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Karma, cause, condition

The two greatest principles of the Buddhadharma are the belief in karma and the recognition of cause and condition.

Be careful not to create causes that lead to the Three Evil Paths. Instead, cultivate the causes for enlightenment. Upholding the five precepts and striving to be good creates a better environment for future practice. Even those who are liberated must abide by karma, for they still live in the phenomenal world.

Chan Master Sheng Yen

Song of Mind of Niu-t'ou Fa-jung Commentary by Master Sheng Yen on a seventh-century poem expressing the Chan understanding of mind. This article is the 29th from a series of lectures given during retreats at the Chan Center in Elmhurst, New York. These talks were given on November 29 and 30, 1987, and were edited by Chris Marano.	Commentary by Master Sheng Yen
The Four Noble Truths This is the first of four Sunday afternoon talks by Master Sheng Yen on the Four Noble Truths, at the Chan Meditation Center from November 1st to November 22nd, 1998. The talks were translated live by Ven. Guo-gu Shi, transcribed from tape by Bruce Rickenbacher, and edited by Ernest Heau, with assistance from Lindley Hanlon. Endnotes were added by Ernest Heau.	A Lecture by Master Sheng Yen
Spiritual Practice in Hung-Chou Chan An article by Dale S. Wright, Professor of Religious Studies at Occidental College, Los Angeles, concerning some early regional	By Prof. Dale S. Wright

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

Commentary by Master Sheng Yen

This article is the 29th from a series of lectures given during retreats at the Chan Center in Elmhurst,New York. These talks were given on December 1st and 26th, 1987 and were edited by Chris Marano.

There is neither people nor seeing.
Without seeing there is constant appearance.

These verses relate to what the Diamond Sutra says about there being no self and no sentient beings. In this case, "no people" refers to there being no objective reality and "no seeing" refers to there being no self-view, or subjective reality. However, even though there is neither self (subject) nor others (object), everything is still clearly perceived the way it is. When there is no "you" working on the method and no method being used, we say that you have become one with the method; and although there is neither a "you" nor the method, you are still working hard from moment to moment.

People come to retreats so that they can spend an intense, extended period of time cultivating their minds. For most people, meditating an hour or two a day at home does not provide enough momentum to penetrate a method deeply. As we meditate sitting period after sitting period, we should attempt to make the environment as well as our minds become smaller and smaller, until there are no others to see and no self that sees them.

I understand that some retreatants here are making phone calls and waiting for family members to arrive so that they can receive and deliver messages. People who have been on retreat before know that this is not permitted, and for good reason. If we cannot even remove ourselves from our relationships with the outside world for seven days, there is no way we will be able to make our minds and the environment become smaller.

The first condition for a successful retreat experience is that you let go of, or isolate yourself from, all thoughts about anything outside the Chan Meditation Hall. The second condition is that you let go of all thoughts about everything that happens in the Meditation Hall. If someone yawns and causes you to yawn in turn, then you have not yet removed yourself from what goes on around you. Although yawns may be contagious under normal conditions, they should have no affect on you during retreat. Train yourself to remember that you have no relationship to people sitting around you.

They are they and you are you. I see that someone is dozing while I am lecturing. What do you think? Is it because she is bored or sleepy, or is it because she is clearly on her method and knows that I have nothing to do with her? Since it is the first day of retreat, I would wager that it is the former reason.

The third condition is that you let go of all thoughts about yourself. When your legs or back become painful, you must cultivate the ability to say, "These legs and back have nothing to do with me. I am meditating." Or, this sleepy practitioner can tell herself, "My drowsiness has nothing to do with me. My body may be drowsy, but I will continue to work on my method."

The same is true of wandering thoughts. Once you realize you have been caught in a web of wandering thoughts, all you have to do is return to the method. The wandering thoughts are not you. The person who had just entertained wandering thoughts is also no longer you. That person is now part of the past. In the present moment, you are working hard on your method. If what I am saying to you right now is useful to you right now, then accept it; but do not continue to think about it. Likewise, do not imagine what the next moment will bring. You will experience it soon enough.

If you can isolate yourself in this manner -- first from the outside environment, then from those around you, then from your own body and wandering thoughts, and finally from the past moment and the next moment -- then you, your method and the environment will disappear. This is the ideal. When practitioners claim they have reached such a level of absorption, it is usually for a different reason. Namely, they have become fatigued from expending so much energy and have fallen into a stupor. Many people who claim to have had enlightenment experiences have merely gone blank from exhaustion. Obviously, this is not the condition of which the Song of Mind speaks. If it were, I am sure many of you would have already experienced enlightenment.

"Without seeing there is constant appearance" also refers to the enlightened mind. To an enlightened being, all phenomena are still present and moving, but there is no self which interacts with them. This condition -- when there is no self but everything is still present -- is called wisdom. There is complete awareness of phenomena and all of their movements, including the movement of the body, but there is no self which attaches to it. If, in your practice you get a taste of what it is like to be undisturbed by the environment, you will feel free and at ease. If you get to the point where your

former thought and subsequent thought have no relationship to each other, you will feel even freer.

What I speak of is not easy to accomplish. We are ordinary human beings, and as such we are often moved by our thoughts, feelings and emotions. We are moved by sensations of the body. When our body is in pain, or ill, or exhausted, it is difficult to concentrate on things like meditation methods. In addition, we are moved by thoughts of the past and future. We are moved by others around us. We are moved by the everyday world. That is why retreats exist, so that we can devote the time and effort necessary to isolate ourselves from such relationships.

Today is the first day of retreat. Begin it by isolating yourself from the outside world. Let go of all thoughts about the day you just experienced. For the next seven days, your world is your method in the present moment. Devote all of your attention to it.

