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The Prerequisites for Chan Practice: Great Faith, Great Doubt, Great Vow, and Great Vigor

by Master Sheng Yen

A method of practice is only a technique. If we use the methods of Chan without the prerequisites, we will not be able to go deeply into practice and derive power from our method. Only when we have Great Faith in the methods and views of Chan, in our teachers, and in ourselves, will we be able to truly practice. When we have Great Faith we can generate Great Doubt. "Doubt" means recognizing the mind of birth of death. We recognize our inability to gain mastery over the arising and perishing of thoughts, our inability to be our own masters in different situations, and our inability to subdue our vexations. We recognize the immediacy of confronting death in our lives. This gives rise to Great Doubt. When we recognize the mind of birth and death and investigate a *huatou* or a *gong'an*, we can generate the doubt sensation. What about someone who does not use the *gong'an* or the *huatou* method? If he or she engages in practice confronting the immediacy of this birth and death, this is also Great Doubt.

After we generate Great Doubt, we will naturally give rise to Great Vow. We vow to bring peace to our own minds and to make full use of our resources to help all sentient beings. Great Vow is the arousing of bodhi mind within us. Great Vow is like having a Great Direction. Without it we will not be able to persist in the practice. Great Vow creates Great Vigor and gives us determination in our direction, so that we will be able to practice continuously, without interruption. Practice is like forging steel into a sword. You cannot pause, but must continuously heat the steel and beat it into shape, making it more and more refined. We must learn how to put down distractions and practice diligently and persistently, yet with a relaxed and joyful attitude. During retreat we must isolate ourselves. We must withdraw our senses from the environment and withdraw our minds from everything that happened prior to the retreat or will happen after the retreat. Eventually we can isolate ourselves from the previous thought and the next thought, so that we are singly in the present moment. To be able to stay continuously, from moment to moment, in the present moment of practice is Great Vigor.

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

Commentary by Master Sheng Yen

This article is the 24th from a series of lectures given during retreats at the Chan Center in Elmhurst, N.Y. This talk was given on June 29, 1982, and was edited by Chris Marano.

The next lines in Song of Mind are:

> ***The reflection of Bodhi appears***
> ***In the eternally clear water of the mind.***

The term, "Bodhi" has multiple meanings in Buddhism. Sometimes it is used in the same way as the "*Tao*" or the "Path." But it can also mean "the end of the Path." This should not seem contradictory, for I have often said that the end of the Path, or the goal towards which one strives, is the Path, or the process, of practice. The unenlightened are told that there is a goal to attain, but for the enlightened, who have awakened to the Tao, there is no Tao.

In the line "The reflection of Bodhi appears," reflection refers to the activities of one's practice while one is treading the Bodhi Path. Apart from practice, there is no Bodhi, just as without a body there can be no reflection of a body. By practice I mean more than meditating, prostrating, and performing all the special activities that are considered formal practice. Anything done mindfully and in accordance with Buddhadharma is practice and is following the Bodhi Path. On the other hand, there is no Bodhi for enlightened beings who have already awakened to Bodhi, because there is no longer any distinctive effort in their actions, nor is there any notion in their minds that they are practicing. Bodhi is known only to those who have determined to follow the path of Bodhi. As one follows the Path, one's depth of practice will deepen; and as it does, the Path will widen and widen, until the Path disappears. This is analogous to awakening to Bodhi. At this point, there would no longer be reflection, because there would be nothing left to reflect.

One retreatant who has been on many retreats told me today that sometimes he feels he is progressing in practice and other times he feels he is regressing. He does not feel that his practice is progressing in a smooth, consistent manner. But, he participates in Chan retreats again and again, and every time the retreat seems good to him. This is an example of a person who has gotten a good taste of practice and who is treading the Bodhi Path. If it were otherwise, he would not have the disposition

to continue. And there is another retreatant who rarely misses a retreat, yet she has never been able to leave behind her steady stream of wandering thoughts. These are people who have accepted the Dharma and who have strong determination to walk the Bodhi Path.

These people I have mentioned know very well that they come to retreat with problems and illusions, both in their daily lives and in their practice. They also know that they are benefiting and will continue to benefit from their practice. Such an attitude is a good foundation for practice. I am more concerned about the people who come to retreats and think they have no problems whatsoever. These people are thoroughly confused. The second line of the couplet -- "In the eternally clear water of the mind" -- addresses this issue. If the mind is relatively clear, then problems that arise will be easier to spot, just as in clear water one can see the bottom, the fish, the stones and bubbles, and water plants. But if the water is murky, like the yellow River, then one can see nothing but murkiness.

Those in clearer waters who are more clearly aware of their problems understand the necessity of practice. Those who think they have no problems are prone to being filled with pride. I see it often, even within the Sangha. Some Sangha members think they are the equals of Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and saints. A monk who in his youth studied and practiced under my guidance visited me not too long ago. He is a good person, but immediately I knew he had gotten stuck somewhere when he said, "Shih-fu, should I still prostrate to you?" It is customary for monks and nuns to prostrate to their past and present Dharma teachers.

I replied, "No, that isn't necessary." Then I continued, "In the last few years you must have made great gains in your practice."

The monk said, "Yes, I did have numerous experiences and they were not bad." I asked what method he had been using, and he replied, "Methods I learned from others turned out to be useless. In the end, it was a method I invented myself that was the most useful."

I said, "I guess then you are ready to become a patriarch, since you have discovered a new method of practice."

He said, "What's wrong with that? After all, Sakyamuni Buddha didn't need a Buddha to attain enlightenment."

I changed the subject and said, "Is there any special reason why you have come to see me this time?"

The monk replied, "No, nothing special. I just came to see if you had attained a higher level of practice."

I said, "Since you have come to see me, I should say a few words. First, to answer your question, I haven't made any high attainments. You, however, are in a bad situation. You have fallen prey to your own delusions and have come under the influence of what we call demons. I do not envy your position." Of course, he didn't like what I said and he left. Soon after, I heard that he had left the monkhood altogether and had returned to lay life. This is an instance of one's mind being murky. In this particular case, the murkiness stemmed from the monk's tremendous attachment to attainment. Because of his strong desire to attain something, he fell into this demonic state. It would be wise to heed this story and be vigilant so that you do not find yourselves in similar circumstances.

"In the eternally clear water of the mind" can be understood on two levels. The first level is where one is clearly aware of one's vexations. The second level is that of one who is thoroughly enlightened. At this level, the water truly is eternally clear. In this water there is no bottom, no banks, no surface, no murkiness; and there is nothing in it except water. There is no sense that it even is water. Here, water refers to the power of wisdom, and like the water, this wisdom is all-pervasive. It is the wisdom of the Buddha, the place where there is no subject or object anymore.

Even the first level is not easy to attain. Although many of us know that we have problems and vexations, it is an altogether different story to say that we are keenly aware of all vexations as they arise within us. Such clarity of mind only comes once one has seen into one's self-nature. Of course, such an ability is not like an on-off switch. As we practice, we will gradually become more clearly aware of our vexations as they arise. We will also come to perceive vexations that we had not noticed before. As practice deepens, so too does this awareness. When finally one sees into one's self-nature, this skill will become very great, as long as one continues to practice.

The next two lines:

> ***The nature of merit is like a simpleton:***
> ***It does not establish closeness and distance.***

If you have attained the Tao and your mind is in accordance with Buddha-nature, it does not necessarily mean that you will be perceived by others to be wise and charismatic. To others, in fact, you may seem like a fool. Buddha-nature accords with that which is pure, undefiled, and unmoving. If it is in accordance with the pure and unmoving, then there is nothing for it to show. A person in accordance with Buddha-nature would not stand out in a crowd. Those that society deems intelligent and charismatic are only superficially wise. In regard to worldly wisdom, there is even the saying that the person who is deeply wise appears to others as a fool. If this is so even in the worldly realm, how much more is it so for the person who has attained the wisdom of Buddha-nature? Such wisdom has nothing to show.

