfing them.

Once we had cleared the hillside the lay public began filing up to pay their respects, and on their return back down they were personally greeted and had hands shaken by the Abbot President Guo-dong Fashi. Some hours later, at 5:30pm with dusk falling, and now with quite persistent rain, I noticed there was still a substantial queue of mourners standing patiently in line awaiting their turn to climb the path up the hill.

After the burial, the burial party had one more small ceremony. We went to the "Founder's Memorial Hall", a sort of 'museum' or display area for artefacts of Shifu's life, including a reconstruction of his solitary retreat house. In there is a 'Bodhi Tree' a frame on which to hang wishes written on little cards in the shape of a Bodhi leaf. We hung up our leaves that we had written earlier, and then we dispersed. The lay mourners also all wrote on Bodhi Leaves, and these were collected from them as they came off the hillside, to be hung on the Bodhi tree later.

There was another short ceremony at 9 pm that evening. A wooden tablet carrying Shifu's name had been resting in the Grand Buddha Hall together with his ashes. There was a short chanting service in the "Founder's Memorial Hall" and then this tablet was now installed in a cabinet which already contained a larger wooden tablet carrying the lineage details. It is common for Buddhist temples to have whole walls devoted to shelves carrying memorial tablets, and I assumed that this was where Shifu's memorial would rest in perpetuity. But no, Shifu had already thought of this and in line with wanting to leave no relics or attachments had left instructions for his tablet to be burned 49 days after his death "or else in no time at all this place will be full of too many wooden tablets!" Indeed this bird does not want to leave any traces.

The following afternoon, shortly before leaving for the airport to return home, I took another walk up the hillside to the burial area. This time the area was almost completely deserted, in stark contrast to the tens of thousands there fewer than 24 hours previously. But not quite deserted. As I walked steadily up the path a woman overtook me, apologising for doing so but signalling in broken English that she had to rush because her bus was leaving soon. As I reached the top she was bowing and standing looking over the burial area, now with hardly a disturbance to the turf to be seen. She apologised again for being in my way, and signalled that she would do three circumambulations. I followed her about half a circuit behind, and that gave her time to do three prostrations at the end without feeling that she was in my way. As I arrived at the end point she pointed at the grass and signalled that her teacher Sheng-yen Fashi was there. I said, "My teacher too", and her face lit up and she grasped my hand and shook it, then rushed down the hill to catch her bus.

Back from Taiwan

Guo-gu

When I first went to New York, Jimmy Yu was a teenage student artist who used to attend retreats with Shifu together with his enthusiastic mother. Later we practised together as Shifu's students on intensive retreats in Queens and, later again, as colleagues after he had become Shifu's personal monastic assistant as Guo-gu Shi and I, as a Dharma heir, was guest-mastering for Shifu in Berlin. After some years, Guo-gu began academic research at Princeton, gained his doctorate and now teaches, once more as Jimmy Yu, at University, married and with children. He has played major roles in preparing Shifu's books and their introductions. I have always admired Guo-gu's vigour in the Dharma and his forthright approach. Here he shares with us some views following the ceremonials in Taiwan. JHC

I returned to Taiwan yesterday, after Shifu's cremation. Dharma Drum Mountain is continuing the services until the interment of Shifu's ashes on the mountain on February 15th. The arrangement of Shifu's funeral was very well organized. In fact, it was no funeral service at all, but a retreat for his students from all over the world. From the paying of respect to his body, to the cremation, and to the chanting practices, everything had a solemn and dignified retreat atmosphere to it. It was what Shifu would have wanted.

As with many of you, I cannot describe my feelings... but my sadness has turned to a strong determination to spread Chan in the West. The meaning of Shifu's passing will change in time, like all things but my vows will not. His last wish for us was to help finish what he couldn't in the West. I pray that the causes and conditions will be in our favour to widely disseminate Chan to benefit all. Shifu has given me two incense sticks (i.e. kyosaku) with his calligraphy on them: one with words about silent illumination Chan and the other with teachings on Hua-tou practice. He also gave me two verses of his calligraphy about the meaning of my name 'Guo-gu'. These gifts now mean something different. I hope to eventually start a Dharma center in his name, 'Sheng-yen Chan-yuan' (Sheng-yen Chan Cloisters). I will first start a small sitting group in Tallahassee. If causes and conditions are ripe, this group will grow. One of the head nuns there told me that Shifu had wished to transmit the Dharma one more time, this time to his close lay disciples like me, but his failing condition did not allow this to happen. Irrespective of this, I follow my vows and we can continue his teachings as much as we can.

We will be going through a transition, a period of mourning and a slow gathering of our spirits. Many things will happen during this transition. Time will tell. My sense is that there will be personnel changes and maybe some ups and downs in the organization. The most important thing for us is to continue our own practice together as a group. Shifu's teachings will live through us if our own practice is strong. By strong, I don't necessarily mean becoming enlightened but that our Bodhisattva vows will continue to humble us and push us onward in our daily lives. At the last 49 day retreat in Taiwan (2006) Shifu emphasized that 'seeing the self-nature' is nothing compared to continual practice, reminding us that deepening our practices is always more important in our lives. I can testify that, even having received Shifu's inka three or four times since 1995 onwards, my own vexations and ignorance continue to be too great to permit me to avoid practice!

We have very strong leadership in Taiwan, and the Sangha is mature and strong. I have every confidence that the Dharma Drum Chan order will continue Shifu's legacy.

Recollections of Shifu

I invited those who had met Shifu to send in any particular memories of him they might have. Here are some of their reminiscences. In their diversity, they tell us much about the ways people of very different orientations responded to the Master's presence. Edited by John Crook.

I guess the strange thing about my first meeting with Shifu was that he wasn't there! I had been attending a sesshin at a Zen retreat centre in southern India and had been reading one of Shifu's books. I forget which one but it was a series of talks given during a retreat. It was one of his more confronting books, one of those that seems to nail you to the wall and says, "Now what are you going to do?" Ironically, it was clear that if this had actually been one of his retreats, there would have been no question of me reading at night! I was deeply affected by it and when I returned home near Bangalore I found myself sitting and sitting, until, three days after my return, I sat all night. I was exhausted, and at one point, probably around 2.00 am, I was about to go to bed, tired out, when I had an overwhelming sense of Shifu, whom I'd never met, sitting right there in front of me, an implacable and steely presence who would entertain no excuses. I felt I was fixed by his gaze and effectively ordered to keep sitting. Throughout the night, each time I tried to give up and go to bed, this 'presence' would return and push me on. The outcome was that I sat all night and had an astonishing experience...though it can hardly be called an experience for it was the experience of there being no experiencer. It was a turning point in my practice, one for which I am eternally grateful. Oh, and when I did meet Shifu in person, I can say that I was in no way disappointed! My only regret is that I'd not found him much earlier and not so near to the end of his life .What a guy!

Dave Fox



Sunrise at Huang-shan, 2000

At the Gaia House 2000 retreat, Shifu said that the Buddha had vowed to enlighten all sentient beings. I asked him if the Buddha had failed in his vow seeing as I wasn't enlightened! He roared with laughter and then said that the Buddha had started the process off by getting the Dharma wheel rolling and that I, he and everyone were spokes in that wheel all rolling along together. At the end of the retreat, he was given a beautiful big photo of the sun coming up over China. It was a symbol of the Dharma returning to China. He cried and said that he wondered if we had all failed old Sakyamuni. I was very moved by his tears. When he said goodbye to everyone he left the hall very slowly, making eye contact with everyone. It moved me deeply.

Hugh Carroll

On one of the retreats that Shifu led at the Maenllwyd, he gave a talk that sketched the path of the Bodhisattva. At the end of the talk, I asked him whether what he had said meant that Bodhisattvas, having gone beyond the delusions of self, experienced no feelings. “Not at all,” he replied, “Bodhisattvas feel very deeply. It is just that they are not attached to their feelings”. I understood at that moment that the way of Chan was not that of an austere, self-centred withdrawal, but rather a deeply compassionate, courageous and all-embracing engagement with the entire Universe.

Ned Reiter

During a winter retreat at Pine Bush in the Catskill hills north of New York, it was very cold and snowy, and Shifu had fallen ill. None-the-less, when it was time for his early afternoon pep-talk, up the hill he walked, dignified as ever, bundled up and wearing his sick-mask. While he gave that talk one would have never known a thing was wrong, as he shared his wisdom and humour. The next morning, he had clearly gotten worse because during his early morning pep-talk before breakfast, he had difficulty keeping his ideas straight at times. It was the only time I have ever seen Shifu falter in a talk, and his face looked extremely pale, hollow, and weak. Yet, he hiked the hill in the cold and snow and gave us that pep-talk anyway. I doubt if I remembered the words even then, because his example of selflessly giving the body and mind, whatever energy he had, for the benefit of others was so powerful. As I falter along burdened by self-attachment on my own sorry version of the Bodhisattva path, I often think back to that retreat and those images and feelings for inspiration and strength.

David Slaymaker

Having sat one retreat with Shifu in England, I decided to try one in New York. This was a huatou retreat and I was struggling with it in many ways. The place was strange; the mix of Chinese, Europeans and Americans was strange, even the birdsong was strange. I was holding too tensely to the form of the practice and not letting the mind ‘do its thing’. In a talk, Shifu compared the use of the huatou to swimming across a river. It was hard to swim across a river because of the currents, he said, but we had to keep swimming. And our thoughts were the flotsam and jetsam bobbing about on the surface of the water. We were to focus on the other shoreline and not bother about the rubbish floating on the surface. And then he asked me “Fiona, are you swimming?” I was flabbergasted to be asked anything, and answered that I was trying. But then I realised that actually I was just treading water and watching the floating bits of rubbish pass by in front of me. The aim of striking out for the ‘other shore’ had passed me by. There was a nod of the kindly old head and I was told to “Swim” with a demonstration of hand movements.

After the retreat I was passing Shifu and Guo-yuan Fashi and I said “Thanks for a good retreat”. Shifu fixed me with a look and said “Not so good. You must keep working.” He was, as always, quite right.

Fiona Nuttall

My abiding memory of Shifu followed the WCF's presentation to him of a painting at the Gaia House retreat in 2000. As I recall, the painting depicted a rising sun, which was intended to symbolise the re-emergence of Buddhism in China. I will never forget Shifu's tears, nor my own.