Completely penetrating everything,
It has always pervaded everywhere.

When you arrive at the stage where there is neither objects to be seen nor a self who sees them, yet there is still clear and constant awareness, then you will have complete understanding of all phenomena in all realms throughout space and time. This is what is meant by the verse, "Completely penetrating everything." It is difficult to grasp the magnitude of such limitless awareness. Perhaps you think it is similar to having psychic abilities, but it is far beyond that. It is true that many people have different kinds of psychic powers, but have anyone of them ever claimed to be omniscient? A psychic's powers are always limited. By the standards of one who is not psychic, it may seem that one who has such abilities is superhuman; but in comparison to knowing all that exists in all worlds, all realms, all dimensions, and at all times, a psychic's powers are minuscule.

Ask a psychic what they know. Some may tell you they can read the minds of others. Some may say they can see past lives, others may say they can see into the future. But can they read the minds of all beings in all realms, and can they see all things that have happened everywhere throughout space and time? Do they even know if beings exist on other planets, and if so, can they describe them? Whatever a psychic may claim to know is still limited. Someone approached me at a lecture in Taiwan and he claimed that he could communicate with beings from another planet. I asked if he would be sharing any of their knowledge with us, and he said no, that he was here to

transmit what I said to them. I asked if he was going to translate my lecture, and he said it was not necessary because they understood our language. I suppose he was some sort of channel. So, is this man legitimate, or is he legitimately crazy? Regardless, his powers were rather limited. I know this because he did not even understand what I said during the lecture. A psychic's powers are limited because the person's ego is still present. Scientists say that we only use about ten percent of our brain's capacity. Perhaps a psychic uses twelve or fifteen percent. But even if we use one hundred percent of our brain's capacity, we are still limited if we have an ego that is attached to it. Even if there existed a truly great and wise philosopher king who transformed the lives of all humans on this planet, this person's power would still be limited to planet Earth. Only when there is no longer a self is it possible to have limitless comprehension.

As I said in a previous talk, one of the goals of intense practice is to make our minds -- our egos -- as well as the environment smaller and smaller. The smaller the ego, the smaller the obstructions it will face. Conversely, the bigger the ego, the greater the obstructions. We witness this in daily life all the time. We often envy the simplicity of innocent children and people who seem to be content with very little, yet we strive to be like people who have power, money, stature and responsibility. We do this despite knowing that with more material wealth and power comes more responsibilities and problems.

In our practice we do not want our egos to become bigger, so we must check ourselves. When you seem to be making progress with your method, how does it make you feel? Do you become proud and excited? Do you think, "I am becoming a great meditator." If you use your insights for your own benefit, then your powers will be limited. You must check yourself constantly, "Are my motives selfish or are they altruistic?"

Chan practitioners want to cultivate the attitude of practicing and doing everything for other sentient beings. It is what is meant by developing bodhi mind. Such an attitude is often considered antagonistic to the Western ideal of striving to become better and to develop a strong sense of self. Everywhere in the United States these days people are talking about empowerment and building self-esteem and confidence. Bookshelves are lined with self-help books, people listen to tapes, go to lectures, attend workshops, and so on. The logic is sound: "If we cannot even help ourselves, if we ourselves are weak, scattered, insecure, disempowered and neurotic, how can we begin to help others?"

We must remember that it is a goal of practice to reduce the size of the ego until it disappears. But it is the ego which decides to do this. We always start from the position of a self-centered ego. When I teach beginners to meditate, I speak of Buddhist cultivation as progressing from a small, scattered self to a concentrated, small self, and then further to large, universal self and ultimately to no-self. Notice that on the way to no-self, we must strengthen and consolidate our egos. A side benefit of practice is that we do indeed become more secure, clearer and confident.

Nonetheless, though we start from the position of self in order to move toward no-self, it is for the benefit of other sentient beings that we do so. This is the Mahayana ideal. It is why the first of the four Bodhisattva Vows is to help others and the last is to attain supreme enlightenment. Hence, we should always have sentient beings in the forefront of our actions and intentions. Also, it is often true that our own vexations are lessened when we devote our time and energy to helping others.

I see that some of you are still skeptical. You probably think it is ridiculous to believe that you can help even a small number of people, let alone innumerable sentient beings. Perhaps so, but you must start somewhere. You do not have to be perfect to help others. Suppose a group of children want to climb over a high wall, but none of them can do it on his or her own. One of them decides to get down on her hands and knees so that the others can boost themselves over the wall. The one on the bottom can be you. It does not always take superior intelligence, skill, or strength to help others. No matter how limited you may think you are, you can always help others. All it takes is the intention to do so.

Are you willing to be the stool for other people to stand on, or will your pride and ego suffer too much adopting such a role? Perhaps you want someone else to get down on his knees so you can get over the wall. If that is the case, we will change the first vow to, "I vow to have innumerable sentient beings help me." You will never experience no-self with an attitude like this. Yes, you may gain some power from the practice, but it will be limited, and I guarantee your vexations will not lessen. In fact, you will create even larger obstructions and greater vexations. Do you want to be a bully and force someone else to help you over the wall? What does that get you? So you have used other people in order to achieve your goal, but what is a wall in comparison to climbing to the stars. The truth is that the vision of self-serving people is usually as limited as their powers and abilities.

When you do not place importance on your self, everything becomes much smoother and easier. Ultimately, when you reach the stage of no-self, then there will be no obstructions whatsoever. There will be no limit to what you can do. Because you have no self, there is no particular place in which you reside. Hence, you are in all places at once. This is freedom without boundaries.

