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Gratitude and Transfer of Merit

by Chan Master Sheng Yen

Like repentance, practicing gratitude and transferring merit are useful for reducing self-centeredness and vexation during retreat and in daily life. When we don't get what we want, it is perhaps because causes and conditions are not ripe or because we lack merit. Reflecting on this, we should feel shame, humility, and repentance. When we receive benefits, no matter what we receive and how much, we should be grateful. But ordinarily when we don't get what we want we resent it, and when things go our way we become arrogant, forgetting those who helped us along the way. We feel self-important and proud, creating more problems for the ego. The first error is resenting those who obstruct us; the second error is not acknowledging the help we receive. These attitudes are the biggest causes of vexation.

The practice of gratitude is of great importance in Mahayana Buddhism. There are four benefactors we should be grateful to: our parents, the Three Jewels, the environment, and all sentient beings. We are grateful to our parents because they gave us this life, and with it we can help ourselves and others. We are grateful to the Three Jewels -Buddha, Dharma, Sangha- because they give us the Buddhadharma, the teachings, and the means to practice it. If our environment is unstable, dangerous, and chaotic, it is difficult to practice, so we are grateful if we live in an environment that is relatively secure. Finally, whatever we receive is due indirectly or directly to the help of other sentient beings. Therefore, we should be grateful to them.

Practicing gratitude keeps us from falling into arrogance, resentment, and ingratitude for what we have. Therefore we need to make giving thanks a part of practice, as well as part of our daily life. To be truly grateful means to acknowledge our benefits by making offerings to our parents, the Three Jewels, our environment, and all sentient beings -not just material offerings, but also our time and energy.

How do we repay our parents? We do this by correcting our shortcomings, changing negative attitudes and behavior, cultivating compassion, and sharing our Dharma wealth with them.

How do we repay the Three Jewels? We do this by being good practitioners and by inspiring others to learn about the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. How do we repay the environment? We do this by helping those with influence use the perspectives of Buddhism-compassion, non-violence, and concern for all sentient beings and for the environment -and by helping them to use wisdom in enterprise and government. How do we repay sentient beings? We do this with compassion: cultivate love and protection, and help those we encounter. These are active ways of transferring what we have gained from the Dharma.

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Song of Mind of Niu-t'ou Fa-jung

Commentary by Master Sheng Yen

This article is the 28th from a series of lectures given during retreats at the Chan Center in Elmhurst,New York. These talks were given on November 28 and 29, 1987 and were edited by Chris Marano.

Eternal day is like night,
Eternal night, like day.

These lines speak of two different levels: the level of the beginning practitioner --all of us here on retreat --and the level of the already-enlightened being. Let's talk about the first level because it is more relevant to our situation. John tells me that, so far, every day of retreat has been good. Perhaps the rest of you feel envious, but actually, John should not feel too happy about his situation. In fact, it would be better if he treated every day as if it were the darkest night. On the other hand, those of you who feel the days have been dark and difficult should think of each day as being filled with light and joy. You are probably wondering, "How can pain be joyful?" It is because the experience of pain is a part of practice and life, and it provides you with the opportunity to observe it, to see how you respond to it, and to practice accepting and letting go of it.

A good friend in Taiwan with whom I often converse sometimes hears me speak about my difficulties and problems. This householder Buddhist's response to everything I say is always the same, "No problem! Everything is fine." He believes that problems and troubles arise so that we can face them as well as ourselves. It is an important part of daily practice. This man has a great attitude. No matter what happens, it is not a problem. If you have been fired from your job, no problem. If someone you love has died, no problem.

The last time I saw my friend I had the opportunity to offer him a bit of his own wisdom. What he thought was a promising business venture turned out to be a scam, and his so-called partner made off with his half of the investment. "No problem," I said.

"No problem!" he answered, bewildered and scratching his head. "But I've just lost a great deal of money."

I replied, "That's fine. When you have money, you are constantly worrying about how to protect it or save it or invest it. It just makes trouble. Now you have nothing to think about, so you have no problems."

I would like to relate another story that was popular news in Taiwanese tabloids for a while. It seems that the beautiful young wife of a rich and famous man ran away to Hong Kong with an American man. Of course, the press was merciless. Everyone was sympathetic toward the rich man, figuring that he must be suffering a great deal from sadness, anger, and humiliation. But he seemed to be unfazed by the experience. His friends asked incredulously, "How can you be so happy?"

He answered, "The very fact that others desire my wife must mean that she is very good. It just shows that I have good taste."

Three months later his wife returned to him. Again, the press made a big deal about the turn of events, but the man was still happy. He hosted a huge party to welcome back his wife. Again, his friends were quite surprised by this man's behavior and asked him how it was that he could be so forgiving and magnanimous. He told them, "That she returned to me tells me that I am a good husband and that she cares for me. After having the opportunity to compare our relationship with another, she chose me, and that makes me happy."

Is this person a wise man or a fool? Who is to judge? How can one know his true motivations? I choose to believe that this man truly did not overly attach to things, that he really did not let things bother him, and that he had the ability to put things down. His attitude is a healthy one. Regardless of what his true intentions were, the way in which he responded to the situation was quite uncommon, and his behavior is relevant to our practice. Say, for instance, that your legs hurt so badly that you think it could not possibly get any worse. The best attitude would be to view it as a golden opportunity to experience such a condition. To experience what we believe to be at or beyond the limits of our capabilities is worthwhile. To endure what we consider to be excruciating pain tempers our will, determination, and self-discipline. Of course, there are different ways to deal with pain. From the point of view of practice, the way to deal with all circumstances is not to try to conquer or overcome them, but to accept them and let them go.

Such an attitude works for painful and difficult situations as well as pleasurable and smooth-flowing situations. Therefore, if everything seems to be going exceedingly well with your practice, it is no reason to feel happy or proud. From experience I can tell you that at the moment you acknowledge your good fortune and happiness, the

situation will change. Again, if you accept and endure your painful legs, eventually the pain will disappear and you will be left with a cool, pleasant sensation. The best thing would be to ignore the new development and concentrate on your method. But, if you turn your attention to your legs, thinking, "Wow, what an amazing experience! A minute ago my legs were excruciatingly painful, but now the feeling is almost pleasurable. Can this really have happened or is it my imagination? Do I have special powers? Is this a result of good practice?" In turning your attention to your experience, the mind stirs, and you find that you are off the method and that the pain has returned.

The lesson to be learned is not to let your mind stir, either with feelings of suffering or with feelings of joy. Most of you have probably been to the circus and watched in awe as an acrobat performed tricks while balancing on a high wire. Where do you think this person's focus is? Is she wondering about whether the audience likes or dislikes her? Is she anticipating applause or hisses? Or is her mind on her practice? Like the acrobat, we must thoroughly train ourselves to be completely unconcerned about what goes on around us or what responses we might encounter, and we must remain diligently focused on our methods.

To summarize the first level of understanding, these verses tell practitioners not to be dismayed by difficult situations or misled by good situations. Practice, like life, is not linear, and you will encounter good days and bad days, good sittings and bad sittings, good experiences and bad experiences. The best approach is to keep your mind on the task at hand and let the experiences come and go. These verses tell us that as practitioners, we should maintain equanimity in our practice and not allow our minds to be moved by the environment.

The verse "Eternal day is like night, eternal night, like day" also speaks of the enlightened condition. People who are enlightened do not act differently from those who are unenlightened. People who act differently, put on airs, or act superior to others because they think they are enlightened are, in fact, not enlightened. The truly enlightened person does not attach to the experience of enlightenment. It is something that has already passed. For the enlightened, there is really no such thing as enlightenment.

Therefore, enlightened ones act more or less the same as ordinary people. They would likely not stand out in a crowd because they are not concerned with what others think of them. They do not require attention and adulation. Often, it is the monk who appears slow and somewhat dumb who is the great practitioner; and the monk who appears to be extremely sharp and knowledgeable is the one who often needs to practice more diligently. Do not concern yourself with or waste time wondering what

your experiences may mean, whether you are making progress or not, or how you appear to others or me. Stay with your method and the rest will take care of itself.

Outwardly like a complete fool,
Inwardly mind is empty and real.