Stuart McLeod

I was fortunate to attend all three of Shifu's Maenllwyd retreats. On the first occasion, in April 1989, I was extraordinarily lucky to be placed next to him when we meditated in the upstairs room (before the new Chan hall was built). It was very special to me to be beside him while sitting; and I so appreciated his friendly tolerance of my repeated changes of posture! Although it took me ages for his teaching really to take hold, I owe him, and his Dharma Heirs, a great debt of gratitude.

Tim Paine

At his first retreat in the Maenllwyd, the meeting with Master Sheng-yen was a memorable occasion. Who was he? What would he be like? The initial group meeting felt as if it had a prickly hedge around it, a vaguely abrasive edge and it was clear that there was to be no nonsense here! What came through however, and kept on coming through, was the depth of his encompassing compassion for all. And he had some crafty, skilful means up his sleeve. One of these artless and seemingly effortless ways was to somehow stage manage little scenarios to say things to us all perhaps not easily conveyed face-to-face, but maybe meant for somebody. Was there someone in the room for whom that little play had such significance... who knows?

Once, a few retreats later, he was not quite well and was taking a gluten free or similar diet. As he was being served, he said how sorry he was to be such a nuisance. Of course, we all say things like that, but there was something about the way he said it which blows my mind to this day.

David Shaw

I had never been a stable sitter, usually getting pains in legs or back and then unfolding my legs. Leading up to my first retreat with Shifu I had been trying to adjust my posture with only limited success. I was terrified that I was going to have a lot of backache again during the more intensive retreat schedule, and I did, right from the first day. During interview, I asked Shifu about posture and backache. He just replied that it wasn't a problem. I felt stunned. Here was I suffering all this backache and pain, and this supposedly compassionate man just said that it didn't matter! And yet I knew that he was right - we all have to have pain sometimes, why not me as well, and he meant that it wasn't a problem for my practice, which is all that matters on retreat. In fact it was helpful for my practice, as the pain was focusing my concentration and I was having virtually no wandering thoughts. It also gave rise to some compassion for the pain of others. It is not only I who suffers.

Simon Child

This story is from the very first time I joined a retreat with Shifu at the Chan Center in Queens, N.Y. At the conclusion of the retreat, there was a time and opportunity to share their experiences with everyone. There was a wonderful, gentle, quiet, soft-spoken old man who was there. When it was his time to speak he said, "Shifu, I hope I die before you do." Shifu said, "Why do you say that?" He answered, "If you die before me, I will be very, very sad and I don't know if I could take that." Shifu looked at the man, smiled and said, "If you die before me, I shall not miss you." Some of the participants in there smiled and laughed and the man looked quizzical about the response from Shifu but the answer was extremely profound and perfect in the manner in which he said it. If he had said anything else, Shifu would never have been the great master that he was. This is the practice of Chan.

Gilbert Gutierrez, Chuan-hui Jing-jian, Dharma Heir of Chan Master Sheng-yen

Long, long ago I went on a Chan retreat at the Maenllwyd with Master Sheng Yen. I did not enjoy it. I rebelled against his rules and fought horribly with my own mind. Yet, much of what he taught has stayed with me and, over the years, guided me in my practice. The thing I hated most was his saying that we had to become 'blind and deaf'. That was the exact opposite of what I had come there for – to gain some clarity instead of my usual mental muddle and confusion. Why did he want us to become blind and deaf? It was nearly twenty years later that I found what I think he would have called the 'Great Doubt', and experienced the blindness for myself. Then his words helped me not to get too scared and to recognise what was happening.

In a more down to earth and practical way, I have always followed his tough advice that on retreat we should not look at anybody else. Don't make eye contact, he said, or smile or even look up. If you pass someone just bow to acknowledge that they too are on retreat. I know some people feel it's helpful to share feelings and encouragement by smiling at others on retreat but I have found his advice enormously freeing. I can work much harder without getting tangled up in reactions to anyone else if I simply let them pass by as ghosts in shoes.

But my most enduring memory of Shifu was his child-like delight and surprise at the technology on offer at the Maenllwyd. "Oil lamps!" he exclaimed, "In Taiwan you can only find these in antique shops!"

Sue Blackmore

When offered the opportunity of asking Shifu a question during an audience in Taiwan in June 2008, I asked him what advice he would give regarding how to bring Chan into our local groups of Westerners in the UK. Shifu explained that Chan is often described using the image of a finger pointing at the Moon. In a departure from the more traditional looking in the direction of the pointing, we should concentrate on the finger, meaning the Dharma and clear instruction in methods of practice, not to where the finger points. If we emphasize the importance of the finger, then practitioners will find their own way to the Moon.

Pete Lowry

I send you this smile from my meeting with Shifu in New York before Christmas 2000.

In spite of my fear of flying, I had flown the 8000 km to attend the 10 days retreat, and everything was working out just extremely beautifully, except for one thing that really annoyed me. We were being interviewed in threes and the answers came from two people - no sign of Shifu. I immediately went to the head monk and said I wanted to talk with Shifu alone. But he politely answered that since 126 persons were at the retreat, they had to do it this way. Seeing Shifu alone was just not possible. I got rather angry and told him to tell Shifu that I had not come 8000 km through the air to talk to his adjutants! I would talk to nobody except him. To my great disapproval, at the next interview I again had to enter the room with two others. I decided not to speak one single word! Sitting there sulkily and looking gloomily down at the floor, I lost all attention of what was happening around me, and of time spent in the room. I don't know how many times my name had been called, but when I finally looked up, I found myself gazing straight into Shifu's eyes and smiling face. He had done the other interviews, and let the others leave the room. "Now," he said, "we are alone as you wished - so what do you want from me!"

Such a smile!

Thøger Nordbo

In 1995, I attended my first retreat with Shifu at Maenllwyd. It was a year after our family had been confronted with the reality that my sister Lucy, who had been 'missing' for 20 years, had been abducted, raped, tortured and murdered by a couple known as 'the Wests'. At the end of the retreat, I made a vow to try and forgive them. That this aspiration even arose within me was remarkable. I could not explain it. But its context is directly connected with the ongoing effect of the vast lineage of Buddhist practice, teachings and vows, embodied in the equanimity of Shifu's presence. A day later, however, I experienced the involuntary, terrifying, physical power of murderous rage. This was my first opportunity to experience empathy for those who have killed.

Five years later, I sat before Shifu in a retreat interview and confessed the deep karmic obstruction that was literally suffocating me. I did not want to go on breathing, feel any more pain. Shifu said, "Just know that your suffering is helping to relieve the suffering of others." Back on my cushion, the grief flooded back, and my desire to breathe returned. I tried to apply the teaching to Rosemary West thinking, half-heartedly, "I am feeling a terrible pain that won't go away, but I hope that it might help you in some way." And then the most profound realisation of the depth and extent of her isolated suffering was revealed as a complex cage of fear, rage, shame, guilt and unresolved grief, locked away and demonised. In this moment, I found myself facing and accepting my own deepest shame, the unborn children that I had chosen to abort during the early years of 'not knowing what had happened to Lucy' when my life was also confused, isolated and unresolved. The word 'forgiving' became alive. My pain can be transformed by the practice of well wishing (to myself and others). From 'because' (therefore 'the other' is to blame and should be made to feel as much pain in return, the cycle of violence and revenge) to 'for' (so that they may be free of that which caused them to harm in the first place). The bars of thick sorrow dissolved.

An image of Shifu comes to mind. He is standing in the field below the Scot's pine trees at Maenllwyd as we circle around him in walking meditation. Shaking imaginary reins, he laughs, exhorting us to 'ride on, ride on'. Internally my vows are galloping in gratitude, devotion and inspiration For-giving.

Marian Partington

What stays in my mind most vividly about Shifu was his arrival at Maenllwyd late one cold, wet night on his first visit to Wales. His journey had been long and exhausting, his surroundings disorienting in their rough farmhouse feel, yet he was able to adapt immediately and give us the very best of himself for a whole week; truly the sign of a Master. During one of the Retreats I attended with him in Wales, I went to see him with my answer to the Koan "What is Mu?" "Mu is Love," I answered with both emotion and conviction. He replied, "You have brought me frozen fruit." I have come to know that reply as an absolute jewel. It makes me laugh, and shed tears of love --- tears that are no longer frozen when I think of him.

Carol Evans

At a Silent Illumination retreat at Pinebush, I was walking across the field after an interview with one of the monks. It was a crisp, cold day with bright blue sky and a scattering of snow on the grass. Shifu was walking towards the interview house and our paths met. He greeted me and asked what the monk had said in my interview. "Make my mind like a mirror" I replied. Shifu smiled, pointed his finger towards the sky and gave me three unforgettable instructions.

Hilary Richards

Experiences of close training with Shifu were often startling. Once on retreat in New York I had an exceptionally warm and supportive interview with Shifu. He was truly charming, relaxed and smiling a lot, talking about The Maenllwyd and about the book 'Catching a Feather on a Fan', which we were preparing together. I left floating on cloud nine. The next period happened to be one for Work and my task was cleaning the bathroom. I busied myself energetically, metaphorically humming away, when in came Shifu. He marched around wiping his fingers on surfaces like some army officer inspecting a barrack room. "Filthy!" he pronounced thunderously, "Pay attention. Do it again!" and, pushing past me, he left in all appearances in a rage. I was thunderstruck and then extremely angry. What on earth was he on about? The place was spotless. I checked it out – yes – spotless. I felt let down, upset; very cross indeed and even considered leaving. But then, I remembered Master Dong-chu and the way he had treated Shifu in his training – like Marpa with Milarepa. Suddenly I got it. This was a brilliant training trick. Shifu knew very well how I would respond. How would I deal with my ego then? Very well, I decided – whatever Shifu did in future, whatever he said – it would make no difference. I would simply go on with my practice regardless. Strangely, the more I did this over the years, the closer we became – but not without further jolts from the blue along the way. What a teacher!

John Crook

Gaia House, 2000. I had been to Wales twice the previous year, my first visits. Arrived in Devon nervous, excited. Rapidly had a dreadful time, and nearly left midweek - managed to hold on somehow. Passed Shifu in the corridor one morning towards the end of the week, and he stopped me, took my hand, looked at me and said quietly "You OK now?"

Nigel Jeffcoat

It seemed that Shifu's dying was as he had lived his life, with the deepest, most gentle simplicity. He stipulated no obituaries, no relics, no flowers, no stupas and no gravestones. Rather he wanted his funeral to be a meaningful Buddhist ritual, and his only request that people present help him fulfil his vows. His ashes were returned to the earth in an unmarked grave, on a small grassy bank in a bamboo grove that would make it possible for people of all religious persuasions, or none, to feel at peace there. In Chinese culture, such a burial form is a radical departure, but Shifu wanted his dying also to be a teaching that emphasised care for the environment, no waste and not holding onto him or his body.