Right now your situation is akin to being in a locked house with shuttered windows. As you practice, you begin to open doors and windows to let in more light, but still you are quite limited. Later, you step outside of the house and are awed by the expansiveness of your newly-developed vision. But you are still limited because you can only see up and outward. For the most part, the Earth blocks your view. So, you continue to practice until you transcend the Earth, and, like an astronaut, you have an unobstructed view of the heavens. Even at this point your vision is still limited because you are a person. There is just so much that you can do and see when you are limited to what you believe to be the self. Ultimately, you must leave your self behind.

We begin with the small self; namely, you, who sits in a particular place and works hard on a method of practice. Eventually, your mind and your method will become smaller and smaller until they disappear. Today, during interview, someone thought they had achieved such a state of absorption. He said that, after working diligently for several sitting periods, his energy left him, and he felt nothing, or something that he described as blankness. I told him that this was not a case of mind and method disappearing. His experience could be better described as sitting in a ghost's cave on a black mountain. Blankness is similar to being asleep or unconscious. If that was all it took to experience enlightenment, my job would be much easier. I would just walk behind each one of you and knock you unconscious with a big stick.

It is said that, upon attaining great enlightenment, the Buddha was able to see worlds as innumerable as the grains of sand in the Ganges River, and know everything about every sentient being in those worlds from the beginningless past to the endless future. That is not to say we would gain such all-knowing insight if we were to experience no-self. Experiencing no-self does not automatically make one a Buddha. Like the Buddha, we may have been enlightened to the principle; but, unlike the Buddha, we have not accumulated merit from countless lifetimes of practice and study. By principle I mean those truths and realities which underlie all people, all things, all dharmas.

Recently, I was the subject of an interview at a Taiwanese radio station. Instead of talking about Buddhism, I was asked questions about love, marriage, family, children and parents. The interviewer was pleased with, though somewhat surprised by, my answers. He asked, "Shih-fu, I am curious. How is it that you know so much about matters of marriage, love, relationships and family when you yourself left home long ago to become a monk?"

I answered, "I base my answers on my experience and knowledge of the principles that underlie all things. I may not have personal experience with a lover or marriage, but the principles that underlie all relationships -- all phenomena -- are the same."

When you arrive at the place of no people and no seeing, then you too will know how to deal with situations based on your experience of principle. The reason why people have so many problems and so much confusion is because they rely on their limited, self-centered views. It is because the ego attaches to gain and loss. When there is nothing to gain or lose, matters become much simpler. Imagine that you are extremely wealthy, and now suppose I gave you a choice: you can keep one of two things, either all your material wealth or the person you love most. Which means more to you, love or money? Regardless of which choice you make, you will suffer because there is a self involved. It does not matter if you are an ordinary person or someone blessed with psychic powers, your dilemma will be the same. If, however, no self is involved, then the matter is simple. You can keep them both or lose them both because there is no self which attaches to gain or loss. You simply act in accordance with causes and conditions as they arise. You do what is to be done from one moment to the next; but, because there is no self involved, you suffer no vexations.

This example, however, is something none of us has to face at the present time. Before we can make our minds and the environment disappear, we must stop our minds from entertaining wandering thoughts. We do what must be done in this moment.

The Four Noble Truths

by Master Sheng Yen

This is the first of four Sunday afternoon talks by Master Sheng Yen on the Four Noble Truths, at the Chan Meditation Center, New York, between November 1 and November 22, 1998. The talks were translated live by Ven. Guo-gu Shi, transcribed from tape by Bruce Rickenbacher, and edited by Ernest Heau, with assistance from Lindley Hanlon. Endnotes were added by Ernest Heau.

Chapter One: *Setting in Motion the Dharma Wheel*

Soon after he realized full enlightenment, the Buddha wanted to share his discovery with all sentient beings. He traveled a hundred-fifty miles on foot from Bodhgaya, where he experienced illumination under the bodhi tree, to the city of Sarnath in Benares. His purpose was to seek out five monks [1.1] with whom he had previously practiced asceticism. The monks had left him when he turned away from asceticism to follow the middle way. Now he had become enlightened and in his great compassion wanted to help his friends find the path to liberation. So his very first teaching as the Buddha was to these five monks at a grove near Sarnath called Deer Park.

The Buddha's First Teaching

In this, the Buddha's first teaching [1.2] he expounded on the middle way between asceticism and indulgence, and also taught the Four Noble Truths. With this teaching he set in motion the Wheel of the Dharma--the teachings of Buddhism. The Four Noble Truths are thus the foundation of the Buddhadharma. To understand, to practice, and to realize the Four Noble Truths is to realize the whole of the Buddhadharma. While most Buddhists may understand the Four Noble Truths to some degree, not everyone may be clear about all their implications. Therefore beginning today, I will explain and try to clarify these four truths as spoken by the Buddha.

When the Buddha expounded on the Four Noble Truths, he first stated what they were. They are, he said, the truth of suffering, the truth of the origin of suffering, the truth of the cessation of suffering, and the truth of the way out of suffering by means of the eightfold noble path [1.3]. This is the first of the "three turnings and twelve processes" [1.4] of the Dharma Wheel.

What does that mean? As taught by the Buddha, each of the noble truths implied three turnings or aspects. Within each noble truth, the three turnings or aspects were:

first, understanding that noble truth; second, putting into practice one's understanding of that noble truth; and third, accomplishing the results, or realizing, that noble truth. Thus, the sequence is from understanding, to practice, to realization. The complete practice of the Four Noble Truths thus consists of twelve processes [1.5], which when completed, assured one entry into nirvana.

Therefore, understanding the meaning of the Four Noble Truths is the first turning. As a result of the first turning, the ascetics understood the nature of suffering and its causes. The Buddha further explained the need to go beyond just understanding the Four Noble Truths, and putting that knowledge into practice. For example, knowing the origins of suffering, we need to abandon the kinds of actions that cause the accumulation of suffering. One has a firm conviction that cessation is possible, and practices the path to accomplish this. Thus the second turning is belief in and acting on the truths.