Yesterday, I talked briefly about monks in monasteries and how it is that looks can often be misleading. Some monks who appear to be foolish or dumb may actually be deeply enlightened. There are many stories in Buddhist history that speak of enlightened monks who were often overlooked by others because of their behavior or appearance. Often, these monks would break or disregard many of the minor monastery rules, making them appear to be disrespectful, ignorant, or absent-minded.

One such story involves Ming dynasty Master Han-shan (not the poet) and his experiences with a monk while visiting a monastery. This particular monk had contracted a disease that had grotesquely bloated his body and had turned his skin a sickening yellow color. He was shunned by the rest of the monks in the monastery because they were disgusted by him. He spent most of his time alone because no one would go near him. Still, he was grateful for being in the monastery, and when he asked for a work assignment, he was given the task of cleaning the bathrooms.

Master Han-shan developed an interest in this man because every morning he noticed that the bathrooms were spotlessly clean. Han-shan inquired and was directed to speak to the sick monk. This monk told him that he would clean the bathrooms every night while everyone else slept because he himself had nowhere to sleep. After he was finished with this assignment, he would spend the rest of the evening in the Meditation Hall waiting for morning service.

After hearing this, Master Han-shan had great respect for the monk that everyone else avoided. As it turned out, Master Han-shan had a few, long-standing problems with his meditation that he could not resolve. He thought that there might be more to this monk than anyone knew, and so he told him about his problems and asked for guidance. Master Han-shan's intuitions were correct, because the diseased monk regarded the problems as a simple matter and offered perfect advice.

We can gain a few insights from this story. One, this monk felt no need to advertise his experience and attainment; and two, he was neither depressed over nor deterred by the preconceptions of and treatment by his peers. He did not indulge in arrogance or self-pity. How affected do you think you would be in similar circumstances? Would

great spiritual experiences fill you with feelings and thoughts of pride and superiority? How would you react if you were the subject of constant ridicule or harassment? Worse, how would you feel if you were ignored and shunned? Would you have the same resolve and equanimity as did the monk in the story?

Usually, the more deeply enlightened a person is, the less he or she will stand out in a crowd. Once, someone made a long pilgrimage to Master Hsu-yun's residence in order to meet the great, contemporary master. The man spotted a non-descript monk spreading manure in a field and asked if he was going the right way and how long it would be before he arrived at Hsu-yun's monastery. The monk in the field annoyed the traveler because he asked questions about his reasons for wanting to visit Hsu-yun. The traveler did not want to be bothered by this ordinary monk, but as you may have already guessed, the manure-spreading monk was Hsu-yun himself. My master, Lin-yuan, also did not have the appearance of a great, awe-inspiring monk. It was the same for me when I was younger, but now people show me more respect. Some may say it is because of my personality and reputation as a Chan teacher, but I suspect it has more to do with looking old and my hair turning white.

These two lines of verse refer to the appearance of one who is already enlightened, but I encourage all of you not to wait for enlightenment to cultivate such an attitude. You will have far fewer vexations if you have the attitude of the diseased monk in the Han-shan story. Pretentiousness is the source of many problems. Whatever you are doing, just do it. Do not concern yourself with the approval or disapproval of others. Do not think about whether you look like a fool or not. People waste so much time and energy trying to impress or take advantage of others.

How many of you would accept a job as a cleaner of bathrooms? Would you consider the job to be below you? How many of you would be willing to let someone else get the better of you in certain situations? If you cannot do even this, then you have not learned much from practice. If in your mind you are clearly aware of what is happening around you or to you, then it does not matter what others perceive or believe. You may appear to be foolish or gullible to others, but in your mind you know you are not. Cultivating such a personality can also be transformative for others, because people will eventually realize that you are not a fool and that, in fact, you are accepting them. Such behavior gives others permission to be more honest and less pretentious.

One of my students in Taiwan once told me that he is clear and sharp when he listens to my lectures, but when he is working he feels dull and one step behind everyone else. Then he turned to me and said, "You often appear like that yourself, Shih-fu. If I

didn't already know you and were to see the way you act sometimes, I would think that you are a stupid idiot."

I did not expect such a comment, and so I responded, "A person with great wisdom is like a fool." But then I added, "Since I'm not a person of great wisdom, you are probably right. Perhaps I am just a fool." I am also happy that because of my practice, I have grown less sensitive to things other people say and do; otherwise, I probably would have been insulted by this man's comment.

Actually, it is true that I am sometimes slow-acting. I could claim that it is because I am mindful about my every decision and movement; but the truth is that sometimes, I do not know what to do. Once, two of my disciples were arguing and fighting right in front of me. If I had adhered to the rules of the temple, I would have asked them to leave. Instead, I closed my eyes. I sat there, doing nothing, and then left.

The same person who called me a stupid idiot witnessed the entire interaction, and he caught me in the hallway and asked, "You are their Shih-fu. What are you going to do about it?" I said, "I don't know." Ultimately, I talked to each disciple, but not until they had finished arguing and had calmed down. I did not see any point in trying to reason with them when they were in the middle of a fight. Nothing would have gotten accomplished. By waiting until they were calm and rational, I was able to talk to them without shaming them or antagonizing them further. Also, because they were clearer, the problem was quickly and easily resolved. I still am not sure if my strategy was foolish or wise, but at the time, it seemed to be the expedient thing to do.

In an earlier lecture, I asked what you would do if the Chan Center caught fire. I went on to say that a practitioner with true Chan spirit would continue to stay on the method, even at risk of burning to ashes. I hope you realize that I was exaggerating to make a point. In that sense, I was encouraging all of you to disregard any and all outside disturbances. On the other hand, you must have enough sense to know what to do in any given situation. If it becomes obvious that the fire is out of control, what are you going to do? If you continue to meditate, thinking, "The Chan Center's Dharma Protectors will take care of the situation," then I would say you really are a fool. Do what is expedient. Later, if I yell at you for having allowed yourself to be moved by the environment, just accept it. In your mind, you know you were clear and that you did the wise thing. It does not matter what I think about you.

In our daily lives, we should train ourselves to be less sensitive to the perceptions of others. Like enlightened beings, we should not be afraid to appear outwardly foolish. Whenever you find that you are filled with vexation because of embarrassment or

over-sensitivity, reflect, "Why am I not cultivating outward foolishness and inward clarity?" This is not an easy task for most people, even for Buddhists and Chan practitioners. Moreover, we are not enlightened beings, so we cannot expect to act this way all the time. But it is definitely an attitude worth cultivating, and I encourage you to make it an integral part of your daily practice.

The Practice of Silent Illumination (mo-chao)

by Master Sheng Yen

This is an excerpt from a forthcoming book entitled Hoofprint of the Ox, which is based on lectures by Master Sheng Yen translated, compiled, arranged, and edited by professor Dan Stevenson.

When people first begin to practice silent illumination they are likely to be confronted by a torrent of scattered thoughts. As soon as one becomes aware of these thoughts one should try to cease involvement with them. One should not allow oneself to become caught up in their train and carried away by them. One does this by simply noticing them and immediately letting them pass. One should be fully attentive to thoughts and sensory experiences from moment to moment. Do not try to avoid, banish, or suppress them. But give free reign to this awareness, allowing it to flow clearly and without interruption, like a stream that sticks to nothing and freely flows into, around, and through all things without impediment.

At the same time, be careful of the pitfall of overexertion in the effort to "illumine" things. To "illumine" (*Chinese: chao*) does not really mean to "shine," as the sun or moon might put out rays of light. It means to simply be aware. The mind is effortlessly luminous, so that whatever presents itself to our awareness is immediately visible to us. This immediate awareness is illumination: Just let go and look and let go and look and let go and look, penetrating directly, deeply, and unobstructedly right into events themselves.

In a sense one could say that letting go is the silent aspect of silent illumination, and the unobstructed play of awareness through all things is the aspect of illumination. But one must remember that they are a single and simultaneous process, not separate ones.

In the Japanese Soto Zen school of Dogen, this method of meditation is called shikantaza or, literally, "Just sit, nothing more." In the practice of shikantaza one concerns oneself with sitting and sitting only. When a distracting thought arises, one says to oneself, "All I am doing is sitting; there is nothing else to do, nothing to accomplish. Just sit." Since that is all the person does, he or she simply sits and lets everything else be, even wandering thoughts. Similarly, when involved in other activities--walking, standing, and so forth--the practitioner just tends completely to the action at hand, with no other thought in mind. Ultimately this very activity is

enlightenment; practice itself is enlightenment. There is no other enlightenment to be sought elsewhere.