Jannie Mead

Bliss of Complete Cessation

Jake Lyne

We transferred the merit of Shifu's life; all present writing their vows on leaf shaped pieces of card in the spirit of Shifu's own vows: he had used the phrase, "*Though the universe may end, my vows are eternal.*" These cards were carried to the burial site and handed over so that they could later be attached to a tree on campus. The burial of ashes was in five unmarked holes, representing the five elements, on a sloping, green clearing with a path round it so that people could walk round in file to pay respects.

The kneeling volunteers lining the procession prostrated in a sort of wave as the ashes passed by. They were mostly in tears. The President of the Republic of China, Taiwan, was present. He had said that Shifu had helped him in establishing his attitude to his Presidency with these words, "*Concern for the people, concern for the country, concern for the world. Bring peace to oneself, bring peace to others, bring peace and joy to sentient beings.*" The men in dark suits surrounding the President, some carrying guns in brief cases, were his bodyguard. Thirty thousand or more joined the procession walking in twos, leading up to the burial site, circling around it and then coming back down to the road, where every individual was personally greeted and thanked by the Abbot President. The procession went on well into darkness.

*Three deep bows transfer the merit of a lifetime
Last remains carried along an avenue of tears,
returned to the source.*

*Behind in silence
tens of thousands turn the Dharma Wheel.
On the empty hillside,
life and death are cast aside*

*In mountain mist,
in clouds and rain
Our vows of continuation*

The China Trip 2008

John Crook

Some three years ago, I was in New York staying with Rebecca Li and David Slaymaker prior to running a retreat at the Dharma Drum Retreat Centre at Pinebush. After the retreat, I suggested to Rebecca that, as she was Shifu's main interpreter, she would be the best person to act as interpreter to a party I hoped to arrange to travel to Chinese monasteries. We would pay her expenses. I was extremely happy when she accepted. Rebecca, David, Simon Child and I then began planning our itinerary. I wanted to visit the major Chan monasteries that had been important throughout the history of Buddhism in China. I had already led a previous party to two of the famous Dharma Mountains in China, Putuo Shan and Jiuhua Shan (NCF 23, Winter 2000) and together with my friend Yiu Yan-nang had spent time in both Nan Hua Si and Yun Men Si in the south of the country (NCF 16, Spring 1997) so I decided not to repeat those visits but to concentrate on the North, including the famous Dharma Mountain of Wu tai and the important monasteries west of Shanghai.

My aim this time was to take several of our group leaders of the Western Chan Fellowship to China to provide a living education in Chan today in its homeland, its current state, main monastic and archaeological sites, problems and revival. I believed this would also be an inspiration to them in their task of passing the Dharma on to the participants in their groups. I also realised that we could return via Hong Kong and cross over to Taiwan to visit Shifu at Dharma Drum Monastery near Taipei. This would be the final and most important port of call enabling us to pay our respects to our Teacher and Patron, The Venerable Master Sheng Yen.

The suggestion was warmly received and we soon had a party. It consisted of the following: Simon Child, Alec Lawless, George Marsh, Jake Lyne, David Brown, Pete Lowry, Hugh Carroll, Eric Johns, Stephen Ward, Sophie Temple-Muir and Sally Masheder together with Rebecca, David and I. Yiu Yan-nang and Eva Tang, who had been our interpreter on the previous visit, joined us for part of the journey and Jack Tang (no relative) was once more a splendid group guide and tour manager. Jannie Mead joined us in Taiwan.

Rebecca and I began an extensive e-mail correspondence about the preparations for this trip. We wanted to stay in at least some of the monasteries to witness their life and practice but this needed diplomatic correspondence in Chinese. None of these monasteries other than Dharma Drum were familiar with Western Buddhists, they might suspect our motives and the Chinese authorities might prove a problem to them. Rebecca did wonders and, although we did not actually sleep in more than two monasteries, we stayed close to all of them. We also decided to visit other cultural sites of touristic interest to boost our knowledge of Chinese history and culture and these included major locations in Beijing, the gardens of Suzhou and the city of Shanghai. Yiu Yan-nang once again offered valuable advice. Our eventual itinerary was as follows:

May 21 (Wed) Arrive Beijing

May 22 (Thu) Visit Forbidden City, Tiananmen Square and Lama Temple.

May 23 (Fri) Visit Fa Yuan Temple (the Buddhist Institute) and Hutong Tour by rickshaw in old city area including family visit, and drum tower.

May 24 (Sat) Visit Temple of Heaven. Train to Datong.

May 25 (Sun) Visit Yungang Grottoes, and, in Datong, the Upper and Lower Hua Yan Temple, Shan Hua Temple.

May 26 (Mon) Transfer from Datong to Mt. Wutai, visiting the Suspending Temple on Hengshan Mountains en route.

- May 27 (Tue) Visit Xian Tong Temple, Ta Yuan Temple and Pusading.
- May 28 (Wed) Transfer from Mt. Wutai to Taiyuan then flight to Nanjing.
- May 29 (Thu) Visit Qixia Temple. (Overnight at Qixia Temple).
- May 30 (Fri) Transfer to Yangzhou, visit Da Ming Temple and He Garden. In the afternoon visit Gao Min Temple. (Overnight at Gao Min Temple).
- May 31 (Sat) Depart to Zhenjiang, visit Jiangshan Temple and Jinshan Temple.
- Jun 1 (Sun) Transfer from Zhenjiang - Changzhou, visit Tianning Temple, transfer Changzhou – Suzhou
- Jun 2 (Mon) Visit Humble Administrator's Garden, Garden of Master of Nets, Lingering Garden.
- Jun 3 (Tue) Transfer from Suzhou-Wuzhen, visit Wuzhen, transfer to Shanghai
- Jun 4 (Wed) Visit Jade Buddha Temple, Bund, and Long Hua Temple. In the evening, Huangpu Cruise trip.
- Jun 5 (Thu) Transfer to Ningbo. Visit nearby Tian Tong Temple
- Jun 6 (Fri) Fly to Hong Kong, followed by a visit to Dharma Drum Monastery in Taiwan.

Our journey was extremely successful, without negative incidents, and taught us much about China, its people at the present time and the marked revival of Buddhism. We found Chan to be thriving although its form tended to be the more simplistic Pure land type, without the depth of either Silent Illumination or strict Linji work with koans or hua-tou, but none the less very sincere. Even so, intensive practice was observed in several places notably Gao Min Si, Tian Tong Si, and on Mount Wu Tai, while in several conversations with us individuals expressed deep understanding. We also had the great good fortune of meeting two amazing ancient Masters who taught us with depth and great virtuosity. We visited two seminaries and, taken together with training witnessed at Jiuhua Shan previously, it is clear that scholastically inclined monks can receive a good education in the Dharma and that this must be gradually spreading again across the country. Furthermore, the big, enthusiastic crowds visiting monasteries during festivals together with extensive Chinese inland tourism revealed a widespread popular involvement with Buddhist faith-based practices of a folk nature. In Taiwan, it was a joy to renew my personal acquaintance with my Shifu once again and to introduce so many of our leaders to him.

I am extremely grateful to Rebecca for her great skill in interpreting this journey to us and to Jack Tang for his accomplished leadership of a complex cultural tour. Eva Tang helped us enormously by negotiating our interview with the ancient Master of Wu Tai mountain.

In the articles that follow, we draw on the reminiscences of several of our travellers to present an account of what we discovered and now wish to share.

There is also an online gallery displaying some of the photographs taken by the party – see www.westernchanfellowship.org/china2008

Buddhist Tourists in China

David Brown and Hugh Carroll both kept diaries in China and now allow us to peep in on their meditations. Each had their own way of seeing things so we select excerpts that give contrasting flavours to our visits, especially those to the monasteries. We thank them both. Edited by John Crook

David's Journey

May 24th, Beijing to Datong

Arrived in Datong at 8.45pm. It is very close to the border of Inner Mongolia. The people look different here. The city plaza by the station was full of people (Saturday evening). Traffic chaotic as everywhere in China, though not as bad as India! Our new guide for the next four days described it as a 'small city' as it has 'only' 3 million people! Heavy smell of coal and sulphur in the air. This is a coal mining town that supplies coal, electricity and water to Beijing. It actually supplies fully 1/3rd of all China's coal according to the Rough Guide to China! Our guide ('Judy') said the water is pumped from underground and the level is dropping by 3-4 metres each year, which one day will be a problem! She was noticeably less politically correct than our guide in Beijing. She noted that because Datong is quite remote from Beijing the Red Guards didn't get there and so didn't damage the Buddhist artefacts we would see tomorrow. Bus journey 30 minutes to hotel (Datong Hotel, 37 Yingbin Road West, Datong, Shanxi, Tel: (86-352)-566 8666 Fax: (86-352) 586 8200)

Evening meal was relatively poor compared with the food we had everywhere in Beijing. Couldn't get internet connection in my room.

May 25 (Sun) One day visit Yungang Grottoes, the Upper and Lower Hua Yan Temple, Shan Hua Temples in Datong.

Yungang Grottoes are about 1/2 hr out of the city. The air was clearer with no coal smell. It was beautiful morning with bright sun and a cooling breeze. A large coalmine lies on the opposite side of the valley yet the grotto is beautiful. The Yungang ('Cloud Ridge') caves were spectacular, with magnificent intact statues – up to 1500 in one cave we were told. They were carved from the soft rock by hollowing in from the top then carving downwards, exiting via the entrance that we used. (By contrast Dunhuang rock is too soft for carving and there are no statues, only paintings/frescoes). Yungang is a photographer's paradise and unlike monasteries one can take photos inside. The whole atmosphere was lovely. Not too crowded, though our guide said we were very lucky as it is normally very crowded and noisy. Judy advised us that cave 3 is a good place to go away from the crowds if we want to meditate. When I arrived there later Eric was leading a small group chanting the Heart Sutra in Chinese inside the cave (to the amazement of other visitors). It echoed wonderfully. I found a small side cave in the dark and sat on a very dusty ledge to meditate for half an hour. Lovely. Sophie told me that evening that she had later also found that cave and done the same. Yungang Grottoes were memorable.