"It does not establish closeness and distance." Closeness refers to that which you like and which is intimate. Distance refers to that which has not much to do with you. Those enlightened to Bodhi see all dharmas as equal. They do not make distinctions between high and low, superior and inferior, near and far. Awhile back, someone said to me, "I have listened to many of your lectures, and you constantly speak of the Dharma as making no distinctions and seeing everything as being equal. It's a nice idea, but I cannot do it. Even if I could, it would cause nothing but trouble. I cannot see my children and the children of others in the same way. I pay all my attention and give all my love and care to my children. I'm not capable of doing the same for all children. They have their own parents to take care of them. Furthermore, my wife is my wife, so she is someone special. I give her special attention and care. I cannot love other women as I do my wife." If you were me, how would you have answered this man's dilemma?

This man's dilemma is similar to the hypothetical situations people often use to discuss ethics and morality: If you had one slice of bread and there were several hungry people, who would you give it to? Or, if a few people were drowning, who would you save first? Theoretically, one can say whatever seems most fair, but in a real-life situation, theory often goes out the window and we deal with things on an emotional level.

The correct way to think about this idea of closeness and distance is as follows: if you are in need of help, so long as I can provide that help, I will help you, no matter what the relationship is between us. Perhaps there will be situations where I cannot help you, but that is because I do not have the ability to help you and not because we have no relationship. If I have only a limited amount of food, I must first feed my family, because as head of the household that is my responsibility. If I have the ability to help

more people, then I will do so, regardless of whether I know them or do not know them, whether they are close or distant. Whether you have been good, bad, or neutral to me bears no influence on my actions. When Sakyamuni Buddha's father died, he went to the funeral and helped carry the coffin. He did not say that all fathers were his fathers and did not spend all of his time carrying dead men's coffins at funerals.

All sentient beings are equal to your parents, but your parents are still your parents. On the other hand, as Buddhists we do not vow to deliver only our parents. We vow to deliver all sentient beings. All dharmas are equal, but each dharma has its own place. According to Buddhadharma, one dharma is not better or higher or closer than another dharma, but each dharma has its own position, its own direction, and its own causes and conditions. In his time, Sakyamuni Buddha helped many sentient beings, but he never left India. No Chinese ever received the benefit of Buddhadharma during Sakyamuni's lifetime. Buddhism did not enter China until several centuries later. Even in India during Sakyamuni Buddha's lifetime, many people lived and died without ever having heard anything about the Buddhadharma. It does not mean that Sakyamuni Buddha had a preferential attitude toward certain sentient beings. Buddha helped who he could help.

We can use these four lines of verse to help us in our practice: attempt to cultivate a mind like clear water, so that you are always aware of your wandering thoughts and vigilant about vexations arising. But, like a simpleton, do not feel aversion toward some thoughts and feelings and desire for others. Meet every condition like the deeply wise person who seems like a fool to others. Do not distinguish between good and bad, close and distant. To the wise fool, all dharmas are equal. You may be wondering why I talk so much, given that I am a teacher of a so-called wordless wisdom like Chan, it is ironic. Because none of us are wise fools, I must use words of distinction to help us move from the level of distinction to the level of no-distinction. I am using poison to relieve the suffering of poison.

The Recorded Sayings of Master Linji

Commentary by Master Sheng Yen

This talk was given on May 11,1997, the sixth day of a retreat held in Poland. These talks were edited by Ernie Heau.

As students of Buddhism in Poland, you have good karma because many meditation masters come here to teach; on the other hand your karma isn't that good because few of them stay. That has its good as well as bad points. It is good because having exposure to different teachers, different styles, you have a better chance of finding something suitable. But it can also be confusing if these teachers teach different things. You may feel that each teacher has good points, but there are so many that you may not learn much from any one of them.

Likewise, whether a teacher stays for a long or short time has good and bad points. In Chan history there have been many disciples who became enlightened after just one night with a master. There are also cases where a disciple, even a future patriarch, practiced with one master for ten, twenty, thirty years without getting enlightened but, after going to another master, experienced enlightenment. He would then return to his original master, who would say something like, "After all I have it available here also." So, teachers staying for a long time or a short time -- in either case it could be good or bad. Everything depends on one's karmic roots.

My own Shifu, Master Ling Yuan, had many disciples, but of all of them only two are Chan teachers with disciples -- myself and a younger Dharma brother. And yet, I studied with Ling Yuan only one night, and my Dharma brother stayed with him no more than a few months. It all depends on causes and conditions and your karmic roots. Therefore, with all these teachers coming here to teach meditation, you are very fortunate. Unlike myself, who had only one night with my teacher, you have me for seven days. In fact, Ling Yuan did not teach me any method of practice that night. I just asked him a lot of questions, none of which he answered. At the end he scolded me, and that was it. But if I had not been ripe, so to speak, his scolding would not have worked.

My purpose for coming to Poland is to be of some help, and I believe the previous teachers have all been correct in their ideas and views. You may not feel that we are saying the same thing, but this is because teachers express themselves in different ways. How you receive teachings depends on your situation, so at times you may feel that our teachings are contradictory. This is not necessarily the case. In any case, you don't have to accept everything, just what you are receptive to and feel you can use in your practice.

There are many levels of practice in Buddhism. On first learning a basic idea or method, some people can receive and use it quite well, but when they hear about an obscure teaching or a more advanced practice, they cannot use it. Still others are more receptive to advanced ideas and methods than they are to basic ones. This does not mean that those who can use deeper approaches are closer to enlightenment. Nor is it true that those who find basic approaches more suitable cannot learn something advanced. People enter the door of practice according to their personal disposition and causes and conditions. If you are using basic methods and concepts, it does not mean you are fixed at that level, so don't be discouraged. Those who are using more advanced methods should not feel proud or arrogant. What matters is that you use a method that is appropriate for you.

In Chan there is no standard way of gaining entry through a door, whether through a basic teaching or a more profound one. This differs from other traditions, for example the Tibetan. Both Chan and Tibetan Buddhism have levels of practice, but in the Tibetan tradition the higher the level, the higher the practice -- you move step by step upwards. Though there are levels of practice in Chan, realization does not come from progressing from one stage to another. You can enter from any level.

However, the common foundation between the different traditions is collecting the scattered mind. In general, you learn how to collect the mind first, then concentrate the mind, and then unify the mind, to attain no-mind. But these stages are not necessarily fixed. There are practitioners who do not enter through unified mind; from concentrated mind, it is possible to directly experience no-mind, or to go directly from ordinary to unified mind. But this is very rare. Usually one trains the mind to be collected, concentrated, unified, eventually passing on to no-mind.

As I indicated earlier, collecting the mind precedes concentrating the mind. "Collecting" connotes pulling the mind back from your external activity or attention, and beginning to fix it on your practice method.

You should at all times collect the mind, because this is quite useful. To collect the mind you can practice sitting, but more importantly, you can also use the methods in daily life. For example, you can work with the breath, you can bring forth the *Mu koan*, you can practice mindfulness -- paying attention to the bodily sensations, your mental reactions, the direction and intention of your mind. If you can practice well any of these methods of collecting the mind, vexations will have fewer opportunities to manifest. Your personality becomes stable and calm. You will cause less harm to yourself and others. You can truly go forward in your practice.

Upon meeting people, I do not try to assess what level they are at or if they are enlightened. I observe whether their personality and emotions are stable and whether their mind is clear. If so, I can see that they are ready for serious practice. Very seldom do I try to assess whether someone had a genuine enlightenment. I only do that when I meet someone who is very confident that they are already enlightened. Then I will chat with them to find out their state of mind.