Although beginners are always confronted by wandering thoughts, it is very important that practice remain completely fluid and relaxed. One of the common mistakes that people make in practicing silent illumination is to exert too much effort to repress thoughts and clear the mind. In trying simultaneously to be aware and to let go of thoughts, the meditator may expend tremendous energy to prevent thoughts from arising. In so doing he or she will very likely cling to the idea of emptiness or thoughtlessness and enter a dead blankness or, at best, low-level dhyana.

But in silent illumination the meditator should be quite alert and responsive, gently yet keenly experiencing the play of the mind in thought after thought. One should never feel that one has to suppress thoughts or push them aside. When one is really tranquil and uninvolved, the arising and perishing of thoughts will automatically decrease and, at the same time, awareness will become quite clear. Indeed, thoughts themselves are really just ripples in the awareness of the mind-- ripples that occur when the mind magnifies and clings to specific features. As one learns to relax and open up one's field of awareness, eventually these ripples of thought will silently dissolve, and clear illumination will be quite uniform and sharp. To achieve this, when sitting, just sit without a second thought. When active, act with total body-mind awareness, completely engaging the event at hand. One's attention should be neither too effortful nor too lax, but very calm, intimate, and precise, as though one's mind were the waters of a cool pond, so still and clear that you can see everything on its bottom, and the surrounding trees are reflected perfectly on its mirror-like surface.

Another common mistake with silent illumination is to fall into a condition of blankness or stupor, where the mind does not reflect or register anything. This is a lazy and hazy state of blankness. It is a dull and dissipated state, yet it is different from outright drowsiness or sleep. It is like standing on the seashore on a gray, rainy day, not seeing anything anywhere. While immersed in this condition, people often believe that their minds are really motionless and that they are truly practicing silent illumination. But this is mistaken.

In certain respects, this error also comes from trying too hard to suppress thoughts and avoid distinctive sense perception. It represents an emphasis on silence, or the notion of silence, as something prior to or separate from illumination. But it errs not from too much exertion, but from interpreting silence and "letting-go" to be a lax and disinterested sort of thoughtlessness. Again, silence in the practice of silent illumination does not mean incognizance. Sensory awareness registers quite clearly

and thoughts still flow, but in an unobstructed and subtle form. Rather than avoiding thoughts and the sensory environment, one's awareness should penetrate right into the heart of phenomena. What decreases with stillness is not awareness of the world, but the tumult of clinging thoughts and passions that impede our awareness of it. Although the problem of blankness is not explicitly associated with drowsiness per se, it is easiest to slip into this condition while meditating if one is groggy. Otherwise, it will tend to arise in people whose stamina or concentration is weak. Should it go unchecked, this dull blankness can become a habitual condition of practice, and silent illumination will be nothing more than a lazy and disinterested stupor.

The opposite condition -- a preoccupation with illumination at the expense of silence -- is also a common problem. Generally this occurs because people believe that the correct way to practice is to let their ordinary minds scamper about and grasp objects in the environment as they wish. Such an attitude leads to nothing but a distracted and fragmented mind. Mindfulness loses both its cohesiveness and its immediacy. A verse by Niu-t'ou Fa-jung, a disciple of the Fourth Patriarch, says that if a person attends to illumination without developing stillness, eventually he will fall prey to mere intellection. This state may be an advancement over the normal scattered mentality, but it is not Chan. The proper situation is for one's mind to be very clear and bright, yet free of the sort of mental fluctuations that come with deluded clinging to objects. It should be a universal and even flow of awareness, not one driven by our usual passionate likes and dislikes.

Perhaps one of the most serious difficulties with practicing silent illumination is the question of assessing one's progress. Precisely because it is so difficult to determine whether one's mind is truly motionless and open, meditators will frequently overestimate their attainments. What is more, spiritual progress can develop so gradually that it is difficult to find a clear index for it. Thus, it is easy for a silent illumination practitioner to feel that thoughts have disappeared when really they have not, especially if he or she has never before experienced no-thought.

For example, suppose a meditator goes into isolation in order to make speedy progress, putting his or her total effort into silent illumination. As practice deepens, mental expansiveness, clarity, and brightness grow until, finally, there seems to be no environmental or bodily limitation whatsoever. The daily routine passes smoothly and without vexation. At this point he or she may be quite convinced that practice of silent illumination is quite deep. What is more, since this is all there is to it -- silent illumination is both practice and fruit -- he or she may dismiss any thought of further effort and progress is spurious. But, really, this experience may be no more than the

expanded sense of self and condition of unified mind experienced in the the pre-dhyana states described in Hinayana texts. Indeed, there are many levels of samadhi in the Hinayana and heterodox traditions which are more profound than this.

Such a person must have a means to test himself, either through a truly experienced teacher or some other means. Should the former be unavailable, it may help to set aside one's practice temporarily and return to the world to test whether one's mind is really unmoving or not. In this way one can determine whether one's response to the environment is a function of the deluded mind or of the wisdom free of outflows. If, in the ordinary world, one is unswayed by obstructions whenever difficult circumstances arise, then one has made some progress in Chan. A truly accomplished practitioner of silent illumination is like a cloud moving through up-thrusting peaks, completely unaffected by anything he or she encounters. For such a person there is no mind nor world to rely on, yet the two interact mutually and spontaneously. His or her powers of enlightenment will ultimately be identical to those achieved through practice of *gong'an* or *huatou*.

Why might it be so necessary to completely set aside meditation practice in this way? If a relatively advanced practitioner meditates regularly for a few hours daily, he or she will naturally remain very calm and stable throughout the day. When such a person engages in secular activities and mixes with others, it is easy to maintain an open and serene mind. However, real accomplishment in Chan, real freedom from defilements, will maintain itself effortlessly throughout all circumstances. If one's practice lacks this self-sustaining power when the regular environment, routines, and supports for Chan practice are suspended, then one's goal has not been reached.

Miscellaneous Questions Concerning the Practice of Silent Illumination

Students inevitably have many questions about silent illumination, especially since it seems so different from gong'an and huatou practice. For clarification, some of the common ones and my answers are included here:

***Question:** What is the difference between Mahayana and Hinayana samadhis, and how might this difference relate to silent illumination?*

The principal difference between the two kinds of samadhi is that time, space, the external environment, and mental activities disappear in the deeper Hinayana samadhis, whereas in true Mahayana samadhi all of these, except defiled mental activities, remain. For example, a person experiencing deep Mahayana samadhi could converse or discourse very lucidly. Because the mind is eternally still, one

would respond without any mentation at all. The Hinayana meditator, however, would experience mental activity and affliction whenever he or she departed from samadhi. These two types of responses --that with defiled mentation and affliction and that without-- are known as "natural response" and "response characterized by mental discrimination or discursiveness." To distinguish between the two is very difficult.

Although the gradual samadhi methods common to the Hinayana and elementary Mahayana teachings (this may be said of the meditations of non-Buddhist teachings as well) cannot themselves provide access to Chan or genuine Mahayana samadhi, the accomplished meditator using silent illumination can indeed enter deep stages of Hinayana samadhi, such as the four formless samapatti of infinite consciousness, infinite space, and so forth. However, the novice or less advanced practitioner of silent illumination will likely not be able to enter the deepest stages of Hinayana and Mahayana samadhi. This is due to the aspect of illumination in Chan silent illumination practice. If silent illumination comprised only the aspect of silencing the mind, attainment of deep stages of Hinayana dhyana and samapatti would be more readily possible. But since the element of illumination detracts from deep meditative absorption, most practitioners of silent illumination cannot enter these states.