Very good lunch in town – though every meal seems to be the same few dishes! - in a restaurant full of smoking, drinking Chinese. Fortunately, we had separate rooms away from the smoke. Everyone looking tired. We then went off to more monasteries in very hot sun, about 30C. Apparently this city gets as hot as 40C and as cold as -30C in winter, and it has hardly any rain. It is in the Gobi desert (which is actually scrubby hills) and suffers badly from dust blown in from the desert. They have had a campaign of conifer planting in the surrounding hills to stabilize the land and this apparently is improving matters. We saw many

miles of tree planting around the city as we drove to/from the grottoes, including planting work still in progress. It's not clear to me how the trees ever get enough water to root effectively. The city main streets were relatively prosperous though a bit run down looking but things rapidly deteriorated in the side streets. In places, one could imagine it looking like Calcutta if it rained heavily – the equivalent here though is dust storms which are maybe not so damaging to health. People seemed very happy and relaxed overall, which I have noticed everywhere I have been in China so far. They seem more content than Westerners.



Yungang Grottoes

The temples in Datong were not memorable. Two of the three are now museums i.e. no monks, and only Upper Hua Yan Temple had monks though we saw only two and didn't get to speak to them. (Rebecca reported that evening that she had tried to persuade the head monk but he was afraid to speak to us without permission in advance from the Religious Affairs Bureau!). The whole area/street complex is a bit bizarre. It is being turned into a Buddhist theme area with many shops selling Buddhist 'gear' (dharma doo-dahs as Hughie called them) and many streets have shops with roofs rebuilt recently to mimic the temple roofing style. A bit awful but John commented that it shows considerable underlying interest in Buddhism amongst the population and that some of the shoppers/tourists/visitors may buy the Buddha statues and then become practitioners.

Datong to Mount Wutai

After about 3-4 hours driving south from Datong and a long climb in hills that reminded me of Northern Spain we came to the pass. There were Tibetan flags draped for about a mile across the countryside as the area is sacred to Tibetans as well as Chinese. John called us to a small summit and led a Tibetan chant (more like a scream in the strong wind). The guides

were I think a bit taken aback and they withdrew! Pete recorded it on his mobile phone and we all had a good laugh later.

We checked in to a nice hotel (The Flower Hotel) at Mount Wutai. The town in the valley was a surprise. My first impression was that it was becoming a Buddha theme park worthy of Disney. Monastery building is a major industry here! We saw a lot of 'monks' by the roadside as we drove in but Judy, our local guide, advised that they were not real monks, but 'business people'! Apparently, the real monks are in small monasteries up in the mountains but tourists cannot visit them. However, there are 100-200 monasteries on the mountain so many must be well away from tourism. My initial impression may have been only partially accurate as we saw some real Buddhism the next day.



Wutai-shan Gate

This turned out to be a wonderful and most memorable day. Chan is truly alive and well in China. Despite the initial impression of commercialism, there is excellent and large scale practice ongoing here. Amazingly, it escaped the destruction of the Cultural Revolution. The temples are magnificent and there are dozens of them, some very large indeed.

We went first to Ta Yuan Temple. It is of a complex of several temples side by side just behind the commercial street. We were warned to not accept gifts from 'monks' who would in fact turn out to be commercial people who would then demand a lot of money. We were also told to not take photos inside the temples as each had a monk looking after it who is a kung fu expert – they would take our cameras away forcibly. After this poor start, we were surprised by the wonderful atmosphere and the beauty of the temples. From the feel of the place, it was clear this is a working monastery and that good meditation is happening here.

I was moved to tears in one of the halls. It was lovely to be in these places. The monks wondering around were clearly practitioners and one came to prostrate after me on one occasion. I saw others filing into their meditation hall. One side hall at the back of the complex had the wonderful sound of Tibetan chanting complete with bells and horns. We were able to peep in and see about 2 dozen (Chinese) monks sitting at low desks chanting and swaying whilst reading from books. Towards the end of our time in this first temple, a monk approached Rebecca. He wanted to talk. He took those of us present outside (about half the group were taking photos elsewhere and so missed this). His name was Tsin hai. It turned out he lived 30km away in a 'hut' and was at the monastery to beg for rice. He said that until last year lay people were able to support monks with food but a law had been passed to stop this. So now, he has to come to the temples to beg for food. He was very well dressed in smart robes, aged about 40, and obviously very intelligent and well educated. John asked him a

series of questions. The replies were excellent, much as one would expect from a master. Asked about his practice he said it was to ask 'who is dragging this corpse around'. When John said that the first practices at our retreat centre are 'Who am I' and 'What am I', he replied, 'It's the same practice.'" It was arranged to take him to lunch so we could talk more.



Tsin-hai

At lunch Tsin-hai told us that Mount Wutai may be closed to visitors very soon until after the Olympics. The authorities are worried that it could become a focus for unrest and demonstration about Tibet. He also said the authorities were worried about a disease in the area for which there is currently no diagnosis nor treatment. It starts with spots and inflammation on the fingers. Several children have died in the village.

The monk described the main point of his training to be to understand life and death. He lived in a small hut built from stones and had 3 companions also with their own huts. They sleep only until 2am (though they also get some sleep after lunch) and meditate from 2am-4am. The reason for getting up so early is to avoid dream sleep as he said that dreams are our karma and they cloud the mind and so are best avoided. It was hard to survive and get food and money required, though he looked very well and had robes in good condition. Jake later started to wonder if he was a fake. He had had a dream (despite saying they try to avoid dreams) that if he met someone carrying a lamp then it would be a good year. Alec pointed out that John's Chinese dharma name means 'carrier of the lamp'. John had asked for his advice on our training. He had replied that we are doing very well. It was difficult to get a human birth; and difficult to hear the Dharma, and even more difficult to become a practitioner. He said that lay practice is very difficult because of the vexations and stresses encountered in lay life. His advice was to simplify our lives as much as possible, to avoid people and situations that cause problems so that we can maintain peaceful minds.

Next we walked to Xian Tong Temple. This is the most important temple on Wutai Shan, we were told. It is truly magnificent. The buildings were very attractive both outside and inside. This is one of the loveliest places I have ever been to. The monastery itself is beautiful and the views of the surrounding hills are most attractive. It looks a bit like the Lake District hills or some places in Switzerland. There were many monks there. Again, I was moved to tears in one of the temples. Higher up the hillside within the complex there is a magnificent bronze temple covered in both large and miniature Buddha engravings, and also a most attractive white temple.



Patch-robed Monk

One of the temples had a monk sitting inside watching over the tourists. I had noticed him earlier sitting just inside the door protecting the temple from unruly tourists. He looked a bit of a mess, unshaven and in dirty patchwork clothes. But he asked if we had any questions. Rebecca translated as John asked him about his practice. He does a Pure Land practice of chanting Namó Amitabha as he walks mindfully. He demonstrated this to us. He clearly described the 'Pure Land' as actually being here in this world if we can purify our minds sufficiently to see reality as it truly is. Only the obscurations due to our karma block us from seeing clearly. He said that chanting the Buddha's name is safer than Chan practice because the worst that can happen is that you go to the 'Amitabha Heaven' on dying: whereas with Chan there are many risks of error that can lead one seriously astray. He said one should practice Chan only with a very experienced master. When we eventually came to leave Xian tong temple I burst into tears again, I really did not want to leave.

May 29th Quixia Monastery, Nanjing

The drive to Qixia monastery from the hotel in Nanjing was only 45 minutes total. Our guide, Lilly, spent much of it telling us passionately about the awful massacre by the Japanese here in the 1930's (The Rape of Nanjing) when they slaughtered 1/3 million civilians. Japanese are held in very low regard in China for not facing up to their war crimes. The Rape of Nanjing has been removed from all Japanese history books.

We had lunch in the monastery restaurant and checked into the monastery hotel surrounded by woodland of the monastery grounds adjacent to the monastery itself. It is a teaching monastery with about 45 monks and 45 trainees, all wearing bright saffron-yellow robes. Most of the monastery was rebuilt in 1919 after being destroyed in the Taiping Rebellion in 1860. However cave carvings and one large stone Buddha survive from the 5th and 6th centuries. The monk who showed us around, when told our main practice is sitting meditation, said 'I am ashamed', meaning that he doesn't do it.

We heard later from the Head Monk that the practice here varies from monk to monk according to their personal preference. Some monks only study, others do hua-tou practice ('Who is reciting Buddha's name'), others do work. At the seminary for male monks they mostly study sutras. There are 7 sutras thought important in Chan (The Heart Sutra, Surangama, Lankavatara, Lotus, Vimalakirti, Diamond and one other. They chant some of these at high speed during services as we later found out.

We joined the evening service. It was very vigorous with chanting that got faster and faster, followed by perambulation around the room chanting Namó Amitabha which was great fun, then finishing with the Three Refuges and Heart Sutra, again at accelerating speed. The latter half of the service from the perambulation onwards I really enjoyed and it made me feel very energized and happy

We had a 1.5 hour talk with the Head Monk (the Abbott was away). He seemed quite nervous. He described how Chan had nearly destroyed Buddhism in China by the start of the 20th Century by excessive focus on meditation and ignorance of sutras and sastras. (They would say that here, wouldn't they?). He said that now a better balance is sought, though we had the impression that meditation is now relatively neglected at least in this monastery. The monks do only a single 7-day retreat each year and it was unclear how much if any sitting they do each day. There is no Chan Hall (it has been converted into the seminary), there is only a chanting hall. To the extent that they do some meditation their main practice is the *hua-tou* – 'Who is reciting Buddha's name', which we have encountered repeatedly on this trip. Lay people also can attend retreat once each year.

He emphasized the importance of gently raising doubt via use of the *hua-tou* and letting it resolve naturally. He said that because Chan had nearly destroyed Buddhism in China, Pure Land became more popular in the 20th Century. He used the term Pure Land Chan at one point though it wasn't clear what he meant. One interpretation is that some 'Chan' Monasteries use something like a Pure Land practice since there are few good masters of real Chan to guide them. He described Hsu-yun as the greatest master of the past 300 years. He also said Sheng-yen is a great master of Silent Illumination. I had asked him if Silent Illumination is used in the monastery and he said 'no'. He gave the impression they don't know how to use the method.