The Buddha told his disciples that he himself, realizing the four truths, had in fact accomplished cessation, and had fulfilled the path away from suffering, and become liberated. And now he was teaching them how to achieve liberation for themselves. The existence of suffering, the causes of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the way out of suffering were fully understood, practiced, and suffering itself was ended. Thus the third turning is the realization, the result of practicing the truths.

As a result of the Buddha's three turnings of the Dharma Wheel even the least gifted of the five monks became enlightened [1.6], and became aryas, awakened ones, the Buddha's first disciples, and the first sangha--the community of Buddhist monks. For forty nine years afterward, the Buddha continued to expound on the Four Noble Truths and all the other teachings of the Buddhadharma until he entered great nirvana. Prior to that, he always admonished his disciples and followers to abide by the precepts (vinaya) [1.7], to accept the Dharma as their teacher, and take liberation (nirvana) as their ultimate goal.

What is abiding by the precepts? It is to live ethically, harmonious, and with stability. What is accepting the Dharma as your teacher? It means taking the Four Noble Truths as the fundamental teaching, and understanding that existence is characterized by impermanence. It is to understand that all things inherently lack independent existence, and are empty of self. It is to believe in the cessation of suffering and in the certainty of ultimate liberation in nirvana. To understand this is to practice the three seals of the Dharma (three marks of existence): suffering,

impermanence, and no-self. And how does one realize the three seals? One begins with the practice of the Four Noble Truths.

What is it to have liberation as one's goal? To have liberation as one's goal, one must fully understand the workings of conditioned arising--that all things arise as a result of many different causes and conditions. To understand the nature of our existence, we begin by understanding the twelve links of conditioned arising [1.8] that determine the shape and path of our life as it unfolds. If one can contemplate these twelve links, one will fully understand the causes of suffering, as well as the way out of suffering towards liberation [1.9].

Thus, the Four Noble Truths encompass the complete teachings of the Buddha and include the three seals of the Dharma, and the twelve links of conditioned arising. Therefore, to realize the goal of the Four Noble Truths, one must also understand and contemplate suffering, impermanence, no-self and conditioned arising.

Although Buddhism can be divided into various schools such as the Theravada, the Mahayana, the Vajrayana, the sudden and the gradual [1.10], and so on, all of them have as their basis the Four Noble Truths, without which, they could not he considered Buddhist. With this brief introduction, let us now proceed to arrive at a deeper understanding of the Four Noble Truths.

Why the Truths are Noble

In general, we can say that all liberated beings (aryas), such as arhats and buddhas, have thoroughly penetrated the Four Noble Truths. And because these truths pervade the understanding of these holy beings, we call them noble. They are also called noble because by understanding and practicing them, we too can reach liberation.

The aryas awakened to the first noble truth of suffering and its many origins. First there is suffering from catastrophic calamity, natural disasters, and other threats from the environment. Second, we can isolate fear and uncertainty sources of suffering. And third are the endless kinds of self-generated afflictions we experience. These latter types of suffering are more clearly mental in origin and manifestation. Thus, the awakened ones are fully aware of the manifold origins of suffering that keep us in the oceanic suffering of samsara, the cycle of birth and death.

The second noble truth is that the fundamental cause of suffering is ignorance manifesting as greed, aversion, and delusion. Ignorance in turn leads us to engage in

actions that cause suffering. Action, the literal meaning of karma, includes overt actions as well as thoughts and words. So what we call the origin or cause of suffering is actually karma--the force that propels existing conditions in our life to a future result, a kind of momentum that leads us in a certain direction. It is a composite energy generated by the illusions and afflictions of sentient beings, causing them to engage in certain actions. These actions themselves plant further 'seeds' (causes and conditions) for further consequences. When the seeds ripen the resultant force becomes a potential that propels us into the future, leading us to particular experiences of suffering.

The third and fourth noble truths derive from the deep understanding realized by aryas of the actual non-existence of suffering, and hence the possibility of its cessation. The Buddha expounded various approaches to arrive at cessation from suffering. Among these, most important is an ethical way of life, which is to say, engaging in conduct that does not cause suffering. We must also cultivate awareness so that we do not create the causes for future suffering. If we are unaware of the causes of suffering, we prolong it by creating the same causes over and over. When we are aware of the causes of suffering, we can cease our negative actions, so that liberation from suffering can result.

Finally, we call these truths noble because they are genuine, timeless, and necessary. They are genuine because nothing can contradict, discredit, or supersede them, and while practicing them one will experience that they are genuine. They are timeless because suffering and the end of suffering are not limited to a particular culture or period of time. As long as there is suffering, sentient beings will strive to end such a state. Finally, they are necessary because to reach cessation we must actually practice the path that leads to liberation.

Worldly and World-Transcending Cause and Effect

A closer look at the Four Noble Truths shows us two kinds of cause and effect at work. One is called 'worldly cause-and- effect,' which leads to suffering; the other is called 'world-transcending cause-and-effect,' which leads to liberation.

Worldly cause-and-effect takes place in space and time, and whatever exists in space and time is characterized by impermanence. Yesterday, you were not here in this hall; today you are here listening to me; after the talk today you will be gone. When we experience this as individuals, we are experiencing impermanence. This sense of change also gives a sense of continuity in our lives. But as the days go by, our lives

are also coming to a close, day by day. So impermanence is essentially this progression from birth to death, from existence to non-existence.