Question: *What are the differences in the practice and relative efficacy of silent illumination and huatou Chan?*

Both are capable of leading to complete enlightenment, and both are sudden methods insofar as neither deliberately sets up cultivation of samadhi as an expedient for reaching this goal. However, the two approaches are in one respect opposite in character. In *huatou* practice, as we know, the meditator must experience great doubt and the world-shattering explosion in order to reach Chan. This is known as the passage from great death to great birth. In silent illumination practice, however, emphasis is directed to what we call "hsiu-hsi" or "directly desisting and putting to rest." Great death and great birth are only experienced when one cultivates the feeling of doubt to the point where it results in an all-consuming explosion. This is an energetic, forceful form of practice that draws together and exponentially feeds on all of our doubts and passions. But cultivation of silent illumination is opposite in character since it does not require doubt but, rather, profound tranquility, clarity, and immediate mindfulness. Herein lies the outstanding dissimilarity between the two methods. Indeed, since in silent illumination Chan there is no extraordinary experience to use as an index of progress, it is very difficult to judge its correctness

and efficacy. This leaves the practitioner of silent illumination open to various points of error to which one involved in *huatou* practice may not be prone.

Question: *The idea of silence seems to imply that mind is absorbed in one point or one thought, thereby ignoring or forgetting the surroundings. On the other hand, illumination sounds just the opposite -- as though mind is allowed to diffuse actively through the external environment.*

It is misleading to say that silence, in this instance, means that mind reduces itself to or settles fixedly on one point. Actually, it means that from moment to moment, nothing is retained in one's mind. The mind does not seize on anything, nor does it discriminate or evolve thoughts about anything. In this respect it is utterly settled and silent. When speaking of illumination, it is alright to say that mind diffuses universally through the surrounding environment, but this does not mean that it is making distinctions or discursively reflecting on the environment. It diffuses fluidly, but it does not seize or dwell on any features.

Furthermore, we should make a distinction between silent illumination as a technique or model of practice to which one strives to conform and the actual experience of it as Chan. When a person is practicing silent illumination, he or she is mentally very keen and clear but drops all discursive involvement with the surrounding environment. Yet, once the practice of silent illumination matures, it is quite possible to carry on all aspects of daily life and active involvement in the world without impeding this clarity and calm. In fact, such a person still does not discriminate. Nonetheless, if you point at an object and ask what it is, he or she will freely tell you. This is because when one has perfected silent illumination, wisdom actively functions and responds without ever departing from the quiescence of samadhi. In technical Buddhist terminology, this kind of experience where samadhi and wisdom are perfectly simultaneous is the "supramundane samadhi of the Mahayana." It is qualitatively quite different from the mundane samadhi of one-pointed absorption in a single thought or feature. Better yet, it is just Chan, for the Chan school does not make these sorts of distinctions.

Question: Is it better not to mix or switch back and forth between silent illumination and huatou practice?

Because they represent two different attitudes-- one quite intense and active, the other more passive -- usually these two methods are not intermingled.

Question: *What about using them for long stretches of time, one method for a few years, then the other?*

In the past there was no such example, but lately I have been thinking of trying this out.

Question: *Why was this never done before, and why are you contemplating doing it now?*

People of the past just stuck to one method. They did not want to run the risk of distracting themselves and their disciples or losing momentum in their practice by switching techniques prematurely. I am thinking of teaching both because people of the past who used one method tended arbitrarily to discredit the other, without having any firsthand experience of it. I tend to be more open minded about this and feel that both methods have their strong points. For example, one might begin with *huatou* and take up silent illumination later, after one has acquired a taste of Chan. Actually, during the T'ang dynasty -- the formative period of Chan -- these approaches may not have been so separate. It was only with the emergence of the specific houses of Chan during the Sung period that they became distinct traditions of practice.

Question: *Are there any clear indicators that a disciple would do better with one method than the other?*

Yes, there are. If a person can effectively calm the mind and let go of thoughts from the start, he may well begin with silent illumination. But if one's mind does not possess this sort of inherent stability, it would be better to use a *huatou*. Then again, if a beginner takes up a *huatou* and is able to concentrate well, but over time is unable to build up great doubt and so runs out of steam, I may have him or her use silent illumination. Actually there are no rigid formulas. If there were, it would not be Chan.

Question: *Can you tell us something about the use of silent illumination and huatou in everyday lay life, as opposed to being on a retreat or in a monastic lifestyle?*

When people used silent illumination in the past, they normally tried to attend to their practice all day long. This was possible because life then was a lot simpler and slower-paced. If you have a fulltime job you can't really use this method, because silent illumination requires one to minimize discursive thinking and simply observe. Thus, at best you can only do it in the morning and evening when you sit at home.

As for *huatou*, again you can't really apply this method when you are on the job. You can still use it for morning and evening meditations, but you will never generate the intense energy that you would use on a retreat. This is an important difference, because with *huatou* it is very important to put all your energy into your practice. It is a very intense practice. Silent illumination is intense and demanding in a different way. In the practice of silent illumination you try to completely let go of yourself. It is basically a very "loose" method. Beginners might have to exert a lot of energy and use silent illumination in a "tight" way in order to settle their minds. But as they become adept at sitting it isn't done intensely.

Question: *Why do you so often have students use the methods of counting or following the breath as a prelude to using huatou and silent illumination?*

Of the five methods for stilling or stopping the mind, in ancient times the two techniques of meditation on impurity and meditation on the breathing were used most often. During the day of Sakyamuni Buddha they were called amrta or "ambrosia" because they were so effective for concentrating the mind. Basically I teach counting the breath in order to help students calm the mind. If one's mind is scattered --which is a common problem these days-- this method will be very beneficial. After a student has made some progress, I might assign contemplation of loving-kindness and compassion or contemplation of impurity, if he or she is excessively plagued by anger or lust. Desires for sex, food, sleep, comfort, and so forth, are closely tied to the body. Thus, meditation on the impurity and repulsiveness of the body is an effective antidote. But for the most part, these will be exceptional cases. Actually, it is best to proceed directly on the path of Chan.

Guidance for Practice in Daily Life

By Master Sheng Yen

This talk was given on May 13, 1997, at the end of a retreat in Poland and was edited by Ernie Heau.

This morning I asked a few people whether there was anything I could help with. They asked me to give some guidance on practice in daily life. How should you practice in this difficult, transitional, post-Communist period? Being neither Buddha nor deity, my understanding and knowledge are limited. If I cannot answer your questions, or my answer does not help you, forgive me. Time is very limited and precious. Be right to the point, and the question should be useful to everyone.

Q: *How should lay people practice in daily life? It seems that the life and practice of ordained people or monks is different from the life of lay people, who have families, work, etc.-- all the humdrum and commotion of daily life.*

There is one clear distinction between lay and left-home (monastic) practice, and that is the ownership of the different problems that come along with each. For example there is the ownership of one's business -- this is directly connected with oneself -- "This is my company or my job or my family" and so forth, so this is a key difference. From this, many other kinds of secondary questions branch out. But aside from the fact that monastics and lay people own different sets of problems, practice should be the same.

One's wealth, family, job -- all of these things should be looked upon with an attitude of service, as opportunities to tread the bodhisattva path. This is a very key idea and difference. That is to say, you are doing these things on behalf of your family, you are working hard on behalf of your company, and so forth. Monastics are doing the same on behalf of the sangha, which includes all sentient beings. And as for your wealth, it is just passing through your hands, as if you were holding it in trust for the good of others.

Do not regard those things in a way that if you lose them, it's like losing your skin, and if you gain something you become overly excited and attached. Look upon those things as if you were doing them for someone else's sake. You are like a representative of your family, or the company you work for.

Look upon encounters with people and all situations as opportunities to practice the bodhisattva path. Every situation is a favorable situation, even if difficult. Make it into a chance for practice. Bondage comes when we get swirled into "this is mine" attitudes, and gain and loss give us much concern. When we gain we are very happy, but when we lose we become very sad. It's OK to have feelings, but don't attach them to issues of gain or loss. You can be happy, but keep your emotions very stable, without much fluctuation. This is very difficult, but it is a part of training. Especially when the issues concern wealth and money, or love and conflict. When two people come together they have some kind of opposition. So at least these three things make it difficult, even in one's own family, to have happiness.

Yesterday Torsten gave a good analogy. He said that a sangha is like a universe in which there is both good and bad, and it's quite normal. So substituting this sangha with family, a family is like a universe, and there are good events and bad events, but this is just the nature of a family. When you see things that are not so good, treat them with ordinary mind, with a normal attitude; accept and deal with them accordingly.