May 31st Gao Min Si

At Gao Min temple, we were up at 4am for morning service. There is a strict hierarchy for standing at the service. Monks were at the front, nuns next, then lay men and finally lay women. The service was similar to that at Qixai though gentler overall. It was a very long time to stand and towards the end, I felt faint so I went to the hall entrance to sit down before rejoining. Immediately afterwards we joined the monks for breakfast. Again, it was the same format as yesterday at Qixai, with watery rice porridge (though containing a few green mung beans and plums this time) and cabbage and beans with a large white dough ball. Learning from yesterday, I didn't touch the dough ball and ate my porridge as fast as possible to finish together with the monks. After a short break, we went to sit in the Chan hall. Some senior monks joined us. The hall is in a square building but has a very attractive octagonal inner

chamber, which houses the main meditation seating. The outer halls have extra sitting space for large retreats. There were less than 100 seats set out and we saw only about 60 nuns and monks at morning service, with nuns out-numbering monks. On entering the hall they had us walk rapidly around the central platform which contained 8 Buddha statues facing each of the 8 octagonal sides of the building. We did this for 10 minutes, getting very fast towards the end. The effect was energising.



Chan Hall, Gao-min Si

Notably the monk who is Head of the Chan Hall ushered the women to the outer walls of the hall, with the men being allowed in the inner circle close to the Buddha statues. Rebecca's face indicated that she was not at all amused by this...

We then sat on the raised platforms for 25 minutes before more fast walking and a short toilet break. There was then another 50 minute sitting. It was uncomfortably humid in the hall even at 7am-8am. After that we packed and left the monastery.

June 5th, Tian Tong Si

The location of Tian Tong is most attractive. Although there is a city and urban sprawl not far away, it is completely protected at present by its position in the hollow of surrounding wood-covered hillsides. The whole valley is intensively cultivated and looks to have very rich soil. We spent about 3.5 hours here and I must say I left feeling very happy. There is a quality of stillness about the place especially in the Chan Hall. The monks also seemed happy and relaxed and they were quite friendly to us. There were very few visitors with only one or two other (Chinese) groups wandering around this very large, beautiful and well-maintained monastery. It is one of the very best we have seen.

Tian Tong is famous in the West as the place at which Hongzhi Zenjue taught Silent Illumination in the late 12th century, and at which a few years later in 1225 the Japanese monk (and eventual Master) Dogen attained enlightenment during his sojourn in China. These are two of the most influential figures in Chan/ Zen, at least in the Caodong / Soto lineages. Tian Tong is one of the so-called 'Five Mountains of the Chan School'.

The temple is very large, yet there were only 80-90 monks at the temple in 1999 compared with over 1000 in 1948 before the Communist revolution. We were told it currently holds about 120 monks (I counted about 60-70 at evening service) so there appears to have been

some growth over the past decade. When we visited the Chan Hall we encountered ‘Chan Hall monks’. These are ‘wandering’ monks who live as per tradition in the Chan Hall for several months at a time dedicated to intensive meditation, which was not happening when John and Simon visited in 2000. Things have improved over the past decade.

The practice seems now to be mostly the same *hua-tou* practice we have encountered throughout this journey in China, the *hua-tou* ‘Who is reciting the Buddha’s name’. The monastery became part of the Linji lineage as well as the Caodong lineage in the 17th century, and the Linji style of *hua-tou* practice now seems to predominate in line with the view we have had given to us on this journey that Silent Illumination is no longer practiced in China. (Oddly the monks we spoke to seemed to have no knowledge of Soto Zen in Japan, and even though some had heard of Master Sheng-yen there was little recognition of the fine work he has done to rebuild Silent Illumination practice in the world).



Dogen Memorial, Tian-tong si

A young monk took us on a guided tour. Mostly he told us stories of ‘miracles’ that had happened which seemed important to him for his faith. He also said that there is currently no real Chan Master at the monastery and when John asked how the meditators could get significant ‘experiences’ validated, he said that they could not. And, anyway, it was his belief that such experiences are very rare these days unlike in the days of the great masters! When asked about instruction in Silent Illumination he said that monks had to just sit and figure it out for themselves. However, he did say that there is one elderly monk with much experience whom others trust for instruction and guidance.

We saw a wonderful painting of Dogen in one of the halls. It is stunning, a great work of art, and it appears as the picture of him in many books.

Hughie's China

Beijing.

Beijing touristy knick-knack alley, all the stores selling the same stuff. Vendors use the hard-sell, grabbing you by the wrist and pulling you towards their stall. We play with them and joke around, a few notice our malas and mime with their fingers saying 'Omitofo, Omitofo'. Big grins all around. In a book shop we find one by 'Orison Swet'. Only the cover is in English, the rest of the book inside is in Chinese. What on earth is it about? There is a picture of him. He has a huge moustache and stands stiffly in a 1930s American pose of preposterous confidence. We get silly doing impersonations of him, delighted at the strangeness. I think his book is something to do with thinking positive in a materialist, business sort of a way. He is very funny.

Tour guide Wally is a communist party cadre. I instinctively like him but he won't quit the propaganda. "Before 1949 we were all starving and unhappy but after Chairman Mao everyone is very happy and richer all the time!" Someone stomps off to the back of the bus to get away, making a 'ugh' face. He has a sing-song voice and a slight lisp. Away from the group, he is usually on his mobile phone, serious and hard looking. The more he tries to indoctrinate the group the more 'anti' it gets. It is a bit sad that he doesn't get this. His mantra is 'Follow Wally' – he doesn't want to lose us.

We are shown the Forbidden City. It feels weird to be there, following Wally with his flag, being herded around. I don't think I've ever been a regular tourist before and it is a surprise. Not having to make decisions, having people to talk to all the time, not having enough time to take things in. There is a fake feeling to it all too. It's nice being part of a group though.

At a gift shop, we see a statue of Chenrezig, the four-armed version. His Holiness the Dalai Lama is his emanation. Given the political situation it seems wonderful that they have overlooked this and have the statue for sale right there in the symbolic heart of Han power. I haggle in tortured Chinese with giggling shop girls, we all have fun and I get a bargain and make an irrelevant political gesture at the same time. All good. Waiting for Wally, we have to hold his blue flag. John passes it to me and soon we are doing a version of the heroic sculpture we have seen. We call it 'monument to the unknown tourist'.

The 'Lama Temple' gives us goose-bumps. Suddenly a tingle and an emotion cuts through the tourist world as we stand in front of the statues. Chenrezig, Tara, Padmasambhava. A sense of reverence and awe comes up. I cry clean tears and feel inspired. The biggest wooden Buddha in the world is there. After the tears; a feeling of clarity. The 'aeon of silence' comes and my mind falls away into endless space – but it's very simple. It's hard to convey these states without sounding overblown.

Tiananmen Square is taken off the schedule for lack of time. A group of us decide to go there after dinner. We want to make some gesture of support for the Tibetan crisis but don't want to get the group into trouble. We keep our visit secret in case we get arrested. If it goes bad then the rest of the group would genuinely be able to say they knew nothing about it. What a lark! Off we go on the underground and come up in the late evening darkness. The square is closed! Policemen stand guard, buses with blacked out windows lurk everywhere. Little cameras swivel at us. We get a bit scared but decide on a circumambulation anyway. We do lots of mantras and pujas as we go round. Four abreast walking in front of the communist party headquarters, I have a tremendous sense of clarity and warmth when we get to the part of the puja that says 'this mind falls still in an enwrapt awareness beyond discrimination'. If only I could make it all better, the anguish of nations, but all I have is this sense of heart-broken solidarity with all that lives. Is that just nothing?



Meal Offering, Fa-yuan Si

Fa Yuan Si, the central administration monastery is next. We put our cameras away and follow a senior monk who gives us the tour. It is very impressive. We have questions at the end but he seems very cagey, giving lukewarm, evasive answers. He is ultra-cool in his manner though. I ask him, 'What is the most important thing to practice for modern Dharma practitioners?' He says '1 faith, 2 study, 3 practice, 4 realisation'. John asks him, 'Who is reciting the Buddha's name?' and we all look intently at him to see if he is going to rise to the challenge. He doesn't.

Tiananmen Square is back on the itinerary. It is only shut at night, it seems, during the day it is an 'attraction'. Secret police wander among the tourists. A group of blue boiler suited women scrub the flag stones. They are roped off. I try to make them laugh, fooling about pretending to have a big vacuum cleaner to help them clean. Young boy soldier/police do funny marching which looks slightly effete. John comments that it isn't like British marching. We do some jolly serious British manly marching, shoulders back, chests out. We think their marching is sissy! We tease them. - 'By the left, quick mince!' - and copy their little synchronised wiggle, some heavy looking police looking on. I don't think they understand 'clowning'.

There is a rickshaw ride in a fleet for all of us. We are shown a 'hutong', an old-style back street neighbourhood. It has been sanitised. We visit a family. They have been sanitised. We can ask questions. I am about to ask if the family are communist but think it might be seen as a 'naughty' question so I bite my tongue. John immediately asks if they are communist! They are. We are not surprised. They have a shop of artwork for us to browse. We are not surprised.

Mount Wutai

Ta-yuan Si on Mount Wutai is a big monastery with a huge white pagoda. Slowly I walk around, spinning the mani wheels, turning my beads, homing in. A monk has been found for us to talk to. Tsin Hai is his name. He says "Chan is like chewing some food, if there is any flavour then it's not Chan. We are born alone and we die alone. Sakyamuni shows us the way

to endure loneliness. If you can't endure it then you can't practice. You have to completely give up all worldly things, money, sex, status, and give yourself one hundred percent to the practice". I ask, 'If the flavour is loneliness, what then?' He says, 'You have to work it out for yourself! Like when you drink water, only you know if it's sweet or bitter.'

I feel like I've been harpooned. The neediness overwhelms me and I go off to cry. The feeling is one of being walled off, can't feel better by turning to worldly things, can't force my way to enlightenment, all striving abruptly useless, leaving me lost in a painful darkness. Finding a golden shrine room, I let the emotion out, cocooned by golden sutras on the walls, golden Buddha rupas everywhere. A friend counsels me. I calm down. She tells me that I am 'one of our stars'. I cheer up.



Ta-yuan Si

We meet Tsin-hai again because we invited him for lunch. Four of them live in caves somewhere about. They have come down to get supplies. Tsin-hai apparently dreamed about us and needed to check one of our guide's birth date to make sure we were the ones. We were. We give them lots of money, they don't seem pleased, but we all know that they will be OK for ages. Feels great.