However, other than these occasions, which are very, very rare, I do not test people, especially in interview. The interviews during the retreat are meant to resolve a student's difficulties in practice, to clarify different methods and ideas. However, some of you are coming to the interview quite nervous, perhaps thinking I will do Dharma combat with you. So I hope you will not be so tense, so nervous. On the other hand, there are those who believe that they are already enlightened, and they turn around the interview and try to test me. I do not discourse with such people, because anything I say will probably be denied by them.

However, the main point of tonight's Dharma talk, is the usefulness of collecting or reigning in the mind. In Zen, a retreat is called *sesshin*, which means "connecting the mind," in which the teacher's and the student's minds mutually seal; in other words, *inka* or sanction a transmission. This word comes from the Chinese word *shexin*, which means "collecting the mind." The pronunciation is similar, but the meaning has been changed somewhat. In the remaining two days, I hope you will make collecting the mind your priority. Whether in that time you will be enlightened doesn't matter. If I

sanction you but then after the retreat you still have lots of vexations, still harm others, and have all sorts of negative emotions, then what's the use?

On the other hand, if by developing collected mind, you have less vexations, you become more stable and upright, and you have more harmony with other people, then I will call this retreat quite useful. If you continually practice collecting the mind, always withdrawing and collecting the mind, it is very possible you will suddenly realize that there is nothing substantial about your thoughts -- they arise, change, and then disappear, continually. And then you realize that none of these thoughts are you. If you stop identifying yourself with these thoughts, it is possible to realize no-mind. So do not belittle this mere collecting the mind; this very basic practice can be of tremendous benefit.

In Chan one can gain an entry at any level. For example, you don't have to go through unified mind to gain entry. You may say, "Oh, this collecting the mind, it's just a beginner's practice." But you must have heard of the "beginner's mind," and you should know that the beginner's mind is the best mind.

On the other hand, I did not say that collecting the mind is enough and that you don't need other methods. Although collecting the mind is important, keep practicing, and whatever stage you get to, it will come naturally. From today's interviews, it seems some of you have reached concentrated mind, and some of you also had a taste of the unified mind. However, you should not seek after unified mind, nor should you always be concerned with what stage you are at.

Everyone had an interview today, so I don't think people have questions. Does anybody want to argue?

(Voice from the hall: *I have one very short question. There is an insect here. Do you think it had any use from this talk?*)

Ask that insect. Please have compassion on that sentient being and take it out.

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.*

The "gateless gate" of Chan underwent gradual codification as it developed institutionally during the late T'ang and early Sung dynasties in China. In an atmosphere charged with increasing emphasis on sectarianism and legitimacy, the different lines of Chan sought to formalize their unique patriarchal heritages and delineate the distinctive features of their particular brand of Chan practice and culture. Much as figures like Ta-hui Tsung-kao (1089-1163) placed the use of *gong'an* and *huatou* securely at the heart of Linji teaching, Sung period masters of the Caodong line gradually distilled the method of *mo-chao Chan* or "silent illumination Chan" as the central axiom of Caodong practice. This process reached its culmination with Hung-chih Cheng-chueh (1091-1157), who was himself a contemporary of Ta-hui. Approximately a century later, the famed Japanese pilgrim, Dogen Kigen (1200-1253), received the Caodong Dharma from T'ien-t'ung Ju-ching (a master within the line of Hung-chih's Dharma brother, Chen-hsieh Ch'ing-liao) and transmitted the Caodong teaching to Japan, where it became known as the Soto Zen school. In this chapter I will discuss the practice of silent illumination, or *mo-chao* Chan, as espoused in the Caodong school.

Chan practice that emphasizes *gong'an* and *huatou* tends to make use of forceful methods such as emotional pressure, shouting, beating, reviling to push the student into a situation where, "one reaches the end of the road but still must press forward," or where, "there is absolutely nothing that can be said but one still must speak." By concentrating all of one's being on a *gong'an* or *huatou,* together with encouragement from the teacher, one is brought to the point of great doubt and, finally, an explosive experience of awakening. The method of practice is intense, and its effect is earth-shaking and easily identifiable. Having achieved a breakthrough of this sort, the student has a clear idea of just what having "no thought" or "no mind" entails.

The approach of silent illumination is different. It is more passive in character and focuses on the development of such qualities as total relaxation coupled with open awareness, stillness and luminosity, perfect silence, and clarity. In so doing, it seeks

gently to settle and silence the churning mind of deluded thinking, bringing it to the point where the perfect quiescence and luminosity of the intrinsically enlightened mind naturally emerges, smooth and clear like a mirror, cool and bright like the radiant moon, deep and still like a pellucid mountain lake. This is not to say that Caodong Chan dispensed with the use of *gong'an* and *huatou.* Quite the contrary. Modern scholarship has shown what most Chinese Buddhists have assumed all along --that *gong'an* have been a universal feature of Chan culture in China, although in certain Caodong circles they may have functioned in a manner different from that developed by Ta-hui and the Linji line. Nonetheless, the approach of silent illumination has come to be identified more readily as the heart of Caodong Chan.

Just as with the *gong'an* and *huatou* technique, the practice of *mo-chao,* or "silent illumination," did not burst on the scene overnight during the Sung period, but took shape slowly over time as a natural outgrowth of the effort to identify the essence of the Caodong teaching. Indeed, antecedents to silent illumination can be found not only among the records of founding Caodong masters, but in documents routinely attributed to the Chan patriarchs of the early T'ang period (618-907) as well. This, of course, would hardly be unusual, given the tendency of later Chan masters to seek historical sanction for their teachings in the putative example or works of earlier, often legendary, Chan figures. Bodhidharma himself is said to have taught, "If you wish to cast aside the false and return to true, concentrate and settle your mind in wall-gazing. Self and other, the unenlightened and the saintly are all as one. Abide securely in this and do not stray." [1] The *Hsin hsin ming* (Inscription on Having Faith in the Mind) attributed to the third patriarch, Seng-ts'an (d. 606), states: "The two come when there is [a notion of] one[ness], so oneness also must not be adhered to. When a single thought does not arise, the myriad things are without defect." And again, "All wise ones throughout the ten directions penetrate this essential truth; this essential [moment of] truth is neither pressingly short nor lengthy. An instant of thought is ten thousand years." [2]

In the *Platform Sutra,* the Sixth Patriarch, Hui-neng, is quoted as saying,

> Men of the world, separate yourself from views; do not activate thoughts. If there were no thinking, then 'no-thought' would have no place to exist. "No" is the "no" of what? "Thought" means "thinking" of what? "No" is separation from the dualism that produces the passions. "Thought" means thinking of the original nature of True Reality. If you give rise to thoughts from your true self-nature, then, although you see,

> hear, perceive, and know, you are not stained by the manifold environments, and are always free. [3]

Yung-chia Cheng-chueh, a disciple of the Sixth Patriarch, says in his *Chih-kuan sung* (Song of Calming and Contemplation), "Having forgotten all involvements one is silent and still, yet numinous wisdom by nature is incisively penetrating. Dark and incognizant, it [still] shines and illumines. While conforming to primal and true emptiness, one [all the while perceives] with precise exactness." [4]

All of these passages from the early Chan patriarchs are examples of teachings that could be seen as precursors to the practice of silent illumination. This tendency continued to evolve, in its unique way, in the early Caodong line itself. Tung-shan Liang-chieh (807-869), one of the two founding masters from whom the school takes its name, once remarked that one should not think about anything at all when practicing Chan: "One should not go east or go west; but go directly to that place where, for ten-thousand miles around, there is not one blade of grass. Then you will get it." [5]

To have even the slightest thought or attachment in mind is equivalent to there being "a blade of grass." Thus, having no grass means to have no discriminating thoughts, and "ten-thousand miles around" refers to vast expanse like empty space. When he heard these words of Tung-shan, the master Shih-shuang Ching-chu (807-885), a contemporary of Tung-shan, commented, "As soon as you go out the door, there is grass everywhere." In other words, as soon as thoughts arise or "the mind steps out the door," everywhere there is difference and discrimination. As soon as mind fixes on or reifies any feature to the exclusion of others, the dynamic and boundless state of no-mind or no-thought is lost.