To experience impermanence we must exist in the space-time continuum. Our sense of space can be great or small--we can sense a multitude of spaces or a very limited space. The difference is the key to how we experience the workings of cause and conditions. These various factors coming together and dispersing give us a sense of time. The very fact that the different aspects of our lives shift, alter, and transform, results from these causal relationships. The workings of causes at conditions, which take place in space, are inseparable and imbedded in time, so we experience time and space together. As I said before, the world is what comes together in space-time, and this experience of constant change is impermanence.

Simply put, world-transcendence is freedom from worldly cause-and-effect, freedom from suffering in time and space. The awakened ones--arhats and buddhas--are no longer fettered by time and space, therefore not influenced by the suffering which impermanence brings. For this reason the state of world-transcendence is a state of liberation.

How do the worldly and world-transcending realities relate to the Four Noble Truths? Worldly cause-and-effect encompasses the first two noble truths of suffering and the origin of suffering. Suffering is actually an effect of living in time and space, and its origin is our ignorance as to the true nature of living in worldly reality.

Surely, you are thinking, there must be some kind of happiness in life, and indeed, there are many occasions in life of joy and happiness. The Buddha himself did not deny these states of joy and happiness, but when he spoke of impermanence as suffering he had in mind the very subtle way impermanence permeates even the joy that we feel. Even in the midst of happiness there is loss and decay. This happiness will fade away just like anything else. Nothing in time and space, nothing in the world lasts or can be truly acquired, however great our desire for things to be other than what they are. This suffering includes our ultimate inability to escape old age, sickness, and death. Since we are not our own masters, on the coarse as well as very subtle levels, suffering is inherent in all aspects of our experience.

World-transcending cause-and-effect relates to the third and fourth noble truths of the cessation of suffering and the path that leads out of suffering. Cessation is the state in which worldly cause-and-effect is abandoned, there is no more accumulation of

karma, and nirvana is realized. One is free from suffering, and the process of reaching this state is the path. Later we will elaborate on the way of practicing the path.

Thus, when the Buddha turned the Wheel of the Dharma, he also taught that the path of liberation is the path of moving from the worldly to the world-transcending modes of acting, thinking, and speaking. And after three turnings of the Dharma wheel, the three expositions of the Four Noble Truths, all five mendicant monks achieved liberation.

Karma and Retribution

Earlier we said that suffering originates in karma. Therefore, all suffering is retribution, which can be understood as either karmic retribution, or resultant retribution. Karmic retribution is the operation of the underlying causes and conditions that propel karmic energy. Resultant retribution is what we experience subjectively as a result of the karmic forces coming due. Resultant retribution takes on the guise of different kinds of suffering. In a later talk we will address the different kinds of suffering, but for now I just want to reaffirm that suffering originates in karma.

How is karma created? Basically, karma is created through the functioning of the six sense organs of eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind. These organs are not necessarily the cause of suffering; rather it is our cherishing them that causes suffering. We cherish them because through them we have a notion of our own body, which we attach and cling to it as if it were perfect, lovable, and permanent; and above all, because through it we have a sense of identity, a sense of self. As a result we generate passions that rule our behavior, setting in motion the karmic forces that propel us into the future.

The third noble truth of cessation refers to the extinction of our mental defilements (afflictions) from the sense organs. As I said these organs are not the cause of the problem. The colorations we add to our experience, through attachment and clinging, are the cause of the problem. So if the six sense organs, defiled by the clinging mind, can be said to be the origin of suffering, correspondingly, the cessation of suffering means ending such defilements.

The fourth noble truth is the path leading toward cessation known as the eightfold noble path. While this path and its eight aspects seem easy to understand, they are extremely rich and encompassing. The path includes the threefold practice of precepts (sila), meditative concentration (samadhi) and wisdom (prajna). It also

includes many other practices, such as the five methods of stilling the mind [1.11], and the four foundations of mindfulness for developing insight. [1.12]

In conjunction with the Four Noble Truths there are also the very detailed practices known as the sixteen aspects of the Four Noble Truths. [1.13]. These aspects can be used as objects of meditation, beginning with the awareness of the breath (calming), and proceeding to the development of meditative awareness (insight). All these methods lead to path of 'seeing' (awakening to) the nature of reality.

Summary

We have talked about numerous things from the turning of the Dharma Wheel, to engaging the path, to attaining arhatship through cessation. So far we have only given a brief summary of the Four Noble Truths. Nevertheless, by the time I finished talking about the three turnings you should have all become aryas like the five monks. (Laughter) But in case there are some of you who have not attained enlightenment, and if today's talk sounded pretty enticing, please come back next Sunday, and we will talk in more detail about the Four Noble Truths. I hope to describe the Four Noble Truths as a group and reveal their different levels, layer after layer, of their subtle implications. If I say the levels get deeper and deeper, I might scare you off, so I will just say I will just try to make them clearer and clearer.

Now we have some time for a few questions.

Questioner: How can we relieve day-to-day suffering?

Shifu: We experience day-to-day life as a burden of body and mind that may seem to come from the environment, but it mainly originates in our own body and mind. This burden is the reality of impermanence. Because of this particular burden that we feel and experience, we take suffering to be inherent in our lives. Happiness is temporary relief from this burden, after which the sense of impermanence and through it, suffering, reappears

One can, however, experience happiness that is less subject to impermanence. The particular happiness the Buddha discusses is the joy of Dharma. The more we practice the Dharma, the more happiness we will have. If we really engage in the Dharma to the point of full liberation, we will be extremely happy, even elated.

Questioner: In daily life, we often encounter the suffering of the sick, such as a terminally ill relative who wants to be relieved of their suffering. What is the correct view for a Buddhist who truly grasps the essence of the Four Noble Truths? What can relieve his fellow being of such suffering, whatever the cause?