We have more questions. I ask "Is it ever permissible for someone who has not resolved the great matter to teach?" He says "If you haven't crossed to the other shore how can you guide others?" Something about the way he says it, together with the context of this exchange happening in public, makes the words go right in. Our status as trainee teacherlings seems very shaky. I think 'quit before you make too much of a fool of yourself' (too late for that!}'. John asks if it took him a long time to 'find the direct route' to which he answers, "You have to fall down and bump your head many times before you find the right way." Right at the end, I hark back to our earlier conversation and promise him that I will 'try my hardest to work it out for myself'. Very forcefully he come right back with "Don't look!" Paradox and self-reliance in the raw. Hard work.

Shifu's interpreter tells me on the bus that Shifu would not have answered my question the way Tsin Hai did. She remembered him being asked the same question and he said something like, "I have a Dharma brother who thinks like that, i.e. - go away somewhere and get enlightened and teach afterwards. He will definitely not have a breakthrough with that attitude, guaranteed! Where is the compassion for others? His practice is focused on himself and therefore is not the Bodhisattva Way!" Something clicks for me in this, a long held tension around teacher/student roles. Of course! How simple! Look at the motivation first! Are we not all stuck in our karma and doing our best? A great burden lifts off me and I see how I can be myself, be a student and be a teacher all at the same time because it's all the same.



Xian-tong Si

Xian-tong Si has a genuine patch robed monk who sits in the full lotus posture on a cushioned chair next to a giant Buddha rupa in a shrine room. He is delighted to talk to us and tell us all about the wonders of reciting the Buddha's name. He show us his 'Namo omitofo' song and dance. It is so nearly hilarious, but there is no self-concern there at all. Thinking of psychotherapy in general and my own state in particular, I ask "How should one practice if there is a lot of sadness? Look into it or move ahead?" "Move ahead, it is a bad state and you shouldn't dwell in it. Instead, plant the seeds of good karma for better states in the future." He is like a mountain in rags.

The monastery has one hundred and eight steps. I go down reciting a mani for each one. I come back up with Manjushri's mantra. I let out a great shout at the top. Everything goes very clear, the wind and light seem to go right through me - endless space, nothing to do. I bump into John outside a shrine room. I see something in his eyes, all liquid and glittering. He's gone into some kind of state too. There feels like a surge of power coming out of the place. A stone carved sutra has bullet holes in it. A Chinese pilgrim looks like he might be Hui-neng. Drying clothes on a line. Vivid shadows. Everything is just – right here!

At a nunnery, we have an arranged meeting with Master Meng Can – 'dream investigation'. He is ninety five years old. He was tortured during the cultural revolution. We prostrate when he comes in. My word but he is impressive: great age and dignity but with a vigour and sharpness to his glance. This is like meeting God! He tells us that we have excellent 'yuan fen' or 'karmic affinity' because he has not been seeing even his own disciples recently. He has made a very special exception for us. John gets into a debate via the interpreter. Most of the time Meng Tsan's face is all gentle and smiley but when he makes his points, he does so like thunder is crashing. I've never heard John spoken to like that!

Qixia

The presence of the centuries is magical, the 'tingle' is strong. We are shown a cave inside which there is a big stone Buddha made in 401 CE. Sixteen hundred years of silence. When I bow, I really bow. There is a very formal meeting in a beautiful formal room with the two most senior monks. The talk is formal. The questions and answers too, are formal. We are given more wrist malas and lots of green tea. I love being treated like an important guest: this is almost a regal, state occasion. It seems that they no longer practice silent illumination there. It seems that this practice is very thin on the ground. The morning and evening services are a trial. I get dizzy and have to sit down outside. They have fabulous dramatic drum and bell routine.



Hanging Monastery, Datong

Tian-tong Si

We get to Tian-tong. For years I have held in my imagination this place where Dogen dropped off body and mind, where Hung-chih was the abbot and wrote 'Cultivating the Empty Field'...and here we are. We wait in a little room with a swallows' nest on the ceiling. Someone waves an ornate fan to cool herself in the heat. There is a feather underneath the nest. I drop the feather to see if she can catch it. She does.

We are taken into the 'Buddha Selection Hall' (Meditation hall). First down a sloping corridor to a little room where we get whispered instructions. A huge wooden door is carefully opened and we tip-toe down another passage to a heavy drape. It is held open for us and we step into the darkness. I stand still trying to get my bearings and in the immensity of that void I hear a grunt of someone sleeping, then another from someone else. Dogen and Hung-chih were still there! Ages of that immense silence crashing through my boundaries, humbled and thrilled. A

big digital clock glowed on the central pillar, counting away in its disdain for my quaint fantasies.

We wander around the huge complex. I feel as though I must have been there in a past life. We see the huge cooking bowls, the 'thousand monk wok', hundreds of interconnected buildings. People buy yet more dharma doodads. A group of us notice Simon wandering towards us, clicking away on his camera as usual. We make three spontaneous prostrations. "Why did Bodhidharma come from the West? Because he hadn't photographed everything in the East yet!" We have a group photo at the front and I feel really blessed. This is the place with the most magic. John jokes about putting a pike in with the goldfish in the big lake, his eyes glittering with mischief. We stroll down the paved walkway off the mountain and I remember how Hung-chih only came down once, just before he died, to thank his donors. To walk in his footsteps makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.



Chan Hall, Tian-tong Si

On the plane on the way home I get a sense of the enormity of what I've been given on this trip: the past generations of practitioners doing absolutely everything they can to ensure the survival of this great joy, this epic silence, this miracle of the Dharma. Battling along in my own little way, I find myself in a middle ground of attempting to pass on what I have learned. This is no end-point and it can be an excruciating position to be in, but I feel empowered somehow. To move forwards together in one big boat, doing our best, one big mistake after another. Also, there is a sense of just how fragile this practice is.

Travelling Verses

George Marsh

Nanjing has been the unhappy site of two terrible massacres: the annihilation of the Taiping rebels in 1864; and the Japanese atrocity of 1937. In the gardens behind Qixia monastery there are grottoes containing ancient Buddha sculptures beheaded by the Taiping rebels who were intolerant monotheists, and again vandalised in the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s.



Qixia Grottoes

Qixia Temple, Nanjing, May 2008

*In the time of the madness of power
the great river Yangtzi bore many headless
bodies with a stately curling motion
to no far shore but to a melting
of the flesh of the loved ones in ocean.*

*These ancient Buddhas each in a niche
cradling tributes of flowers and incense
are all beheaded like the Nanjing martyrs.
Their stone shoulders and still bellies endure
and their dwindling necks are eloquent as art is.*

At The Lingering Garden in Suzhou there is a plaque erected over the entrance reading, "Lingering between Heaven and Earth Forever."

Lingering between Heaven and Earth Forever

*By The Lingering Garden's lily-pond
grandparents are "lingering
between heaven and earth forever"
with children who're throwing crumbs
where golden fish are gathering.
They smile for they know forever
does not last long though it is
forever and the last of it
can last as long as anything.*

Five Days Practice

*Virtue and holiness are of the first day
and fade, as it is of the second day
to clatter on the stairs, be guilty, and to fail.
Clamouring lovers complain on the third

and justifications ring in the great silence.
The fourth is a day of clenching the thumbs
the brow, the teeth. The method, the method,
I hiss, till dawn smothers each weak star

for the fifth comes that wagtails should laugh
at the powerless moon, that cows should moo,
that air should taste of a dewy dawn
where the crow wets her belly in pasture

and we walk with whispering steps
to the threshold, bowing into bell ripples.*

Ancient Teachers in Full Flow

John Crook

On two occasions during our tour, we met extraordinary ninety-year-old masters who were clearly delighted to be talking with us. These two men were rarities indeed. Their monastic careers cover a vast length of time including the period of repression of Buddhism under the communists. In Yun Men Si some years ago, my friend Yiu Yan-nang and I had talked with the Guestmaster who had said that the lack of such masters meant that many monks in China nowadays could learn only from books. Here we had found two genuine, living roots of Chan enlightenment.

Master Meng Can

The first of these remarkable men lived in the nunnery of Pu-shou Si, well off bounds to tourists on Mount Wu Tai. Eva Tang, who had been our interpreter during a previous visit to China, knew of him and had kindly arranged for us to meet him. It may seem unusual for a monk to live in a nunnery but as a refuge for elderly monks and their attendants this seems to be not so uncommon. The nunnery itself was an exemplary institution. We attended the Evening Service and noted the almost military precision of the assembly, row by row neatly drawn up facing the Buddha and the delicacy, discipline and decorum with which the nuns behaved. The chanting was some of the best we encountered in China. As most of us were males, we were fortunate even to be admitted.



Pu-shou Si

We were taken to a large upper room and made comfortable. When Master Meng Can (Dream Investigate) came in aided by an attendant we all prostrated and sat. As the leader of our party, I sat facing him below his raised rostrum directly under his gaze. That gaze alone was extraordinary for a ninety-year-old man. It was direct, demanding attention, vigorous and keenly involved in getting his message across to us. He seemed to enjoy the novelty of meeting a group of Western lay Buddhists. It was a gaze that could have been wilting had I not raised my game to hear him. My record of what he told us is shaky so I am relying on notes from Rebecca who interpreted. Here is a summary.

“You must know that the purpose of Chan practice is to illuminate and understand the mind and to see the true nature of experience. Indeed, for us, the meaning of the word “Buddha” is “Awaken and Understand”. Naturally, this requires one to reflect upon one’s past, including

past lives, so that one can get a clear idea of one's personal karma. One should see this life as resembling a dream. It is illusory and when we wake up, as if from a dream, the illusion disappears. As the Heart Sutra says, Form is Emptiness and Emptiness is Form. They are two sides of the same coin. The experience of Form implies the experience of Space. To understand form one needs to understand space."

"The practice is one of letting go of body, family and career. These are all not 'I'. They don't belong to your essential nature yet they are your illusory 'me'. In my case, I just live in this monastery. It does not "belong" to me, not 'mine' in any way. I simply make use of its facilities and of my body for what they can be used for. This is letting go of self.

"Regardless of differing schools of thought, the essence of Buddhadharma is 'Nature empty - Conditioned co-arising'. Nature is emptiness; the conditioned arising of our thinking experience appears as not-emptiness, a seeming solidity. This means that all forms of family and human relationships are the result of karmic connections. They have no other reality. Every person is equal in Buddhism. One has to pay back the karma one has collected in the past and this applies to the wealthy, the poor and to people of all nationalities."

"Before you practice, make sure it cannot cause anyone harm. Then, in each moment, let go of everything. When you do that, you are Buddha. When attachments return, that is Samsara. If one can let go of attachment moment to moment, one has accomplished one's cultivation."

"We are meeting today because of distant association in the past. This is good. I wish you well."