Tung-shan also states in his *Hsuan chung ming* ("Inscription on the Mysterious Middle"), "Although active and functioning, there is no motion. Although quiescent, it is not fixated. The pure breeze blows over the grasses, but the grasses do not sway. The bright moon fills the sky, yet there is no shining." [6] In a similar but more enigmatic statement, he once instructed, "If you wish to understand this matter, you must be like dead wood putting forth blossoms. Then you will be in conformity with it." [7] The Chan master Hsiang-yen Chih-hsien (d. 898), a contemporary of Tung-shan, was once asked about the Way. He replied, "In the dry woods the dragon sings" and, "An eye glimmers in a [dead and dry] skull."

Dead and dry wood has absolutely no activity, no life; but here it puts forth blossoms. The dragon is known for its great vitality as well as its connection with water. Thus, the images of a dragon singing in a dry wood and a living eye in a desiccated skull seem completely anomalous. Shih-shuang Ching-chu said of these two statements, "There is joy there" and "There is consciousness there." Ts'ao-shan Pen-chi (840-901), the successor of Tung-shan, later remarked, "The skull has no awareness but wisdom's eye begins to shine in it. If joy and conscious awareness should be extinguished, all communication and response would cease. Those who deny this do not understand that purity is in the impure." [8] Both examples point to the cardinal importance of the Caodong image of silence with illumination, illumination in silence.

In the teachings of Shih-shuang Ching-chu the concept of stillness and marvelous awareness begins to show evidence of developing into an identifiable technique of silent illumination practice. He is said to have urged his students to become like dead ashes or dry wood, incapable of putting forth flame or growth, or to make their minds like the single plume of a waterfall, with its waters pouring down steadily without interruption. Another favorite simile for meditation used by Shih-shuang Ching-chu was that of a cold incense burner in a silent and long-abandoned temple. Indeed, Shih-shuang is said to have encouraged his students to sit in meditation for long periods without moving or lying down, as if they were "dead branches" or "blocks of wood." Consequently, in Chan circles his community was commonly called the "dry or dead wood group." [9]

Whether Shih-shuang Ching-chu's teaching was typical of the Caodong line itself is hard to say. As with most Chan figures of the period, very little information is available about actual practice, and even that is problematic given the late date of many of the sources. As a discrete method of practice, *mo-chao,* or "silent illumination" proper, begins to be taught in the Caodong line only after the line is rescued from the brink of extinction and revived by the eleventh-century master T'ou-tzu I-ch'ing (1032-1082). Records of Caodong masters descended from T'ou-tzu I-ch'ing frequently employ the metaphor of silence and illumination, stillness and radiance, to convey the essence of Caodong Chan. With the advent of the famous Sung-period master Hung-chih Cheng-chueh (1091-1157), silent illumination (*mo-chao*) is finally singled out as the distinctive technique of practice of the Caodong line.

In addition to his well-known *Lancet of Seated Meditation* and *Inscription on Silent Illumination,* Hung-chih composed numerous verses on the practice of silent illumination.[10] In one celebrated passage, he states that "Your body should sit silently; your mind should be quiescent and unmoving; and your mouth, so still that moss grows around it and grasses sprout from your tongue. Do this without cease, cleansing the mind until it gains the clarity of an autumn pool and is as bright as the moon shining in the autumn sky." [11]

Using imagery like this, Hung-chih instructs his students to let go and settle quietly into themselves, leaving behind all entangling conditions and supports, until they reach a point of perfect and unrestrained quiescence. At the same time, this does not imply that mind becomes dark or incognizant. Quite the contrary. It is the distortions of deluded and conditioned thinking that are silenced, not mental clarity or awareness itself. With this silence, the mind's innate wisdom shines unobstructedly, perfectly clear and luminous, without a single speck of dust to impede it. "In this [state of] silent sitting," Hung-chih says, "the mind clearly perceives the details of sensory objects; yet, as though transparent, no constructed image is produced." [12]

Everything is right where it originally is, just as it is and in its own native place. As long as it does not become erroneously fixated on stillness, the more the mind settles down the more bright and expansive its intrinsic awareness of things will become. When mind is utterly quiescent, without any grasping or abiding whatsoever, its natural awareness or reflectivity is boundless in both scope and depth. Hung-chih likens this to the point of an arrow fitted perfectly into its protective sheath: This calm and bright awareness becomes so perfectly immediate to and pervasive with the environment that all distinction between subjective awareness and object itself dissolves. This luminous emptiness and quiescence is itself the intrinsically enlightened condition of all beings; and its actualization is great liberation. Thus, silent illumination is the fullest and most direct expression of the unmediated realization of Buddha-nature espoused in the Chan School. Here are two selections from Hung-chih's writings that describe the practice of silent illumination:

> The ground [of the mind] is empty and vast. From the very beginning it has been this way. Purify and cleanse it right here and now, ridding it of all deluded entanglements and illusory influences, and you will arrive effortlessly at a place that is clean and bright. Totally empty, it is devoid of image; abstruse and profound, it depends on nothing. Utterly empty and alone, one illumines innate reality and lets go of external phenomena. Thus it is said, "Clearly one perceives that not a single thing exists." This ground [of the mind] lies beyond the reach of birth and death. Yet, like the pellucid and lustrous depths of a deep spring, it is able to put forth radiance and manifest responsive functioning. Permeating through each and every mote of dust, as though transparent, it forms no semblances. This wondrous activity of seeing and hearing leaps far beyond [everyday] sounds and forms. Extending everywhere, its functioning leaves no trace; its mirroring is without obstruction. Spontaneously, thought after thought and object after object issue forth in perfect mutual unison. A person of old has said, "By having no mind one attains immediately the Tao of no-mind, whence 'attaining the Tao of no-mind' is also put to rest." The mind is clear and one sits in perfect silence. Disporting in the marvelousness of the all-encompassing middle way, where is there need to investigate anything? [13]

And again:

> The true approach to practice is simply to sit in stillness and silently investigate. Deep down a point is reached where one is no longer swirled about by external causes and conditions. When the mind is empty, it becomes open [and all-embracing]. When its luminosity is truly wondrous, it becomes even and impartial. Internally there is no thought of grasping after things. Utterly detached, [the mind] rests alone within itself, free of darkness and obscuration. Numinally potent, it severs all dependence, becoming utterly self-possessed. Its attainment does not come through ordinary feelings: You must let go completely and depend on nothing whatsoever. Exceedingly deep and intrinsically numinous, from the moment that you first realize [this mind] you will never again hanker after the features of defilement but be serenely self-possessed rest wherever you find yourself. Perfectly pure, it is brightly luminous. Brightly luminous, it penetrates through [all things]. Thus it is able to respond harmoniously, [continually] engaging

phenomenal events, so that phenomenal event and phenomenal event are utterly without impediment. Floating effortlessly, clouds come off the mountain peaks. Shining boldly, the moon [appears in the] mountain stream. Reaching everywhere, its radiance and powers of spiritual transformation perceive penetratingly without obstructing features, responding with perfect precision, [as snugly] as a sheath fits the tip of its arrow. With further training and nourishment it ripens, and its substance becomes firm and penetrates everywhere freely. [14]

[1] Yanagida Seizan, tr. Daruma no goroku. Zen no goroku no. 1. Tokyo: Chikuma shoten, 1969, p. 32.

[2] Seng-ts'an, Hsin-hsin ming, T. 48.376b5-6, 377a3-4.

[3] Philip Yampolsky, Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch, p. 139.

[4] Chih-kuan sung, T. 48.389b28-9.

[5]

[6] Tung-shan Liang-chieh chan-shih yu-lu, HTC 119.914.

[7] T47.522b.

[8] Tsao-shan yuan-cheng chan-shih yu lu, T.47.529b25-c7.