In terms of meditation, perhaps monastic life would be easier, and relationships are not that complicated. A layperson can change their situation through daily practice, weekly group practice, and at least two seven-day retreats a year. Of course you can set aside a period of your life to live in a monastic setting. Someone told me yesterday that he would like to be a monk just for a few years, and then return to a householder's life. It is not necessary to do this. You can live in that kind of setting as a layperson for a period of time and then return to a householder's life. So there are several things one can do.

Q: *Does Chan Buddhism advocate or teach, as in Tibetan Buddhism, any special practices that would prepare laypeople for death?*

A very important question, but difficult to answer. I am prepared to die any moment, and I am not particularly concerned how and when, but when it comes I will be fully prepared. One should have the attitude of neither fearing nor looking forward to death. Last fall I went to see a master in his eighties, who was quite ill. When I comforted him, telling him that he will get better, he replied that I didn't have to say this, adding, "If I live, that's fine, if I die, that's also fine." This is equanimity.

However, ordinary people fear death, because they don't know what will happen. Even practitioners, when confronting death, may still have fear. My advice is to practice vows. Again and again, make this vow: I will follow the Dharma lifetime after lifetime, or if reborn into a Pure Land, I will continue to practice there.
No matter how a person dies, it is due to one's karmic retribution, and one's degree of merit and virtue, cultivated in the past. But no matter how we die, we should face death with acceptance and joy. How can we, confronting death, accept it with joy? We find it difficult to leave this world most of all because of our strong attachment to our sense of self and our physical body. We are also deeply attached to family, friends, possessions, wealth. But these attitudes should be turned around; we should reflect that we came into this world owning nothing, and we should leave with nothing.

It is like a traveler whose time is up at a particular hotel, who must leave to continue his journey, and encounter new possibilities. Whether one wants to or not, one has to move on. When ordinary people without practice die, they take with them, first, their habitual lifetime tendencies; second, their heaviest and most dominant karma from this life. These forces greatly influence the future life of someone who does not practice vows. As practitioners we should be constantly making vows, aspiring towards wholesomeness. We should understand one very important point: making vows can overpower our habitual tendencies and our stock of heavy karma. With a strong practice of making vows, we needn't be concerned where we will go after death, or where we will be reborn. We will follow our vows.

Dying is something like passing through the stages of meditation. Some experience suffering that may last for a while. But afterwards it is much like meditation, when first the sense of body dissolves, and then the environment also disappears. At that time don't become anxious and afraid, but continue in that meditative state, just allowing the mind to rest. According to the power of one's vows, one will naturally be carried to the next rebirth. This question is very important, but let's leave death behind and talk about the living.

Q: *It was said that relationships in lay life are different from those in a monastery. In a monastery they are simpler. In ordinary life the rules of the game are completely different. Most of the people we encounter are not meditators, but are interested in gaining, in thrusting their opinions upon others. It is easy to practice here, on retreat, where we all know what the rules are, but in lay life we find ourselves in the midst of various conflicts between opposing parties; there is a lot of violence, and aggression, so could Shifu say something about that?*

I am knowledgeable and clear about these rules, because I know and interact with a great variety of people in the society, acting on behalf of my Buddhist organization throughout the world, in political and economic spheres. I meet people of many different levels in society, so I have a wide range of exposure and I am clear about their rules of the game. One principle is that one should handle and deal with situations with compassion. Whatever games people play according to whatever rules, if you play their game, use their rules not to oppose, but with compassion.

For example the Dalai Lama is up against a power that does not speak from the perspective of reason, and that is the government in Communist China. But that does not mean that he is sitting back doing nothing. In fact he is very actively exerting influence from every possible angle. What he is doing is not as simple as just spreading the Dharma. In fact he travels internationally to influence the Communists in different ways. Through gaining the sympathy of other people and also through lectures, initiations, practices, and speaking about peace, he is trying to make the Communists accept him, what he believes and wants to accomplish. So one has to make use of every means to accomplish that, but in his mind there is no opposition, because he does this out of compassion.

My own organization, the Dharma Drum Mountain in Taiwan, is very large. It also extends to the United States and other parts of the world. In order to survive one has to play the game according to the rules of the society, but out of compassion and for the sake of Dharma. Being involved in the Buddhist activities of Dharma Drum, I meet a whole range of people who are running the society and all sorts of things. As I said, the most important thing is compassion, and the principle is to transform enemies into friends, not to turn friends into enemies. It is very important to stand very firmly on this principle and use it in dealing with people in different situations.

So maintaining compassion, we still use the rules and games of life. Second, use your skills, assets, and wealth as a temporary trust to help others. Third, see everything as an opportunity to practice, to develop aspects of your journey on the bodhisattva path. Familiarizing yourself with these principles, you can deal with life both in smaller and in larger, more complicated contexts.

Q: *I have a question on how to practice with children. I think this may be important also for others present here. We live in a strongly Christian country and there are basically no opportunities to visit a temple as in other Buddhist countries. Is there anything you would especially recommend in such a situation?*

I do not have children, but my advice is that you introduce to them very early the life of Shakyamuni Buddha, especially his early years. Read to them the Jataka tales, which are stories of the Buddha in his previous lives. When you have group practice, bring your children and have a separate room where a sangha member would baby-sit, and teach them ideas of the Dharma. This will give them some exposure while quite young. You can also teach them very simple forms of meditation-- five minutes, ten minutes. Some kids can even sit for half an hour, although that is rare. Another advice is that a pregnant woman can meditate, so the child can experience serenity and calmness while in the womb.

Q: *The choices in our life are quite simple when we choose the better good, but lately I have been encountering more often the necessity of choosing a lesser evil, for example when in order to protect one's family one has to cause harm. How should one practice in such situations?*

Is the question because others harm your family, to protect it you have to harm others?

Q: *It seems sometimes there really is no choice. For example a drunk comes to our door and knocks and we have to tell him off.*

Oh, very simple. To protect our own life or our family, we should not wait until we are harmed. So the first thing is to protect oneself. The second thing is, if one must harm in defense, one should not harm others too much. It is best if we can just deflect hostility. Compassion should be directed equally to all beings, but there are those who are close to us and those who are distant, there are things of primary and secondary concern. Within this equal mind there are still differences. For example one's own existence, the continuum of our own life -- this is closest to us and very important. One's family's welfare is also very important. Although one should have compassion and be fair to all, there are still things that are primary and secondary. Compassion is not waiting for someone to harm you or your family. At some point you act on your priorities.

However if by sacrificing your life or your family, many, many more sentient beings will benefit, you may choose to do so. Not that everyone should do this. If you can and are willing to do it for this cause, that is your choice. If you are not ready for this kind of sacrifice, don't do it, because this is the practice of a high-level bodhisattva. In the

Jataka tales, the future Buddha did this over and over. So take hold of this principle and, accordingly, do as much as you can do.

I know you have more questions, but we are out of time. You will have to come back for the sequel when I come back to Poland. But if I die very soon, then I will be reborn and may come back as a little boy. Maybe then I will be the one asking you questions about the Dharma.

Q: *When will you come again, Shifu?*

I can't tell. I don't know.

Q: *Would Shifu like to be reborn as a woman, and if not, why?*

All I want to do is come back. I haven't given much thought about whether as a man or woman, but to me it doesn't matter. I do not give more importance to men than to women, but neither am I a feminist. I am neutral.

Q: *Why doesn't Shifu greet women by shaking hands?*

This is just a precept, or rule of behavior, for Buddhist monks. The Buddha probably gave this precept to prevent people from thinking, "Ah, this monk likes women, he shakes this woman's hands," and so give them less vexations. Monks are also human beings, so if they touch women very often, pretty soon they'll want to get married. Women are so nice. OK, our time is up, that's all. Time for evening service.

Master Sheng Yen at Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp in Germany

Ending Remarks by Shifu:

We should be grateful to all the teachers who have come here. I know most of them, and some are good friends. All teachers have their own styles, their own methods and emphasis, but from my perspective, those who came here are all good teachers. One of them, John Crook, is my disciple. He is active in spreading the Dharma in Europe, and I urge you to trust and have faith in him.