The vigour of the Master's mind was truly amazing for someone of more than ninety years of age.

Master De Lin

Gao Min Monastery in Yangzhou has the reputation of being the best in China for the propriety and discipline of its pure Chan regime and of its monks. This has been so, whatever the national situation, for well beyond a hundred years. It is one of the few with an active Chan hall recently re-constructed. The old master we met at Gao Min Monastery is Master De Lin (Virtue Forest). He is a Dharma heir of Master Lai Guo, one of the most important masters of the 20th century, an associate of the famous reformer Master Xu-yun. Again we were ushered into a comfortable room and treated with every respect. The ancient Master was led in by very attentive assistants and was seated comfortably. Again, the vigour of his gaze and the forcefulness of his presentation were remarkable. Master De Lin emphasized the importance of serious study of the Dharma (sutras and sastras) to build the foundation of one's practice and spoke clearly of Silent Illumination. What follows is an edited version of David Brown's recording of our interaction. I soon realized that his questioning was rhetorical – to enable him to provide the answer whatever I might say!

Master de Lin (MDL): "How is Sheng-yen instructing you?"

John Crook (JC): "He says the most important thing is to 'See the Nature' with a compassionate heart. Can you help us with how we should do this?"

MDL: "That is pretty good. It is better to practice Chan as a lay person because Chan is daily life. It is difficult to explain Chan. So first, I would like to understand your view of Chan. I understand there are a number of PhD's here so you should have grasped something! (NB several of the group had doctorates of one type or another, mostly medical or in psychological science).

JC: "Actually, none of us has a PhD in Buddhist studies."

MDL: "Is Buddhahood attained by practicing?"

JC: “Practice is preparation.”

DL: “The word Practice in Chinese has two characters, meaning ‘repair or rectify’ and ‘practice’. So to practice is to rectify our behaviour. Buddhist practice can be summarized in one sentence: ‘Buddha - mind is pure whereas ordinary people have impure minds.’ The mind of purity equals ‘wisdom’; the impure mind equals ‘vexation’. Where does vexation come from?”

Jake Lyne answered “From attachment”, but MDL went on:

MDL: “Vexation comes from absence of wisdom, just as wisdom is the absence of vexation. The key to practice is to know that you have vexations and thus to find a way towards wisdom and be like Buddha. There are many paths and practices. You need to find one that suits you. You must engage in Chan practice outside retreat, in daily life. If you can do that then that shows progress. Even when one cannot go on retreat one can practice Chan in daily life.”



Gao-min Si

With emphasis MDL went on “The most important thing is to maintain Unified Mind outside retreat not just during retreat days. It is very important to investigate what Chan is during our practice. For example: Is it the Buddha of your inner nature that you are investigating when reciting the Buddha’s name or are you looking outside yourself for some Buddha in the Western Paradise? You have to think about the relationship of Chan and your heart. What is it you are doing”

MDL then asked if we had learned any non-Chan methods. JC replied that some in the group had done Theravadin and Tibetan practice.

MDL responded: “Theravadin practice is different from Chan practice. What does ‘Buddha’ mean? The word Buddha literally means ‘Awakened one’. Sentient beings are ‘confused ones’. But what are we confused about? How do we practice to attain Buddhahood and lose our confusion? We must understand the direction of the path clearly. I want to share with you

the many decades of my practice in one sentence – even though Buddhahood is only attained over many lifetimes. The one sentence is this: ‘Do not engage in any unwholesome deeds whatsoever’. This applies not only to actions. I do not engage with any thought that arises in my mind whatsoever. Not engaging in unwholesome deeds means that you are not a bad person. But what do you do to become a good person? Engage in wholesome deeds! Do both to perfection as well as you can.”

“There are several important principles to follow.

1. No unwholesome deeds whatsoever, using a very strict definition of unwholesome to include not giving rise to thoughts of attachment. Even a single thought of attachment means you can not see your Buddha Nature. A single thought of attachment is like a small thin reed in front of your eyes that can hide a whole mountain from your sight. You must do repentance for any unwholesome deeds.
2. Engage in wholesome deeds. Use the 10 great vows of Samantabhadra as a guide to wholesome deeds. Do this to perfection for the benefit of oneself and others.
3. Purify one’s mind. Because we haven’t done this, we fail to see Buddha-mind. A pure mind is not a dull empty mind. Everything is there in a pure mind but it is not then illusory.”

MDL then asked how we practice Silent Illumination as taught by Master Sheng Yen. Without waiting for an answer, he went on, “Use a method to gather and quieten the thoughts. There are many ways to do this. It is important to understand the difference between merely a quiet mind and a quiet but also illuminated mind that reflects everything. The path of practice involves adjusting our attitude and mindset. For ordinary sentient beings, the mind is ‘out there’ in the sensory world. But the mind of the Buddha is not anywhere, it is not abiding in any place or realm.’

MDL then mentioned the Diamond Sutra which says much the same, and the story of Hui Neng’s enlightenment on hearing chanting of this sutra, and in particular the famous phrase ‘Without abiding anywhere the mind arises’. He said: “This is very difficult to understand. You should read the sutras to get a sense of this. Other wise your practice will be more difficult. Silent Illumination means that ‘in Silence there is always Illumination’, and ‘in Illumination there is always Silence’. And Silence and Illumination are Not Two, they are One. Consider the Heart Sutra that says that ‘Form is Emptiness and Emptiness is Form’ You must have this understanding to practice Silent Illumination correctly”.

MDL then went on to say that the last chapter of the Vimalakirti Sutra deals with non-duality. “If we have Silence without Illumination or vice versa we are in duality, not non -duality, not oneness. The path is to find a way to practice to attain silence and illumination together (non-dual). As Manjushri says in the scripture ‘To my mind, all dharmas (the elementary, momentary events of existence) are without names, explanations, purposes, thought. They are outside all questions and answers.’ This means that if you search you will not find. If you ‘find’ it is not correct Chan’ ‘Chan is the present moment. You have to acquire a method to collect and silence your mind. Silence is an attitude, like ‘agreeing silently’ or ‘accepting’.

Concerning effort in practise, MDL said that one’s sharpness of roots makes a huge difference. He again used the example of Hui Neng who ‘saw the nature’ without practice because he had very, very sharp roots from practice in previous lives. “If you are unable to attain silence in Silent Illumination practice it is because you have a course mind. There are three layers of thoughts to be aware of. There are course thoughts, fine thoughts, and very subtle wandering thoughts. These must all be recognized in the practice. Wandering thoughts are habitual. Deal with the habit by developing another habit to replace the wandering thoughts, for example, by reciting Buddha’s name. This leads to focusing of the scattered thoughts. It’s simple if you understand it. Otherwise it is an impenetrable wall.”

“Attachment to wandering thoughts is why we appear different to Buddha even though we have the same mind. All phenomena are the products of our mind. This is just as waves have the same nature as the ocean. When there are no waves (no disturbance in the mind) you can see to a depth of 10,000 feet.”

Later several of us had a conversation with the monk who is head of the Chan Hall. Unlike Master De Lin who had such a clear understanding of Silent Illumination this monk was surprisingly sceptical. He suggested that Silent Illumination no longer existed anymore in the world. The belief in Linji lineage, he said, is that Silent Illumination method died out completely many centuries ago and that no one alive now truly knows how it was practiced by Hongzhi and other ancient masters of the method. Was this some sort of political statement? Was it the attitude of younger partisan monks in the monastery? We are not sure. MDL was perhaps especially interested in Master Sheng yens teachings on this topic and wished to pursue it with us. We are not too clear about what methods are used today in the Gao Min Si Chan hall – probably “Who is repeating Buddha’s name “as elsewhere in China. Certainly, in speaking of Silent Illumination, MDL seemed to be concerned with the possibility of ‘quietism’ which is one of the traps in Silent illumination that the Chinese call ‘The Cave of Demons’. Again, he clearly used Pure Land approaches as a Koan for inner development not for finding some refuge in a ‘Pure Land’ of imagination.



Chan Hall Doors, Gao-min Si

To meet such Masters was a privilege and a revelation. The idea that before the Communists came Chan was already dead in China, as some Japanese teachers used to argue, was clearly revealed as manifestly false. Again, today, in at least some of the most disciplined monasteries in China, a very clear Chan (Zen) from both a Rinzai and a Caodong approach is present in the hands of elderly Masters and differentiated from the more simplistic of Pure Land approaches. In some places at least the parallels with the teachings of Shifu at Dharma Drum are striking. We wished that more of the monasteries we visited in China had proper Chan Halls and the application of method we had seen only in these few. The significance of Dharma Drum in the revival of Chinese Zen was clearly apparent.

Visiting Shifu at Dharma Drum Mountain

David Brown's Account

It was raining in Hong Kong so we had no view of the city when we landed. After a nice spaghetti lunch with David and Rebecca in 'the free world' as Rebecca happily called it (Hong Kong is her original home before moving to New York) we got the 1.5 hour flight to Taiwan. Taiwan actually is much closer to Ningbo City which we had left that morning, but currently there are no direct flights between China and Taiwan. However, relationships have improved between the two countries and from July there will be direct flights.

It was again raining lightly in Taiwan when we landed. The bus journey North to Dharma Drum Mountain (DDM) took two hours. We went through slow traffic around Taipei City then through quite ugly ribbon development most of the way. There may be pretty places in Taiwan but this area isn't one of them. Taipei is in the North of Taiwan and DDM is even further North near the tip of the island. It is close to the North East Coast and parts of the campus have sea views.

We arrived at DDM at about 6.30pm and immediately had dinner then most of us went to bed as we were very tired and had an early start for 6am Morning Service the next day.



Lotus Bells, Dharma Drum Mountain

Morning service was attended by about 40 nuns and 20 monks, plus about another 50 lay people including us. The format was similar to that some of the monasteries we visited in mainland China, starting with the Surangama Sutra which accelerated in speed such that I was soon lost trying to follow the text. Then the remainder of the service was pretty much identical to that used at DDRC and at Maenllwyd, at normal speed and easy to follow.