[9] Ching-te chuan-teng lu, fascicle 15 (Shih-shuang).

[10] Hung-chih chan-shih kuang lu, T 48. 100a-b and 98a-b. For the Lancet of Seated Meditation see Carl Bielefeldt, Dogen's Manuals of Zen Meditation (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 99-101.

[11] Hung-chih chan-shih kuang lu, T 48.??.

[12] Hung-chih chan-shih kuang lu, T 48.

[13] Hung-chih Cheng-chueh yu-lu, T. 48.73c.

[14] Hung-chih cheng-chueh yu-lu, T 48.73c.

SORROW #3

It has its quiet like an intake of breath as big as a galaxy and bigger, as if, when you open your mouth, you swallow a bird, and the bird is free -- clouds in your mouth or your throat and its song is the roar of an ocean in your belly. Sorrow is silence like the roar of an ocean in your belly.

SORROW catches in your throat
like a bird
whose song
is the roar of an ocean
in your belly
whose answer is a question
whose thirst is a desert
whose desire
is an ocean
whose voice is an ocean's
tide
as reliable
as sorrow's quiet
Sorrow
is every wave on every ocean
and anger its
current

So you got the part about oceans and tears, but is that what I meant? Not exactly. I wasn't thinking of water, I was thinking of waves of motion, emotion like waves of the very pert, alert, alarming way we feel: the peak-ends of how we feel and the tent-wide differences at bottom. Seashells open like musical instruments: it's with booms that we measure their depths. It's with sound we measure their distance in measures like tears crystallized as sound, as silence like wind through waves carrying silence; like boats whose prows open backwards to grief.

Diane Stevenson
[November 4,1997(3)]

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, which 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, a strong mixed feeling of sadness and joy all at once came over me that said, "Sitting right here, right now, doing this, is the most sane thing...beyond description." A wave of gratitude and faith, that together with other events and experiences during the retreat, and the following Bodhisattva Precepts ceremony, 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 tension comes 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 many times too that my wanting to attain something is a major obstruction. And I've always felt it must be right, but this time my mind asked a very interesting question. It said, "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 seems 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 pieces of pictures still forming bit by bit. I also, though, want to thank everyone who attended the retreat for their special part, and everyone who works so hard to keep retreats going for doing just that. And Shih-fu, Thank You. I cannot find words for the value of your example.

The Practice of Many Paths- Where Is Home?

By John Anello

Pure and simple, I am a lost soul. And I probably would have it no other way, had I a choice. What "soul" is for sure no one has been able to definitively determine -it seems to be one of those great spiritual mysteries that must be taken on faith and faith alone. But my feeling is that regardless of what soul may be, there is no place on this earth where it can comfortably reside. It transcends all earthly things, out of sync with all things material. But this yearning to find a "home" for the soul has been the primary motivator in my personal search for a spiritual practice that is fulfilling.

However, at this stage of the journey, it seems apparent that whether one believes in the Pure Land or Heaven, unless you are divinely blessed, there can be found no "perfect bliss" here on earth. So as is true for many "seekers," the search for my spiritual home continues and probably will continue for the rest of my life. But at least the search brings hope of filling that yearning for redemption, of finding that practice that will open up my heart and dissolve the illusion and delusion so pervasive in today's world of commercialization and objectification. This yearning, this search, for a fulfilling practice has led me over the years to many different paths: gurus, Yoga, Zen, Chan, TM, est, psychotherapy, and, currently, back to my original faith: Catholicism. Yes, Catholicism, not Chan. My apologies, but this is not an article about how after having tried all these other practices, I finally found my spiritual center in Chan. This is also not an intellectual analysis of the similarities and differences of the many different spiritual paths. This is a simple article, at the request of the Managing Editor of the Chan Magazine, of how this seeker has continued to leap from one practice to another -exactly what the gurus, yogis, and Zen masters tell us not to do -and how Chan and other spiritual practices led me back, for the moment, to my roots, the Christian faith. Don't be misled, however; this jumping around is not something of which I am proud. It's not something I recommend, either. It's just the path of one practitioner, the only way for this individual to get from one place to the next. This journey is, at its heart, an act of surrender to the Supreme and my personal path along the Way. Maybe some readers will relate to it, and in some way it may provide support to struggling seekers like myself to stay the course. A quote seems relevant here by W.Y. EvansWentz in the "General Introduction" to The Tibetan Book of the Great

Liberation:
"There have been no more profound psychologists than the great Teachers, who, with unanimity, have proclaimed that the neophyte must become as a little child before he can enter into the Realm of Truth."

In truth, I think my primary practice, at the core, has actually always been as a Catholic. That is the tradition in which I was raised. Unlike many, I am thankful for that experience. So many people have horror stories about their Christian upbringing. But my experience has been quite different, having come away with a feeling of love, charity, and forgiveness for my fellow human beings and myself. The teachings of loving your neighbor as yourself and loving God have remained with me all my life, with Christ being seen as guru, and the inherent teachings residing in my heart rather than in a book. However, being a Christian has not prevented me from becoming a "disciple" of a modern sage; practicing mystical Yoga, Zen, Chan, and Taoism; or participating in TM, est, and other new-age philosophies and practices. With what has been written to this point, a question naturally arises: Can the Chan Magazine be a place to address diverse spiritual experiences, or is it only appropriate here to relate experiences associated with Chan practice exclusively? If the latter, it seems we are going to deprive ourselves of the richness of the commonality of different practices and remain mired in duality and attachments, including the attachment to Chan. For me, the challenge of spiritual practice, which I hope can be reflected in this magazine, is the same as the very challenge of life itself: transcendence of differences, discrimination, and competition. I keep asking myself whether in the end, truly, if all sentient beings are buddhas and if we have only our inner wisdom to guide us, is there any difference between one path and another? Is it possible that the entire lifelong spiritual journey constitutes spiritual practice, rather than just the specific practice in which I may he involved at any given time?

It has often saddened me to hear Zen and Yoga practitioners (or new-age philosophers) speak scathingly about their previous practice or the faith in which they were raised, such as Christianity or Judaism. For many, it seems that the only way to move on to a new practice is to decimate the one before it or deny its positive influences. I myself was guilty of that type of expression until I finally was able to realize its inherent self-destructiveness. In defending my choices to others to switch to another teacher or practice, I felt I had to give firm evidence for that choice, to receive acknowledgment and justification. Unwilling to take responsibility for my own actions, I found ways to criticize the previous teacher or practice, thereby confirming the reason for my moving on. I would conclude that the teacher was obviously not enlightened or

was too strict or not strict enough and so on and so forth. And I've heard the same justifications from many other practitioners, sometimes to the point of tearing apart a teacher's credibility. And then there are others whom I've heard tell of their practice being the only "true" practice. I recall one former Catholic stating that Buddhism was "better" than Christianity because Buddhism is the "only" way to enlightenment, but then again, I've heard returnees to the Christian faith call Buddhism "evil" or "demonic." The sad thing about comments such as these is that they negate whatever joy, wisdom, or inspiration may have been garnered from previous experience, possibly leaving the individual feeling that he or she made a big mistake, wasted a great deal of time and energy, was wronged, or was deluded or ignorant. But one must ask: Is there ever a "bad" place to start? The spiritual path must begin somewhere, and shouldn't one be thankful for that opportunity of the first step? Even more to the point, is there any beginning or end in practice? Any right practice? Any wrong practice?