I hope to return to Poland, but I do not know when. If causes and conditions are ripe, I also want to go to Berlin. In fact I would like to go to every possible place, even to hell. However the places I am able to go will probably exclude hell. If my teachings survive somewhere, then I am also there. Shakyamuni Buddha entered parinirvana a long time ago, but today we are still using his Dharma. So is he still here? Dharma is Mind, Chan is the Dharma of Mind. If someone uses a teaching, the teacher is with them. More so if their mind is in complete accord with the teacher's mind; then, with this mind seal, their teacher is always with them. I stayed only one night with Master Ling-yuan, but he is still in my heart and mind, though he died long ago. We have been together for just one week, but if you practice what I have taught, I will be with you. Even if you do not see me as your teacher, if the teachings I presented can be useful to you, to that extent, I am a part of your life.

The Four Noble Truths

Talk by Master Jen Chun

Chinese New Year morning talk given at the Chan Meditation Center on February 14, 1999 and translated by Guo-yuan Shi.

The sun, like the Golden Crow flying as fast as an arrow,
urges us to bring forth light:
Light that penetrates existence and emptiness,
and permeates and delights the body and mind.
The moon, like the Jade Rabbit racing as fast as a shuttle,
encourages us to protect the brightness:
Brightness that distinguishes right from wrong
and strengthens and purifies body, speech, and mind.

Happy New Year, ladies and gentlemen. I sincerely wish everyone health of body and mind, and happiness for your whole family. I respectfully hope that you practice wisdom this year and, through wisdom, that you know your body and mind, cultivate your character, and conduct yourself according to the principles of compassion and virtue so that you benefit all sentient beings. Moreover, I respectfully urge everybody to cultivate bodhicitta -- compassionate mind -- and to confidently and diligently follow the great path of the bodhisattva.

The Chinese liken the sun to a Golden Crow, meaning that time is valuable and fleeting. The teachings of Buddha urge us to make the best possible use of time and to transform everything into the light of wisdom. We must make the best use of our sense faculties in order to uncover our light of wisdom. In the Buddhadharma, "light" represents the profound truth that the Buddha realized. Once a person realizes this truth, he will make the best use of his time, and he will never again relapse into bad habits. He will follow the great path of the Dharma.

There are many Dharma doors, but they all fit into two categories. There are doors through sunyata, or emptiness, and there are doors through the myriad things that exist, such as our bodies and minds, and all the phenomena and surroundings that present themselves to us. Most sentient beings do not know the true nature of these things. Their minds are engulfed in the situations that happen to them. Always

chasing round and round, they allow themselves to be captured in the realm of samsara.

Buddha made a deep investigation of his body and mind as he experienced them right at that moment. He discovered a profound truth: the empty nature of all dharmas. He discovered and developed great clarity and great luminosity. Thus it was because of his own experience that he urged everybody to carefully observe sensation and the manifestations of the phenomena in front of us in order to realize the true nature of existence. The light of wisdom can penetrate phenomena. Once that has happened you do not dwell in that emptiness; you return to phenomena and society and contribute, utilizing the principles of emptiness and mutual dependence.

Buddhadharma does not start from the outside world to explain things. It explains everything from right here, from your own body and mind right at this moment. If you investigate the nature of your body and mind here and now, moment to moment, gradually you'll be relieved of suffering. The body is like a dark, dangerous dungeon, and the mind is like an abyss. Since Buddha realized the nature of everything, he is able to shed light, to illuminate sentient beings and gradually guide them out of the dungeon and the abyss. Once we're out of the dungeon and the abyss, our bodies and minds will be at ease, without impediments.

In Chinese and Indian legend the moon is likened to a jade rabbit. It is jade because it sheds cool light and gives people relief and pleasure in tropical weather. It is a rabbit because it moves quickly. The moon is also compared to the weaver's shuttle, which moves back and forth rapidly. The moon reminds us, again, that time is fleeting and that we should make the best use of the time we have to benefit from the Buddhadharma, free ourselves from darkness, and realize luminosity.

We have to manifest the light of wisdom in this world. That means we have to conduct ourselves in accordance with the realities of this world, eradicate our bad habits and habitual patterns and move on to the bright side, to Buddhadharma. Once we do this, we can follow the Buddha path and, like Bodhisattvas, devote ourselves to Buddhadharma life after life, making the very best use of our time.

Following the Buddhadharma gives our lives genuineness. Our actions, speech, thoughts, and feelings will be correct, virtuous, and in correspondence with the Buddhadharma. Our actions will be good, and our words will be accurate, correct, and brief. We will gradually eliminate our vexations, whether they are ramifications [the

branches] or root vexations. When we have eliminated our vexations, our minds are at ease, cool, and without impediments.

What is sound character? Most people think this means physical and mental health, but in Buddhadharma soundness signifies vigor, completeness, and profundity. A person who realizes the Buddhadharma can make the best use of herself or himself and rests in an unperturbed state. He or she is totally unshakable. We know that most of us are deeply affected by the vicissitudes of life. For instance, if we receive compliments, we enjoy them and are happy. If the next moment we are criticized, then we are immediately unhappy. When a person has realized the Buddhadharma, he or she is unmoved by such phenomena. That is the state of having no impediments.

When a person has no impediments we say he or she can penetrate phenomena and make best use of his or her life, always practicing the Bodhisattva path. But the real reason for cultivating and learning Buddhadharma, for trying to leave samsara and enter nirvana, is for the sake of all sentient beings. You have to cultivate yourself in order to free sentient beings from samsara. That is the purpose of cultivating and learning Buddhadharma. Brightness allows clarity, but what does clarity mean? As a person gradually lets go of defilement, he or she moves on toward clarity, a state without any entanglements. For example, a lay person can practice the five precepts, which provide a strong basis for higher-stage practice and can eventually lead to emancipation.

Clarity has another meaning: a person who sincerely practices Buddhadharma can eventually become totally in correspondence with Buddhadharma and able to achieve nirvana at any time. However, the essence of Buddhadharma is not only to benefit yourself but to benefit all sentient beings, so a person like this, a great practitioner, remains among sentient beings, helping them and giving them guidance so that everyone, together, can achieve Buddhahood.

In conclusion, I sincerely wish that we all, from this moment on, live in clarity and without impediments, and that we practice the Buddha path together until everyone achieves Buddhahood.

"...Some kind of endeavor, some goal oriented effort."

Retreat Report by DS

This retreat was the first at the new Shawangunk Center. The Center and Surrounding area are very beautiful and the atmosphere is very calming and peaceful. Especially in November when the trees are without leaves and the space expands deep into the forest.

As for sitting meditation, this retreat was again another opportunity for improvement. I was able to relax more than before, and to do so with an erect back and neck. During one particular session sitting on the cushion with leg and back pain that usually drives me nuts, I suddenly felt very peaceful. Often the mind tells me how ridiculous the practice is, urging me to get up and do something more useful, something more Exciting! But what would I be doing if not on retreat I wondered, sitting here with my legs and back in pain, trying to collect my monkey mind onto this ordinary old breath? I may be at work playing the games and rushing around. Or I may be at home feeling tired from work, or looking for something to keep me busy and entertained. All these images seemed so "off," so crazy, or insane. Like if I were then watching someone else do all that I'd say, "What in the world are you doing?!" Seeing myself this way and then seeing myself again where I was on the cushion, strong mixed feelings of sadness and joy all at once came over me and I felt, "Sitting right there, right now, doing this, is the most sane thing... beyond description." A wave of gratitude and faith, together with other events and experiences during the retreat, and the Bodhisattva Precepts ceremony which followed, have continued to support my practice with greater sincerity and effort. This was much needed by me.

Another experience that still stands out in my mind came after Shih-fu told us (again) that our physical and mental tensions come from being hasty, from wanting to attain something. As eluded to above, this tension has always been (and still usually is) an obstruction of mine. I've been told may times that my wanting to attain something is a major obstruction. I've always felt it must be right, but this time my mind asked a very interesting question: "Is that really so?!" "Is this how it is for ME?" So I looked, and looked, and looked.... I looked while I ate, I looked while I walked, I looked while I sat, brushed my teeth, drank, and everything else.