Shifu: One engages the Four Noble Truths by oneself; understand suffering and the way out of suffering, as it relates to you. If a sick person is still conscious and is receptive, there may be an opportunity to help that person practice. We cannot implant the Four Noble Truths in another person, but we can at least help them understand some of the origins of suffering, and begin practicing the Four Noble Truths. But if that person is not receptive or able to comprehend, then the Four Noble Truths will not help. While we can relieve their pain and so on, that is not the end of existential suffering or liberation from it. Medication and other methods of relief are not what we mean by cessation. Only by engaging in practice can someone be freed from the suffering described in the Four Noble Truths.

When a friend was on the edge of death I tried to convey some the teachings, but this person was quite agitated, in agony and pain, and was not receptive. Since that would not work, I simply sat next to my friend and started to quietly recite the Buddha's name. This worked to a certain extent because my presence at his bedside and the stability of my mind perhaps influenced him directly; in a non-verbal way, so that he was able gradually to calm down.

If reciting the Buddha's name is not effective, you can try meditating next to that person. This may sound far-fetched but it can be effective. The prerequisite is that you are really engaging in mediation, so that with a very stable, calm mind, your mind and the other person's can come to a mutual response. That person may directly calm down as a result. But if your mind is scattered or unduly influenced by the environment or lots of wandering thoughts, this will probably not work.

Thank you for your questions. So I encourage you to come back next Sunday... or you will not be liberated! (*Laughter and applause*)

Notes

[1.1] Kondanna, Asaji, Wappa, Mahanama, and Bhaddiya (names in Pali), the early followers of the Buddha during his ascetic practice, which was characterizcd by extreme austerity and belief in the soul (atman).

[1.2] Subsequently recorded as The Sutra Setting in Motion the Dharma Wheel. (Pali: Dhammacakka-pattavana Sutta)

[1.3] The eightfold noble path consists of the practices of: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right meditation.

[1.4] See The Way to Buddhahood, Ven. Yin-shun, Wisdom Publications, 1998, pp.174-178

[1.5] The three turnings and twelve processes are summarized below:
First noble truth:

> This is the noble truth of suffering
> The truth of suffering must be understood
> The truth of suffering has been understood.

Second noble truth:

> This is the noble truth of the cause of suffering
> The cause of suffering must be abandoned
> The cause of suffering has been abandoned.

Third noble truth:

> This is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering
> The cessation of suffering must be experienced
> The cessation of suffering has been experienced.

Fourth noble truth:

> This is the noble truth of the path out of suffering
> The path out of suffering must be practiced
> The path out of suffering has been realized.

[1.6] The order of enlightenment of the monks (according to The Life of the Buddha by Edward Thomas, p.88) suggests there were three teachings, Or turnings of the Dharma Wheel before all five monks became awakened. First Kondanna alone, then Vappa and Bhaddiya, and then Mahanama and Asaji.

[1.7] The tripitaka, the 'three baskets' of the Buddhist canon, consists of the vinaya (rules of discipline for monastics), the sutras (the discourses of the Buddha), and the abhidharma (philosophical and psychological analysis).

[1.8] The twelve links (nidanas) of conditioned arising are the basic causal forces in samsara, the cycle of birth and death. They are called 'links' because they sequentially form the causal chain of sentient existence. The links are: (1) fundamental ignorance, (2) action, (3) consciousness, (4) name-and-form, (5) the six sense faculties, (6) contact, (7) sensation, (8) desire, (9) grasping, (10) coming into existence, (11) birth, and (12) old age and death. 'Conditioned arising' refers to the fact that all phenomena are the result of the interplay between countless factors, interrelating in a nexus of cause and effect. Also referred to as the twelve links of dependent origination.

[1.9] The fourth talk in this series includes a discussion of the contemplation of the twelve links.

[1.10] Theravada: early Buddhism espousing the way of the arhat. Mahayana: later Buddhism espousing the way of the bodhisattva. Vajrayana: branch of Mahayana espousing esoteric cultivation. Sudden and gradual schools: two approaches to enlightenment within Chinese Chan Buddhism, often associated with Linji and Caodong schools (Zen: Rinzai and Soto).

[1.11] The five methods of stilling the mind: (1) mindfulness of breath, (2) contemplating the impurity of the body, (3) mindful recollection of the buddhas/bodhisattvas, (4) meditation on the four limitless mentalities (loving-kindness, compassion, joy, equanimity), and (5) contemplating causes and conditions.

[1.12] The four foundations of mindfulness, described in the Sattipatthana-sutta (Pali) are: (1) mindfulness of breath, (2) mindfulness of sensation/feeling, (3) mindfulness of mind, and (4) mindfulness of mental objects (dharmas).

[1.13] The sixteen aspects or attributes of the Four Noble Truths are: first noble truth--impermanence, suffering, emptiness, selflessness; second noble truth--cause, origin, condition, completion; third noble truth--cessation, peace, bliss, emergence (renunciation); fourth noble truth--true path, knowing, attaining, elimination (of delusion). For a more detailed discussion of the sixteen aspects, see The Four Noble Truths, Ven. Lobsang Gyatso, Snow Lion Publications, 1994.

Spiritual Practice in Hung-Chou Chan

by Dale S. Wright

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The origins and history of Chan Buddhism as we know it today owe a great deal to the development that took place in the 8th and 9th centuries CE in a remote and rural section of South-central China called "Hung-chou," today Northern Chiang-si province and still largely rural. Indeed, as contemporary China opens itself to the outside world, visitors interested in the "golden age" of Chan are beginning to explore the temple ruins that are still to be found throughout the countryside in this region. There are excellent reasons for our curiosity. For it was here that a radical style of Chan spiritual practice developed that has defined this tradition since that time. The founding figure of this time and place was the renown Ma-tsu Tao-i (709-788), whose style of spiritual practice constitutes an innovative break with the earlier Chan tradition as we see it, for example, in the Chan of "East Mountain" monastery, or of Shen-hsiu and Shenhui, or in the voluminous Chan documents found at Tun-huang. This reorientation in style of practice is further developed in Ma-tsu's successors, such prominent figures as Pai-chang Huaihai, Huang-po Hsi-yun, and Lin-chi I-hsuan. The influence of these great masters had a profound impact on the Chan Buddhism of the Sung dynasty (960-1260), the development of this tradition in Korea and Japan, and on us in the west today. So, what is this style of spiritual practice?