Coincidentally, while writing this article, I came across a copy of the Utne Reader, a journal that focuses on creativity and personal reflection, that on its cover showed a young Oriental/Caucasian boy sporting religious icons of all kind, including the Star of David, the Crucifix, and the Yin-Yang symbol. He also was wearing a yarmulke and tokens of Hindu deities. The article inquired as to whether we have forsaken conventional religion in order to create our own "Designer God." The thought is a challenging one for me and for many baby boomers like myself who continue to quest for something deeper in life, something more meaningful. The Utne article asked whether the self-created practices of "searchers" is symptomatic of a runaway consumer society --that is, an individual's jumping from one practice to another as one would jump from one restaurant to the next, one TV channel to the next, one job to the next, or one relationship to the next. The "experts" quoted in the article -priests, Zen teachers, and spiritualists of all sorts- differed in their opinions, some criticizing and others applauding the new-found freedom of spiritual exploration. But the questions remain: Have we cheapened spiritual practice? Have we turned spiritual practice into just one more means of instant gratification and whimsical pleasure?

The fact is that almost all "Westerners" (again, duality at every turn) who have arrived at Zen practice have come from another tradition. Having been raised in the 60's, the height of rejection of the status quo, I, like many, ultimately "rebelled" against my original religious tradition to find another practice more suitable to my individual character. But for seekers in this country, the choice has often not been singular --that is, a simple replacement of one tradition for another. For some of us, as we have

"progressed" in our spiritual expression, we have gone through second and third transformations, if not more. I am reminded that even the Buddha himself did not start out as a "Buddhist." He was a yogi, an ascetic one at that. If he himself had to go through spiritual transformation, doubt, and confusion, almost to the point of starvation, then what is the challenge to us? In fact, even Zen itself has evolved. Buddhism exported to China mingled with Taoism to become Chan, and then Chan was exported to Japan to become Zen, not to mention the transformations throughout the Orient as well as the United States itself. After thousands of years, the same challenge continues to arise: Are we flexible enough to allow ourselves and fellow practitioners to move on again and again without critical challenge? Can we continue to allow ourselves and others and our spiritual practice to evolve?

When one falls in love with a spiritual practice, it may seem at the time that the practice is truly the only perfect one, the only true practice, the only one that will lead to enlightenment or God. And often, spiritual teachers will support that belief. I remember once hearing a parish priest say to his congregation that they should not attend ceremonies at places of worship of friends of other faiths because they had to be "true" to their own faith and verbalize and act on that faith. It seems understandable that we would think that our current practice is the only way to enlightenment or God, because it takes that type of firm commitment to maintain one's practice. True practice of Zen is not for the faint of heart, nor is any other spiritual tradition. But what I have over time found to be true along the spiritual journey is that it is not the practice itself that matters, but rather the way of practicing --with full heart, full mind, and full body to the best of my ability. In this way, all practices have sort of merged into one. In essence, there may come a point at which there is no practice at all, making everything practice. When all is said and done, maybe it is the way we choose to practice our lives that truly makes all the difference. Maybe it is not whether we meditate deeply or pray often that determines the depth of our spirituality, but rather the way in which we love people, accept differences among people, break down the barriers between people, and give ourselves to the aid of the less fortunate. This certainly sounds like the way of the bodhisattva, but it also reflects the teachings of Yoga and Christianity. In Zen, the vow that has always moved and inspired me is "Sentient Beings Are Numberless; I Vow to Save Them." But what is "saving"? This vow is very similar to Christ's teaching: "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me... Whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me."

Again, the reason that I ask these questions and reflect upon these matters is because almost all of the practices mentioned above I have participated in, fallen in love with, and then fallen out of love with. As alluded to, I recently left the active practice of Zen/ Chan and returned to my Catholic faith and have found great depth, spiritual power, and mystery in the practice that once seemed distant and uninspiring. The Catholic teachings themselves have not changed, but my way of practice has changed dramatically. And in fact, it was through such practices as Yoga, Zen, and Chan --the discipline and reflection, the contemplating of what it means to live the life of a bodhisattva, and statements made by the Dalai Lama and Master Sheng Yen at the Roseland event-that led me back to the Catholic faith.

Many great teachers, gurus, and spiritualists have stated that a seeker should dig one very deep well rather than many shallow ones. But I have had to repeatedly ask myself, what does a seeker do if he/ she has been digging the same well for a prolonged period of time and come up dry? Should one climb out of that hole and begin digging in another spot? Or to put it in more straightforward terms, what happens when a practice stops working for you and you are powerfully drawn to another? Staying in a moribund practice may be no different from staying in a job or career that is no longer rewarding or exciting or remaining in a relationship that no longer works. Some people with greater fortitude -or denial mechanisms?- may be able to force themselves to stay with one practice and tough it out. But should those who do not succeed at toughing it out be considered as, or consider themselves as, failures to themselves or their practice? Or are we free to make our own choices about our spirituality, even if it means changing on a whim over and over again? There are always two ways to look at something. A person who continues to change spiritual paths may be accused of being afraid of commitment to a specific practice or teacher. But then again, a person who makes independent choices can be called courageous for living his/her own life and trusting in a higher source. To quote from the I Ching: "In the very center of each of us there dwells an innocent and divine spirit. If we allow ourselves to be guided by it in every situation, we can never go wrong." My feeling is that I have been very lucky in that I have dug many wells and have struck water each time. That doesn't mean that I have found God or reached enlightenment. It just means that each spiritual tradition in itself has enriched my life and provided me with inspiration and a little more knowledge of what it means to be human, but that at various points it became apparent that it was time to move on to a new practice in order to keep practice in life alive and thriving. These were not intellectual decisions but ones driven by the heart and usually inspired by a dramatic change or revelation in my life.

My most recent personal experience was propelled by a bout of pneumonia, followed by depression, when I began turning to my Bible for wisdom and support. The words of the Gospel penetrated deeply and brought me to tears many times. One particularly beautiful and nurturing passage was, "Look at the birds in the sky; they do not sow or reap, they gather nothing into barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are not you more important than they? Learn from the way the wild flowers grow. They do not work or spin. But I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was clothed like one of them?

However, this experience of being deeply moved was not very different from what was experienced a number of years ago when meditating with a guru. Spontaneously, while meditating on this guru's picture, I had begun slowly crying until a torrent of tears streamed down my cheeks; the sobbing then began to transform into giggles and escalated to uncontrollable belly laughter. No, these weren't signs of having gone temporarily insane; rather, I felt joyous and alive. The experience was one of having returned home and having found my guru who would take me to the other shore, as he often promised to those who followed him devoutly. He had great spiritual energy; and infused with that energy, I was inspired to compose over 300 spiritual poems in just a few months. Because of this guru, God was constantly in my heart, and the guru was constantly on my mind. And I loved the time that I spent with that great teacher.

But as time progressed, the connection with the guru began to diminish, some of his teachings did not mesh with my personal philosophy about life, and feelings of alienation began to arise when forcing myself to try to continue attending his meditation sessions and follow his rules. I soon realized that my heart just wasn't in this practice anymore and it was time to move on. This guru had spoken often of Yoga practice, which I began to investigate more deeply on my own. Quickly, I became totally infatuated with Yoga and Yoga meditation. At a Yoga center in New York, I started to meditate on the Lord Siva, the Hindu deity representing destruction of ignorance and often seated in the lotus posture in deep meditation. Asanas and yogic breathing exercises became daily practices, and ultimately I received a Siva mantra from an ascetic yogi. Yogis often speak of merging with your chosen deity, and that is what began to occur in my case. The mantra brought inner quiet and peace of mind. Over time, a new, deeper power and joy of meditation began to unfold. This was a practice that was truly collective, paying attention to the body, the mind, and the spirit. A couple of hours of Yoga postures relieved the body of stress, Siva mantra meditation opened the spiritual heart, and studying Yoga texts such as the Brahma Sutras, Srimad Bhagavatam, and Bhagavad Gita purified the mind. This practice

could only be described as "sweet." The yogis themselves were like little children in some ways -playful and gentle- yet, they were so very wise. I truly thought this was the end of my search, that through disciplined Yoga practices, absolute bliss would be attained and all samskaras (mental impressions) would fall away. But it was not to be. Over time, the mantra began to fade, and all that came to be important was quiet meditation and only meditation no-mantras, no focus on breathing, no deities, just emptiness. At that point, Siva and the mantra began to disappear, as did my Yoga practice.