Guess what I found. It really is so! And in a really big way, too! Everything I do seem to involve some kind of endeavor, some goal-oriented effort. Trying to do it in some certain way --trying to do it just right. And of course there is very little to no room for investigation and learning in such matters, it is a matter of being that certain way Now! I don't know that I even really know what these certain ways really are!! But Shih-fu was right; this constant presence of endeavor causes much if not all of my constant presence of tension -- again, whether walking, standing, sitting, or lying down. At this point I was left with no choice but to take up one more endeavor -- to find out how not to want something all the time. And I don't know how I came to it (maybe because Shih-fu tells us so often to do it), but while walking outside and contemplating this problem I concluded I'd just have to give my body up to the walking. Otherwise I'd continue trying to walk like this or like that, and continue thereby to be tense and not at ease. Whatever walking is, I'm sure it can take care of itself, so here, have my body and walk! I had to remind myself as I walked of course, "Give it up. Give up. Give up the body to walking." And I let the walking have the body. For a while I just kind of floated along with this walking body, feeling very calm and relaxed. Surprised too! What a peaceful feeling to just let the body walk. It worked on the cushion for a while too (until I finally forgot to remind myself to give up the body to sitting).

But perhaps the most important lesson I learned from this last experience was the benefit of turning the teaching toward myself. Not to just say, "Yeah, that's right!" but instead to ask, "Oh really? Well, I'll just have a look for myself and see." "I'll see if I have so much desire and if this makes me tense. I'll just see if thoughts and awareness are different." And maybe even, "You may say it works, but I'm going to sit and use this method myself, to see for myself. Does all this Buddhadharma apply to ME?!"

There were some other things too that have stuck with me (being now only two and a half months later). But these two were the more complete in themselves. The others I feel are pieced of pictures still forming bit by bit. I also, though, want to thank everyone who attended the retreat for their special part in it, and everyone who works so hard to keep the retreats going for doing just that. And Shih-fu, Thank You. I cannot find words for the value of your example.

Fall Has Fallen

Fall has fallen
with a vengeance:
the rage of its colors
its spin

Fall has fallen
with the violent delicacy
of little leaves
on little winds

Fall has fallen
Outrageously --
in macabre imitation
of spring
(a madness)

Old leaves
like new buds
but darker

Old wings (leaves)
new wings (breeze)

Leaves fall like birds
on a last mission:
bursting flames

The last leaf is adamant
like an old man
sticking to his walking stick soon he'll sit.

Grace
falls in fall
to grace the ground
to trace the ground
with gold

The air
is full
of fall

falling
in
the
air
The air is pungent
with leaf mold
molded by Fall into
temples (tombs)
into pyramids
of incense--
burning
Chaff
as old as
Egypt
as old as Greece
as old as the oldest men:
who leave behind them
the smell of death
smelling like leaves

-- Diane Stevenson

Weren't my wandering thoughts just the discontinuous soundtrack of my vexations?

Excerpts from Retreat Reports

Editor's note: The new Dharma Drum Retreat Center in Shawangunk, New York, now hosts as many as 70 participants on each retreat (soon it will accommodate 100). They come from over a dozen different countries and a wide range of experience, from first-time retreatants to those who lost count of their retreats long ago. What follows are excerpts from the reports of a dozen different practitioners-men and women, beginners and veterans -- about their retreat experiences in 1998.

I spent the first day in the dark; mostly I remember darkness, my eyes closing, the light dimming, my mind dimming with it, sinking into a warm murk that even wandering thought could barely break through. During the day I struggled, but by evening I didn't even want to practice well, I just wanted to sleep...

W*hen I came to the retreat I was very wired, moving in my quick Western speed. I didn't even know how frantically I did things until I experienced my behavior during work periods. I took on the dishwashing chore like a tornado, causing vexations to my co-workers in trying to keep up with the speed. How do I know this? We didn't talk verbally, but we certainly talked to each other in silence. Fortunately I realized this about myself and slowed down, and soon my motion was more harmonious with the others. Also, this retreat I didn't try to beat the line, to be first to the bathroom and out the door. I learned, mainly from the example of others, how to wait in line, be patient, and allow the other to go ahead. I was very happy in this new state of being...*

The first four days of the retreat I was struggling with sleepiness, pain, and irritation. At times I thought I must be crazy for putting myself through this experience. I was at times irritated, angry, bored, and scared. However, instead of analyzing my feelings, with the help of Shifu's (Master Sheng Yen's) Dharma talks I determinedly stuck to the method. I didn't seem to be getting anywhere until the fourth day, when we were led on a walk and meditation by the lake. As I lifted my eyes and gazed out over the lake, resting them gently on the water, trees, and sky, something shifted in me. When we returned to the Chan Hall and I took my seat I remembered what Shifu had said about relaxing the eyes and facial muscles. For the remainder of the retreat I regularly checked my eyes and facial muscles, and to my surprise I often found they were

tense! I consciously made the effort to relax them. I did this over and over again in meditation. I also checked my lower back, abdomen, and shoulders. They often were also tense! I certainly would never have realized my tension, especially in my eyes and face, if Shifu had not pointed this out in his talks...

...O*n the second day, and only on that day, there were just a few moments with no pain whatsoever. My mind had relaxed considerably, my breathing had slowed down, the "I thought" had lost its tight grip, and all the pain simply disappeared. I just sat then, counted my breaths, and felt comfortable, yet I was fully aware of myself sitting and of my surroundings. Another day, during Direct Contemplation, I discovered that the instant I was fully aware and in the moment, feelings of desire in general, but also specifically for the object contemplated, had vanished. If I do not label, I do not desire...*

...In the beginning my thoughts were long and sticky, coming as distinct opinions about the place, people, etc. I wanted to do things when I planned them (like taking a shower). It wasn't always possible at exactly that moment. Although it wasn't difficult to avoid the irritation, I realized how easily I can give in to vexations, just out of habit and laziness. After a few days I was able to experience "just waiting" under the door of the bathroom (a small experience of cessation of the negative state of mind). ...I gradually started to experience longer breaks in the stream of thoughts. On the fourth day I noticed changes in the texture of thoughts: some of them became light and it was possible to "blow them away" with the awareness of breath; others were like bubbles, and I was able to notice them in the state of formation... On the fifth day my method of practice changed. Until that time I was following the breath. During one period my breathing became slow and almost unrecognizable. I stopped distinguishing between the in and out breaths. There were no thoughts except the question "Where am I?" and the subsequent thought "I'm going to stay where I am without looking for the breath." I became aware of my body and the environment, without differentiating any of its aspects. Peaceful, quiet, bright...

...T*he geese flying overhead at regular intervals on their migration south seemed an apt metaphor for this process: honk, honk; honk, honk; silence. Weren't my wandering thoughts just the discontinuous soundtrack of my vexations? I felt as distant from them at times as from the geese flying overhead; these thoughts came, honked, and went. Why had I ever given them such importance? Honk, honk; honk, honk; weren't they just a form of noise pollution of the mind? They were mine only if I insisted on possessing them. The geese were not mine any more than my migrating thoughts. Soundless moments stretched into hours....*

...I do not know why my body was suddenly shaken by sobbing on the fourth or fifth day of the retreat. I felt the tears gathering, but there was no reason for them. I was not remembering something sad. There was no upsurge of painful feelings from past injury or loss. I had been silently counting my breaths as usual, and the few thoughts passing through my mind were weak and fleeting. Then the body began to weep. Tears streamed down my face and the stomach muscles convulsed as if a tragedy had occurred. And yet my spine remained erect and motionless, and the peaceful counting continued without change....

...M*y mind was calm, but the huatou was more like a mantra....I could not give rise to the doubt....Shifu discussed the Silent Illumination method....I decided to try it. The first sitting with Silent Illumination was very refreshing. It worked quite well: my mind was quiet and concentrated, feeling my body and the space of the room, the light at that point of the day, the sound of the birds and the roar of the waterfall at the mouth of the lake. I was not thinking about these things, just taking them in. The next period I tried again. It seemed to work for a little while, but then, suddenly, and with the conviction of a jealous lover, the huatou method returned. And not hypnotic chanting of the words, but asking once and waiting for response. And not empty waiting, a waiting with a heightened sense of anticipation. I've experienced the anticipation before, but this was different. I was much calmer. I wasn't falling into my usual traps, such as congratulating myself on how well I was doing, or expending too much energy in the form of a tense body, or denying the authenticity of what I was feeling. These things did not matter....*

...I went to my interview with Shifu carrying a concept that came without effort, an hour or so before. The Great Vow to master limitless approaches to Dharma, I realized, is none other than the act of true *huatou* practice.