The word Chan means meditation, and that was no doubt the primary practice as well as descriptive characteristic of early Chan. Meditation had from the beginning been one dimension of Buddhist practice, at least in principle if not in actuality. The early Chan monks in China were among a wide class of monks, including many Tien-tai monks, who accorded meditation a central place among practices. Without discarding meditation altogether, Hung-chou Chan seems to have once again shifted the focus of concern away from this contemplative practice. Without question, meditation continued to have a role in their practice. But more often than recommending it, the literature of Hung-chou Chan criticizes the practice of meditation, or more precisely, it criticizes the attitude or understanding in terms of which meditation was being practiced.

A famous story in one biography of Ma-tsu's teacher, Nan-yueh Huai-jang, in the *Transmission of the Lamp*, has traditionally been taken as the most powerful

expression of this point. Ma-tsu, a student eager for spiritual progress, sat long hours in meditation. Observing his absorption one day, his teacher asked the obvious question, "What is the great virtue of sitting in meditation?" Ma-tsu replied, "Accomplishing Buddhahood!" The teacher then picked up a tile and began to rub it on a stone. Ma-tsu asked, "What are you doing?" "Making a mirror" replied the teacher. Ma-tsu asked again, "How is it possible to obtain a mirror by rubbing a tile?" The story ends with Huai-jang's rhetorical question, "How is it possible to obtain Buddhahood by sitting in meditation?"

That it would indeed bring about that goal was an assumption of early Chan. But at least by Ma-tsu's time some teachers began to conclude that the understanding supporting this practice had the effect of precluding the very realization to which it was directed. What practice aimed at a goal of attainment presupposes is that human beings lack something fundamental, that there is something that is attainable from someplace else. But this is just what the Hung-chou masters denied: "Since you are already fundamentally complete, don't add on spurious practices".

One of the most common Hung-chou sayings provides the rationale for this shift of understanding concerning the practice of meditation or any other practice: "This very mind is Buddha!" What Ma-tsu and others communicated through this saying is that what seems to be the most remote, transcendental goal is, paradoxically, nearest to us. Hung-chou monks, like other Buddhists before them, spoke of enlightenment as a "return," a return to and encounter with one's own deepest nature. This "original nature," a spontaneous attunement to the world, is what is most easily overlooked in the act of striving for a remote goal. Therefore, Huang-po, Pai-chang's most celebrated student, responds to the question -- How does one bring about enlightened mind? -- in the following way:

> "Enlightenment is not something to be attained. If right now you bring forth this 'non-attaining' mind, steadfastly not obtaining anything, then this is enlightened mind. Enlightenment is not a place to reside. For this reason there is nothing attainable. Therefore, [the Buddha] said: 'When I was still in the realm of Dipamkara Buddha, there was not the slightest thing attainable'."

The act of striving is itself what creates the distance or separation that striving seeks to overcome. A "dualism" separating the practitioner from the goal of practice was the presupposed background that had supported not only the practice of meditation but also the entirety of Buddhist practice. Yet even striving could not be rejected in a

dualistic way; somehow the appropriate posture was beyond both extremes, striving and its negation. Thus, *The Extensive Record of Pai-chang* claims:

> A Buddha is a person who does not seek. If you seek this you spoil it. The principle is one of non-seeking. Seek it and it is lost. If one holds onto non-seeking, this is still the same as seeking.

The admonition not to seek, difficult indeed in an institution centered on spiritual quest, functioned to direct the practitioner to what is already here, that is, to the "ordinary" that one previously hoped to transcend. This redirection of attention to the "ordinary" and the "everyday" is perhaps the most characteristic theme of Hung-chou Chan. For them, "Everyday mind is the Way." Meditation, therefore, need not be a special activity requiring its own time, setting, and posture. Every moment of life, "sitting, standing, or lying down," ought to be seen as a primordial manifestation of Buddha-nature. This reorientation to the ordinary enabled a dramatic transformation of Chan practice -- any thing could be considered a "practice" if by practice one means, not one activity among others that one does toward a pregiven goal, but just what one does. According to Tsung-mi's more traditional point of view this went too far, even to the point of regarding "the moving of a muscle or the blinking of an eye" as a sign of Buddha-nature. A sanctification of the ordinary meant that, to be a Buddhist, one need not speak in a classical language; ordinary, colloquial language was even closer to the fundamental attunement within which one dwells by birthright anyway. The manual labor that at least partially supported the Hung-chou monasteries could likewise be taken, not as something menial and base, but as a practice expressing one's deepest nature. "Chopping wood and carrying water," the most ordinary of T'ang dynasty tasks, were to be seen as the extraordinary Way itself. Given this reversal of Buddhist priorities, the presumptuous young monk, Lin-chi, could say that what his teacher, Huang-po, had to transmit to him was "not much".

That the extra-ordinary was to be found nowhere except within the ordinary was perhaps the most important principle in T'ang dynasty Buddhist thought generally, and had therefore been formulated in various theoretical ways before Ma-tsu's time. What the Hung-chou masters contributed to this principle was twofold: first, a realization that the principle had the effect of undermining the theoretical (and dualistic) formalism within which it was established, and second, a way of integrating the principle into authentic daily life.