I was soon on my own again, until Zen. Asanas and other Yoga practices were unnecessary. All I wanted to do was meditate. The need was for a spiritual practice that would allow me to join with other seekers in many hours of silent meditation without praises to anything or anyone. And that is what Zen practice provided. Zazen and koans by Japanese Zen masters such as Dogen Zenji were absolutely fulfilling. Early on, one experience in particular proved very powerful. During a weekend retreat at a Zen center in upstate New York, I fell into a deep meditation and the entire meditation hall seemed bathed in snow. Similar to previous experiences, this felt like absolute bliss. Then the gong sounded and one of the monks began pounding on a kettledrum. Another monk chanted in deep resonant tones: "Let me respectfully remind you -life and death are of supreme importance. Time swiftly passes by, and opportunity is lost. Each of us should strive to awaken... awaken. Take heed. Do not squander your life." It is called the Evening Gatha, and with each pound of the drum, that gatha penetrated deeper and deeper into my heart. I was rooted to my zafu, and the tears started streaming down my cheeks. As the zazen period ended and people began to rise and leave the meditation hall, I remained sitting, unable to move from that spot. Again, I felt that I had arrived.

Of course, though, I hadn't arrived (maybe because I had never left). The constant internal emotional battle between practices continued: the battle between bowing to the Buddha and my Christian background. Although it was often clearly stated by the non-Christian teachers from whom I took direction that one didn't have to totally abandon faith in one's original religion to practice, for example, Zen or Yoga, for me that was easier said than done. The practical truth is that time is limited for people with jobs and relationships to sustain, and there isn't an inordinate amount of time to commit to spiritual pursuits if you are not a monastic. Although a few have managed to do it, it's not likely that a person will be able to pursue two practices at once. After a time, one practice will fall away. Whenever I would hear a spiritual teacher say it was OK to follow two paths at once, I would think in reply, "Sure, it is OK for you if I am a

Christian and a Zen student, but is it OK with me? And is it OK with God?" But when you are searching for spiritual "truths" or knowledge, certainty is a rare commodity. Surprisingly, what I continued to find to be the case was that when I was in the midst of a personal crisis, I didn't turn to Yoga or Zen or the Buddha for repose but to Christ and the Church. But once things would return to normal, I would once again be drawn to another spiritual practice.

Despite the conflict, I continued Zen practice. It did, however, remain disturbing to bow to the Buddha, especially on Sunday, the day of normal Christian services. But the draw of the Church remained distant, because the peace, bliss, and emptiness experienced in meditation were still so powerful and the Zen teachings were so penetrating, profound, and unburdening. Even the pain experienced in prolonged sittings was appreciated, perceived as a purification process that would help overcome dualistic attitudes. But as could be predicted, Japanese-style Zen did finally indeed begin to lose its polish. And no matter how much I tried to repolish it, I could not turn the tile of Zen into a mirror. The bells, gongs, and clappers were confusing and distracting. And the requirement to remain ABSOLUTELY still for 30 minutes at a time began to feel excessive. Again, it seemed time to move on. Something else was needed now: something softer, gentler, and kinder, and that is when the Chan center and Master Sheng Yen appeared.

The search had been for a more "religious" Zen, a softer Zen without the scoldings "Don't Move!" and the rigid practices. I searched for a teacher who would be willing to acknowledge realms other than this earthly one, something closer to what I knew from the Catholic Church. After having searched the Internet and the bookstores and dropping by various Zen centers, I surprisingly found less than a mile from my home the Chan center. Everyone was greeted so warmly there; the center was open most every day; and there was always a monk in residence with whom to speak. Other centers I had attended were really part-time zendos, up in a loft somewhere and open only a few hours a day a few days a week. It was the friendly hellos and respectful bows that sold me on the Chan center. What captured me, though, was the sitting meditations and the way in which they were conducted. Everyone seemed very relaxed, and if necessary, people shifted their bodies. And when they shifted, no one berated them. I kept my body almost completely rigid each period for the first few months, been trained to do so at the Japanese-style Zen center. It was hard at first to let myself shift even if my knees were in excruciating pain, but finally I did allow myself to do so -just to see what happen. It was a glorious break. My knees hardly ever hurt

after that. So much tension was relieved in that one moment. Suddenly, sitting meditation became pleasurable, rather than painful much of the time.

Being so happy, then, why did I ultimately leave the Chan center and return to my Catholic parish church? The seed of my return to the Catholic Church was actually planted by the Dalai Lama at the Roseland during the event with Master Sheng Yen. During the question-and-answer period, one audience member asked the Dalai Lama about his attitude toward so many Westerners practicing Buddhism. He responded in a way that was completely surprising to me. He said that Westerners if at all possible should stay with the tradition in which they were raised and find their way through that practice. He added, however, that if individuals found that their original practice did not work for them, then another practice, such as Buddhism, should be tried if the person is drawn to that. It caused me great consternation and deep reflection. I was led to ask myself whether there might be a place for me in the Catholic Church. It also brought me face to face with my love of the God with which I had been raised. I was also drawn back to Christian practice as I learned more and more from Master Sheng Yen and his teachings about what it means to live the life of a bodhisattva. Master Sheng Yen's teachings about bodhisattvahood reminded me of the simple teachings of Christ in the Gospel to "love your neighbor and God above all things." Simple as they are, those few words became very powerful -a new mantra of sorts- and kept resonating in my heart and mind. I kept asking myself: How do I practice being a bodhisattva? How do I love my neighbor? How do I love God? One answer appears in the Diamond Sutra: "If any disciple will simply practice kindness, he will soon attain anuttara-samyak-sambodhi [unexcelled, complete awakening]."

It began to become clear that most of my spiritual practices had never extended outside of myself. It was about My sitting, My practice, My spirituality, My enlightenment. But when reflecting on the practice of kindness and giving, I realized that my most powerful spiritual experience had occurred years before, when I had been taking care of my father during the final months of his life when he was dying of cancer. In fact it was that very experience that brought me back to the spiritual quest. Before that, I really had no heartfelt practice at all. While my father was dying and I was providing for his needs, as painful as the experience was, there was always this

inner joy of giving. In fact, when my father passed on, there was a great void in my life where caretaking for him had been. Identification of that void was the beginning of the return to spiritual practice. But ultimately, it was the teachings relating to being a bodhisattva by Master Sheng Yen that led me to seek opportunities to donate whatever spare time I had to charitable works and to reflect once again on the teachings of love and charity by Christ in the Gospel.

I have now been attending church every Sunday for about the past six months and occasionally during the week as well. There is a definite comfortable feeling of having come home again, but with a deeper, richer understanding of spiritual practice resulting from participation in other traditions. Daily meditation practice continues to be a central aspect of spiritual practice, and the teachings of Chan, Zen, and Taoism also remain integral. But most important, practice now includes volunteering my time at a number of charities, including a hospice center for terminally ill patients, and going on Christian retreats to abbeys and friaries, where I can still engage in meditation but stay connected to my Christian roots. One of my latest weekend retreats was with the Franciscan Friars, who, like Chan monks, take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Many serve God as counselors, teachers, and caretakers of the sick and destitute, following the teachings of St. Francis. They quietly run numerous soup kitchens, homeless shelters, and missions around the world, always looking for opportunities to aid the poor. And they do it all unconditionally, as service to those in need, or as they call it, "Living the Gospel." I am in the midst of trying to discern whether such a life may be the ultimate way for me to practice both Christianity and bodhisattvahood. I am so very thankful to be able to have had the experience of the Eastern traditions as a Westerner, yet still have the chance to return to my religious roots. I consider all these experiences to have been blessings from God. Rather than having diluted my faith, these traditions collectively have strengthened it. As a result of the Buddha's teachings, there is a deeper sense of what it means to be Christian and what it means to follow in the footsteps of Christ. There are truly so many ways to be a buddha, so many ways to practice, so many ways to love.