In the interview my mind was focused on this little gem. I mentioned my observation. Shifu said, smiling, "That's a vow, not a huatou."
I began to explain; I mentioned something about phenomena.
He asked, "What is phenomena?"
I gave a dictionary style clarification of the word, hoping to help him with translation. Now, after all the interviews I've had with him over the years, and my awareness that he really does have a sophisticated English vocabulary... I sometimes wonder at my mental density in always thinking he needs a translation.
He then said, still with an amused smile on his face, "Thinking makes you stupid." I remember my first reaction being one of hurt. After all, I was rather pleased with this idea.... I craved a congratulatory pat on the back.
Later, after the interview, another small insight came to me. "Is this stupid?" I asked myself. I didn't make any effort to have this insight, it just appeared. "One could call this a thought, but I fail to see the stupidity in it. Yet isn't it a wonderfully interesting conceptual loop, 'Thinking makes you stupid'? Stupidity is defined by thinking, and thinking defines stupidity. Fascinating."
It was at this point that I suddenly stopped and said to myself, "What the hell are you doing? Your practice is not 'Thinking makes you stupid!' You're supposed to be working on your *huatou*!"
So there I was. Thinking made me stupid.

...A*ctually the most interesting things happen after retreats. This time I experienced stunning clarity of certain fragments of urban landscape...These houses were HOUSES and nothing else existed at that very moment...Their existence was breathtaking. They were just as they were. Impossible to comment upon. "Thusness" as strong as a boxer's blow. And I did not look at any especially grand buildings....*

...Two times Shifu pointed out to me unpleasant smells in his washroom that I cleaned. One was in the curtain. The other was in the little cupboard under the sink. Bad smell, he said. I let him smell the rag, the soap can, and the sponge, to determine where it came from. It was comic. Then I had to clean them very well and put them near the window so the smell would disperse in the wide free body of air outside.
It took some hard time, in the months after the retreat, and a bad experience, for me to come to terms with what he meant.

When I was in the retreat I did not feel that I was changing. Yes, I was becoming more calm at last, and I refreshed the knowledge of the direction in which my karma is taking me.
But it was only when I found myself in the subway, sitting among the bodies of people going to work, all of them tired, all of them tense, after working at making themselves presentable according to the accustomed ways, and there was not even one face or body that was not tense, that had not some amount of despair, or hanging on to some fleeting hope, it was only then that I knew that I was somewhere else.
Just one step outside the Chan Center made me meet the big world of ours, in which everything moves with no hope.

...A*s we filed out of the Chan Hall, the retreat just ended, Shifu asked after my wife. "What is the first thing you will say to her?" he asked me. How much I love her, I thought, but I said, "I will give her your regards." "Your GRATITUDE!" he scolded, his eyes twinkling. I had been off retreat for five minutes and had already abandoned Buddhism completely.*

NEWS

New Abbot Appointed

Master Sheng Yen has appointed Guo-yuan Shi as the new abbot of the Chan Center. Guo-yuan Shi has been very active in running both the Queens and the Shawangunk centers. Moving into his position as Assistant Abbot will be Guo-shun Shi, who, although quieter and more behind the scenes, has been a strong support at the center for the past seven years. A person who has upheld the precepts of a monk or nun for over 10 years is known as "upper seat". Guo-yuan Shi has been a monk for over 12 years, Guo-shun Shi has been a nun for 11 years. We are very lucky to have their wisdom and compassion assisting Shih-fu in leading our Chan Center, and wish them the best in their new positions.

Teacher Training Course

Over ten years ago, the Chan Meditation Center began a program training people to become meditation instructors. However, at that time, because of different conditions, there were not many students coming to learn meditation. So once those instructors had been trained, there were no students to teach.

Today conditions have changed, and there are good reasons to begin a new Teacher Training program. For one thing, we get requests from other organizations, schools, and various places inviting us to teach meditation. We don't have enough instructors to meet these requests. Also, now that we have the Dharma Drum Retreat Center (DDRC) we would like to devise ongoing retreat programs, year-round. These retreats will last from two days to seven days, and even longer. Because of this we will need people to monitor the participants and assist them in their practice. A third reason for conducting this program is that from 1975 until now, Shih-fu has been traveling to the United States for 24 years. As he is now 70 years old and considering retirement, Shih-fu feels he should have some students who can at the very least teach meditation and who can introduce others to basic Buddhist teaching, Correct Views, and a step beyond that, to spread Buddhadharma on his behalf and become teachers in their own right in the West. Our hope is that more and more Americans will come to realize their need for Buddhist teaching. We also hope to spread our teachings in the Chinese speaking community here in America. The class is taught in both Chinese and English.

The Teacher Training Program aims to produce two types of instructors: Chan Assistant Teachers and Dharma Lecturers.

Chan Assistant Teachers will be responsible for going through stages of training. They will start as instructors of the Beginner's Meditation Workshop, teaching portions of the workshop and finally teaching the entire workshop. They will also learn to become retreat monitors, performing such tasks as being the time-keeper on retreat. They will go on to become retreat instructors, learning to conduct interviews of retreat participants. Finally they will be trained as assistant teachers. Qualified assistant teachers will be able to facilitate 1 to 5 day retreats, using recorded tapes by Shih-fu for the retreat Dharma Talks.

Dharma Lecturers will lecture on two types of things. First are basic ideas, the teaching and theory of Chan. Second are the basic tenets of Buddhism. It is not necessary that the Dharma Lecturer will be able to give interviews during retreats, or even lead retreats. Their prerequisite is actually having gone through the first level of training, which is the Beginner's Meditation Workshop. Beyond that, Level One of the lecturer training program will include group study on the Heart Sutra. Level Two-Intermediate Buddhadharma, will include Shih-fu's classes on Four Kinds of Condition-Origination. Level Three-Advanced Buddhadharma, will include Shih-fu's classes on Tathagatagarbha, Yogachara, and Madhyamika and independent book studies.

For both Chan Assistant Teachers and Dharma Lecturers there are two kinds of examinations, written and oral, for the different levels of training. For the oral examinations students take turns presenting portions of the beginner's workshop and giving dharma lectures to their fellow students and the instructors. Once a person passes both oral and written exams, they are qualified to become that level's instructor.

The Teacher Training Program began on May 21st, with five classes on the Chan Teacher Training program. Students are continuing throughout the Summer and Fall to meet weekly, taking exams and observing and supporting each other's oral

presentations. The Dharma Lecturer program will pick up in the Fall with another five classes, when Shih-fu returns from Taiwan.

Renovations at Dharma Drum Retreat Center

An architect is working on a renovation project for three major buildings at the Shawagunk center. The Chan Hall is being expanded to accommodate 100 people, with bathrooms and showers installed in the old kitchen area. A new kitchen will be installed in the current Meeting House, which will serve as a dining hall. The sleeping quarters in the main house will be expanded to accommodate 100 people. The work is expected to be completed in time for the November retreat.

20th Annual Membership Meeting

The Dharma Drum Mountain Buddhist Association - Institute of Chung-Hwa Buddhist Culture held its 20th annual membership meeting on July 20th. The DDMBA has a great deal of history to review from its beginnings in 1979 at the Temple of Great Enlightenment in the Bronx. Membership has grown to 14 chapters. Many students have come to study at the Center; Master Sheng Yen has led over 80 retreats in the US alone. Among our notable achievements are the development of the Shawangunk Retreat Center and Dharma Drum Publications (DDP). The retreat center will host a 49-day retreat next year, and in future will host a 7-day retreat each month of the year. DDP has produced 9 books on its own and has now entered a new phase of working with outside publishers, such as Shambhala, Oxford University Press, and Doubleday. There are currently 8 books in the planning stages, including an autobiography of Shih-fu and a translation of his biography The Way Home from the Chinese. Other future plans include putting Shih-fu's retreat talks on CD for use on retreats, and creating an online archive in hypertext format. We look forward to another 20 years, and beyond, in support of the Dharma.

Metrimonial Blessing Ceremony

On Saturday, May 15, Master Sheng Yen performed a ceremony to bless the marriage of Eugene Morris, of London, and Doris Lin, of New Jersey, at the Chan Center. About 80 people attended the beautiful ceremony, which included the

newlyweds taking refuge in the Three Jewels, expressing gratitude to their parents, and exchanging vows. Shi-fu encouraged them to respect, to learn to accept, and to forgive each other.