The Morning Service was held in a very large modern-style hall. It is almost Japanese in its simplicity and clean lines, and totally unlike any of the older traditional halls we have seen on this trip. So whilst Master Sheng-yen went on a tour of China in 1999 to gather ideas for DDM, the result is a very modern, 21st Century complex of buildings of very high quality. I like the interior design a lot. John seemed less keen, preferring older styles. However, the exterior styling of the buildings is not inspired and could be any modern campus in the West. The buildings were a bit of a jumble, with no obvious plan to the layout, which made it very easy to get lost on this large campus. There is a little more building in progress but overall my impression is that the DDM campus itself is close to completion. However there are plans to

build a public university on adjacent land, offering standard courses but run on Buddhist principles. I heard that the money for the buildings has been raised but that building will not start until a large endowment fund is raised to guarantee ongoing running costs. I also heard that DDM itself does not have a sufficient endowment fund and is dependent on donations. Raising money appears to be a main priority for Master Sheng-yen.

The campus houses not only the usual buildings expected at a Monastery but also a Buddhist College which lay people can attend for the 2 year Masters in Buddhism Course. I was told there are about 20-30 students on each of the two years at the moment. The campus also houses the Sangha University which is basically a Seminary for training monks. It has a 4 year course that all must complete before being accepted as monks or nuns.



Group Photo with Shifu and Abbot President Guo-dong Fashi

During the morning we had 1.25 hours with Master Sheng Yen. We had been told to wear face masks but after he entered he asked us to remove them so he could see us properly. He seemed very frail though Simon later told me he looks better now than he did 18 months ago. He has lost the bloated look he had that we saw in photos at DDRC. However, I still would not have recognized him as the person we last saw at the end of 2004. When he first spoke his voice was very weak, however he grew more spirited as the event proceeded. This was basically a question and answer session when we each had opportunity to ask him a question if we wished to do so. George Marsh presented him with a gift of three prints by William Blake. And Jannie Mead gave him a gift of her own calligraphy (she has just started learning). His face lit up in a big smile as she explained it was her own work, he clearly appreciated that.

Those members of the group who had not taken refuge did so at this meeting with Master Sheng-yen, including myself. Amazingly, despite 33 years of Buddhist practice, I had never done this ceremony.

We then went for coffee and lunch in a visitors dining area. I had a very good talk with Bhikshuni Guo-guang, who is 'Deputy CEO' and responsible for much of the administration at the Monastery. She said she would help us (David and Ann) find a suitable retreat to attend at DDM with English translation. It would be easier if a group of maybe 5-10 English speakers came together. Then Guo-yuan appeared and walked across to me with a very wide smile. It was lovely to see him again after nearly 4 years. He asked after Ann. I was surprised he remembered us. He also said he would help us find a suitable retreat at DDM. His English actually seems to have improved since he left DDRC and moved back to Taiwan.

The afternoon was taken up with a 2 hour session in which John and Simon spoke to the seminary students about the Western Chan Fellowship, contrasts between Chinese and Western cultures and answered questions, particularly about difficulties in training Westerners.

Later in the day Guo-yuan showed us the Chan Hall. There was a retreat in progress led by Chi-chern so we had to wait for a suitable time. The Chan Hall is simply stunning. It is more than twice the size of that at DDRRC with a very high ceiling. It is made of stone, marble, wood and bamboo, with a beautiful pure white Buddha statue. But it is the ‘presence’ of the hall which is most stunning. It is deep and powerful in a way I have not experienced anywhere else. It is most affecting. Guo-yuan also said the same, stating that its overall effect is more powerful for meditation than the Chan Hall at DDRRC. There are outer chambers surrounding the hall for walking meditation and a lovely grass walking area outside. There is tropical vegetation seen through the windows on two sides and tree-covered hills on the other sides. Overall the DDM site is nice but not special. However, the location of the Chan Hall is definitely very special, it is a gorgeous spot. I would love to meditate here. Guo-yuan told us how the spot was selected. Apparently before it was built it was a tree covered slope just like those visible outside the hall. Master Sheng-yen had been walking around the area trying to decide where to build the Chan Hall when he sat down on a rock. The story goes that he immediately went into deep Samadhi which lasted an hour. When he came out of it he said that the hall must be built there, with the Buddha statue located on the spot where the rock stood. The Chinese love stories like this and in any other place I would take it with a pinch of salt. But this Chan Hall does feel very special.



Chan Hall, Dharma Drum Mountain

The next day we went to Morning Service again, followed by breakfast. Breakfast comprised rice, vegetables and tofu, much as all other meals. After breakfast John and I went off to Master Sheng-yen’s private house (the guides said that most monks don’t even know it exists.) It was up a track above the Monastery buildings. The house, a single story bungalow, reminded me of property designs in parts of the USA. I had asked Rebecca to get me an interview to follow up Master Sheng-yen’s request last time I met him that I should do so next time our paths crossed. The bungalow was swarming with photographers who took pictures of John and me arriving and leaving. However they were not allowed into the interviews, which Shifu regarded as personal Dharma interviews. Rebecca Li translated for both of us

After our interviews John and I rejoined the group who were on a tour of part of the campus that we did not see yesterday, the Founding Hall, which is a museum outlining Master Sheng-yen's life story and the founding of DDM. Although likely historically accurate I could not avoid a feeling that a mythology is being created! However, this is important for fundraising and Master Sheng-yen is undoubtedly an expert at that. One can only be inspired by what he has achieved during his life, from very poor beginnings. One interesting fact is that a time capsule of 20/21st Century Buddhist artefacts has been buried beneath the Buddha Hall. Duplicates of the contents were on show in the Founding Hall. The capsule is destined to be opened in 1000 years, in the year 3000!



At Shifu's Residence, Dharma Drum Mountain

We left DDM mid afternoon, after a 48 hour visit, for Taipei airport to travel back to Hong Kong.

The weather at DDM was quite oppressive. It was 28-30 C as elsewhere in China but very, very humid. We were drenched in sweat almost immediately after leaving our air-conditioned rooms. This is the typhoon season and it is best to avoid coming here at this time of year. I had thought that a visit in winter may be best since I was told that temperatures range from 10C – 18C in winter; However Rebecca told me that is just as humid all year round and possibly even less pleasant when humid and cool.

Hughie's Account

Fly from Ningbo to Hong Kong, straight on to another flight to Taiwan and through the clouds and rain on a bus to Dharma Drum. We are greeted very beautifully, given nice rooms and are shown around. The roofs don't have the ornate carvings and turned up ends like we are used to. Everything is stone rather than wood. This lot won't burn down! The complex is very large and the buildings are very modern, the feel is like a university campus. John and Simon give a talk to the students. I feel very proud of them. We see the museum where there are mockups of the place where Shifu did his long, solo retreat. We visit the gorgeous Chan Hall. I see myself sitting there one day. Impressive quiet, a practice I understand at last. The retreatants were doing Silent Illumination.

We go to see Shifu. In the vestibule outside we sign a ledger with a fancy ink pen. We wear masks because he is very ill these days. We sit in more ornate chairs, all very posh. He is lead in and seems very dodderly but has a lovely welcoming smile. It's great to see him again.

There are various greetings and formal cordialities. He asks us to take our masks off, a gesture that makes me really warm to him. Presents are given, beautiful calligraphy, meaningful Blake prints. We get into questions. I realise that this might be my only chance so I jump in – 'sometimes I feel so radiant and wonderful, sometimes terribly lonely and miserable. How can I bring these two states together?' This has long been a kind of koan for me. Shifu popped it instantly! 'The two states are completely different and cannot be brought together. One is from unifying your mind with your surroundings, the other from rejecting something in your experience'. End! He actually solved my koan for me just like that. Very simple and very obvious and yet framed in a completely new way for me. I felt liberated.



Refuges and Precepts Ceremony, Dharma Drum Mountain

I liked the questions and answers. His responses had a vigour about them that felt refreshing despite his frailty. We had a refuge ceremony. Seven of us gathered in front of him and took the three refuges and the precepts. There was great force behind the feeling engendered. The power of history was behind us and there was a great feeling of coming home to a universal 'rightness'. Individually we went up and knelt before him. He gave us a card with our new Dharma name on. I was very moved. My name was 'Chang Ke'. We were given necklaces with Sakyamuni on one side and Kuan-yin on the other, very beautiful. We were given lovely glass wrist malas. I was totally blown away with all this. Not just a high point of the trip but a centrally important pivot in my life. An old and wonderfully impressive nun later explained to me what 'Chang Ke' meant. 'Chang' is to do with constant, continuous, everlasting or eternal. 'Ke' is overcoming, surmounting problems or victory over difficulties, so it's something like 'Eternally Victorious'. She explained how the name is not necessarily a description of where you are but a hint about where you are NOT!

I leave Dharma Drum with the feeling that I will be back. There are mixed feelings. It is obviously the centre of our practice on some level but at the same time it is set up for Easterners. I'd really have to learn Mandarin if I was going to stay for any length of time. We start our return journey and begin to reflect on what it has all been about. In Hong Kong, as I fall into a poignant mood, we pass what we were told was the tallest building in the world! What a place!

Notices

Forthcoming Retreats

Details and booking form at www.westernchanfellowship.org/retreats.html

- March 14-19: Western Zen Retreat
- April 18-26: Silent Illumination
- June 6-11: Western Zen Retreat
- June 20-26: Relationship as Chan Practice
- August 1-6: Western Zen Retreat
- August 29 - September 5: Silent Illumination
- October 10-17: Koan Retreat
- October 24-29: Five Day Chan Retreat
- November 7-14: Mahamudra on the Tantric Path
- November 28 – December 3: Western Zen Retreat

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We keep the NCF mailing list and the WCF membership list on a computer database for administration and mailing purposes. If you do not wish your details to be kept on a computer database then please write to the Membership Secretary. There are sometimes circumstances where it may be helpful to use this database in other ways, and we would like your permission to do so. We would of course do so sensitively. The circumstances that we have in mind are to contact individuals in a geographical area e.g. (i) to attempt to form the nucleus of a new local meditation group or (ii) to respond to enquirers who wish to discuss Chan or WZR or meditation with a contact in their locality.

If you would not wish your details to be released in such circumstances then please write to the Membership Secretary and your wishes will be respected.

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We welcome your contributions, whether articles, poetry, artwork, retreat reports, letters, or whatever else. However we do not promise that we shall publish your contribution, or in which issue it will appear if we do so. Owing to the workload involved, our policy is that we do not acknowledge materials received.

Where possible submissions by email to editorial@WesternChanFellowship.org are preferred for articles, poems, etc, since this obviates the need for retyping or scanning.

For artwork email submissions are also useful, but in addition non-returnable copies or originals by post may be helpful since then if required we can rescan them ourselves at higher resolution than may be appropriate for email attachments. Thank you.

The articles in this journal have been submitted by various authors and the views expressed do not necessarily represent the views of the Western Chan Fellowship.

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