News

Silent Illumination Retreat

A seven-day intensive retreat was held at the Dharma Drum Retreat Center from Nov. 27th through Dec. 5th. Seventy-three people participated, from eleven different countries: Brazil, Canada, England, France, Luxembourg, Malaysia, Mexico, Poland, Switzerland, Taiwan, and the United States. The weather was beautiful and sunny. There was one day of powerful winds, the rest were surprisingly warm for the time of year. Towards the end of the week students sat up late into the night, meditating in the light of a lovely full moon.

The entire retreat was dedicated to the Silent Illumination method. Master Sheng Yen does not often give teachings on this method. The first time he ever gave formal teachings on Silent Illumination practice was in November 1980. The second time was in Wales, Great Britain, in June 1995. This retreat at the Dharma Drum Center in Shawagunk was only the third time he has given these teachings.

During the day Master Sheng Yen gave instruction on how to practice this method. The instructions were repeated each day, though not in exactly the same words. Something was added to each day's instruction, reinforcing the teaching of the day before and building on it, so that the students' understanding was deepened in a clear progression. In addition to sitting meditation, students were led in Direct Contemplation during walking meditation, sometimes sitting on the shores of the lake. In the evenings Master Sheng Yen commented on discourse records of Hongzhi Zhenjue, the Caodong master who formulated the practice of Silent Illumination. At the end of the retreat, many students commented on the wonderful clarity of the instruction and the Dharma talks and hoped they might be published as a handbook for the method.

Attending this retreat were two teachers from the Insight Meditation Center; Narayan Liebenson Grady and Michael Grady. Narayan is a guiding teacher at the Cambridge Insight Meditation Center (CIMC), where she has been teaching since the center opened in 1985. She is also a senior Dharma teacher at the Insight Meditation Society (IMS) in Barre, MA. She is the author of When Singing, Just Sing: Life as Meditation (available from the Cambridge Insight Meditation Center, 331 Broadway, Cambridge, MA 02139). Michael Grady has been practicing vipassana since 1973. He teaches at CIMC and at IMS. Also attending the retreat was an ordained Soto nun, Tonen

O'Connor of the Milwaukee Zen Center. Tonen has nearly completed her training to become a Zen teacher.

The core of vipassana, or insight meditation, is the practice of mindfulness, that quality of awareness that sees without judgment. This is the "Illumination" part of Silent Illumination. Soto Zen has as its primary meditation method shikantaza, or "just sitting" which entered the Japanese tradition from the earlier Chinese Silent Illumination method. Thus, it was most interesting, in the discussion periods at the end of the retreat, to compare notes with these advanced practitioners of other traditions. In looking at different types of Buddhist practices and traditions, we learn from each other.

Another retreat dedicated to the Silent Illumination method will be given this year, from June 26th to July 3rd.

We asked Tonen O'Connor, Associate Priest at Milwaukee Zen Center (Kokyo-an), to write something about the retreat:

> I was ordained as a priest in the Japanese tradition of Soto Zen in 1994. Yes, a priest, not a nun. We do not maintain celibacy, although some may elect it as a personal choice. Men and women have equal status and are called priests.
>
> Last summer, discussing my final approach to Dharma Transmission, my teacher suggested that I explore a number of other Buddhist practice centers around the country in order to get a sense of their practice of the Dharma. We agreed that it would be wonderful if I could participate in a retreat with Master Sheng Yen, whose books we greatly admired.
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> So there I was in December, the only black-robed outlander among 72 retreatants from Taiwan, the U.S., Europe and Latin America, as well as Shih-fu, two monks, and a nun. It felt odd at first, but I found everyone kind, generous, and large of spirit.

The retreat was rigorous, silent, and very helpful. And there was a great bonus for me: Shih-fu had elected to teach the Silent Illumination method. This is the approach that Dogen, the great 13th-century Japanese founder of my school (Soto), encountered on his travels to China and brought back to make it the heart of his own practice. It was thrilling to hear Shih-fu lecture from a text by Hung-chih and to hear the method presented. I was able at last to really experience the links between my tradition and one form of Chan practice. It was also possible to see how Dogen subtly altered it so that the shikantaza we practice became an expression of his understanding of the Buddha Dharma.

On a personal note, perhaps the deepest moments of direct perception without labeling words came in the evenings on the porch of the Chan hall, sitting in the moonlight.

It was a great experience for me and I am grateful to Shih-fu and all those who were there.

Tibetan/Chinese Buddhist Studies Exchange

Guo-yuan Shih and Lama Lobsang Ngodup, President of the Tibetan Monastery, NY, have been meeting to discuss a collaboration between the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics of Dharamsala (IBD) and our Institute of Chung-Hwa Buddhist Studies (IOCHBS). Dharamsala, known as "The Little Lhasa", is in North India on a spur of the outer Himalayas. His Holiness The Dalai Lama has made Dharamsala the home of the Tibetan government in exile. Centers for the preservation of Tibetan culture and traditions have been established there, including nearly 200 monasteries and nunneries. In short, the Tibetans have kept alive in India what was almost totally destroyed inside Tibet.

The tentative agreement is to form a collaboration which will further mutual understanding and exchange between Chinese and Tibetan Buddhist studies. The IBD will send a geshe of high scholastic accomplishment to the IOCHBS for an extended period of time (at least ten years). The representative of the IOCHBS will choose the geshe when he visits Dharamsala.

"Geshe" is a Tibetan term for a lama who has completed a prescribed and systematic educational program. The monasteries in the Tibetan tradition are similar to western universities, bestowing degrees on completion of the monastic program. There are several degrees of geshe, the highest being a Lharampa Geshe.

The Geshe will teach advanced IBD courses on Tibetan Buddhism, dialectics, and language at the IOCHBS. Teaching methodology will be through the use of existing Tibetan sastra which have not yet been translated into Chinese. The Geshe will also work with a small group of Chinese students to translate the 200 volumes of the AbhidharmaMahavibhashika-sastra into Tibetan. (Currently the only existing version of this sastra is in Chinese.)

The IOCHBS will support this exchange program with $10,000 annually, to be used at the IBD's discretion. IOCHBS will supply the Geshe with room and board, a monthly stipend, and a high-quality translator to assist in the Geshe's courses.

Guo-gu Shih Speaks at Tai Chi School

Eric Schneider, founder of the Northeastern Tai Chi Chuan Association, invited Guo-gu Shih to give a talk at this Manhattan-based school. On Jan 5th Guo-gu Shih spoke on the topic of "Silent Illumination and the Practice of Self-Transformation". The talk was very well received. The Northeastern Tai Chi Chuan Association is a not-for-profit organization devoted to the teaching of Tai Chi Chuan and other related Asian studies. Eric Schneider is the Chief instructor. The school currently offers instruction in Yang-style Tai Chi Chuan, I Chuan meditation, Xing Yi, Bagua, and Ba Ji.

Fourth Buddhist Youth Day

On January 16 the fourth Buddhist Youth Day was organized and hosted by Mr. and Mrs. Phil Chen under the youth leadership of Jane Chen. Lindley Hanlon taught a

workshop on focus, observation, contemplation, and meditation which she describes as "point and shoot Zen," using still photography as a means to discover the beauty, transience, and serenity of nature and its presence within our own nature. A group of more than twenty young people and parents visited a park near the Chen's house in New Jersey to contemplate and photograph the snow-crusted rocks, trees, and ground. A buffet supper at the Chen's followed the brisk afternoon walk. On Feb. 6 a follow-up class was held at the Chan Center and Flushing Botanical Garden for eighteen New Yorkers who were unable to attend the first session. The photographs were mounted and exhibited on February 13 and 14 as part of the Chinese New Year Celebration at the Chan Center.