Integrating Chan thought and realization into daily life required not only a new way of acting, but also a new way of speaking. No practice so distinctly characterizes

Hung-chou Chan as its discursive practice. In examining the kinds of rhetoric found in the literary traditions of Hung-chou Chan, we need to reflect briefly on our sources. There are numerous texts that transmit this kind of Chan to us. They consist not in the writings of Hung-chou masters but in collections of purported "sayings" which circulated among monks and lay people of the area. These include segments of lectures, question and answer sessions, uncontextualized sayings, and descriptions of actions -- especially encounters between Chan masters -- all of which were the subject of great excitement and oral discussion. Sometimes later -- often centuries later -- these sayings were gathered into manuscript form, then edited and printed as the Chan literature that we have available to us today.

The Hung-chou masters had ideological reasons for not writing- they rejected the kinds of formal study that characterized Buddhist practice up until their time. Following Bodhidharma's criticism of "dependence on words and letters," they sought a mode of being free from the kinds of closure and rigidity that language and texts suggested to them. They tended to stress their difference from earlier traditions in order to set out a new identity for practicing monks. In retrospect, we can see that these differences, while real, were not as great as Hung-chou rhetoric claimed. The language of Pai-chang and Huang-po, for instance, is laced with references to Buddhist sutras; clearly, they were accustomed to closing an argument with a sutra quotation, thereby substantiating the point, as was the practice in Buddhist discourse. Sometimes, sayings recorded as the language of the master were actually segments from sutras or other texts. Nevertheless, a movement away from dependence on sutras began to take place in Hung-chou Chan. The colloquial language of these monks was also a significant departure from the formal language of the earlier tradition.

Though a great deal of Hung-chou rhetoric is anti-study, anti-text, and anti-language, it would be a mistake on our part to read this "language" literally, without recognizing the fundamental role that study, text, and language did in fact play in Hung-chou Chan. Reading, for example, continued to be an important practice, although what Hung-chou monks read and how they read underwent transformation. The way of reading shifted from focus on the objective content of sutras to personal, experiential appropriation by the reader, while what they read gradually shifted from sutras to accounts of words and actions of Chan masters. There was also a greater emphasis on spoken discourse, on lectures, question and answer sessions, and what came to be known as encounter dialogues. But whenever spoken discourse seems important, it inevitably gets written down, especially in a society as thoroughly literate as China had become. On this basis a new genre of Buddhist literature emerged in Hung-chou

Chan, the "Discourse Record" texts. So eager were these monks to appropriate the language of their masters and other renowned teachers of Chan that they kept personal notebooks recording significant sayings and events.

These sayings and descriptions of events circulated by word of mouth, first among co-practitioners and then more broadly, until in a variety of versions they were known all over China. In these later and more articulate versions, they eventually became the sacred texts of Chan. For some monks at least, they replaced the sutras as the core of their reading practice.
These "sayings," however, like the words of sutras, were thought to be hindrances to spirituality if they were taken as objects of knowledge, or as somehow sufficient in themselves. Sayings indicated, hinted at, or evoked, elicited, something beyond themselves, which was clearly unattainable through direct reference. They referred to no spiritual object at all but rather, indirectly, to a disclosure of something that was prior to all conceptualization. In this context, language and its set of conceptual categories seemed to run aground. What they sought to encounter was beyond all categories, and even beyond their negation; it always stood in the background of focal awareness even when the spiritually adept sought to grasp it. This realization brought the Hung-chou masters to deny their own religious categories -- Buddha, Mind, and so on -- and then, even further, to deny that negation. Thus, Pai-chang claims: "The 'nature' of fundamental existence cannot be specified in language. Originally it is neither ordinary nor sacred. Nor is it defiled or pure. And it is neither empty nor existent, neither good nor evil". Regarding references to *what* is revealed in spiritual awareness as dangerous or at least misleading, more often than not texts show greater concern with the stance or posture required for the disclosure to occur than they do with its "source" or referent. "When affirmation and negation, like and dislike, the principled and unprincipled, and all knowing and feeling are exhausted, unable to entangle you, then there is free spontaneity in all situations".

The detachment called for in this passage is perhaps the primary element in Hung-chou spirituality or, at least, a prerequisite to other elements. Letting go of habitual categories and forms of awareness was essential to the process of opening up a dimension within which deeper awareness might be disclosed. What obstructs this "deeper awareness" or "original nature" is the search for security through fixation and enclosure. Seeking to effect release and freedom by calling attention to forms of human bondage, Hung-chou rhetoric employs the following verbal metaphors: holding on, grasping, fixating, obstructing, losing and seeking, separating, differentiating, blocking and screening ourselves off from more extensive attunement. Detachment

requires a "letting go" and "release," not of things so much as of the kind of self-understanding that holds and grasps at things, unaware of the more primordial background within which both self and things have their existence. Thus, after establishing "detachment as the fundamental principle" Huang-po claims that one who is "free" is not "separate from all affairs". That freedom is not an escape from things or affairs takes us back to the Hung-chou concern for the "ordinary." Freedom, Buddhahood, is available nowhere else but here, within the "everyday." Thus it is not so much a matter of release from our current situation as it is an awakening to that situation, as well as a deep sense of *being* situated or contextualized within a larger, encompassing whole.

Although reflexivity (reflecting back on oneself) is sometimes an element in this reorientation, Hung-chou spirituality does not consist in focus on the self, or subjectivity, but instead seeks to discover a ground of experience and action more primordial than subjectivity. On this point Hung-chou Chan can be seen to be in continuity with the basic Buddhist concept of "no-self." Although the precise sense in which there is "no-self" can, and indeed did, change, these monks and masters understood themselves to stand in a tradition of spirituality that called them into a dimension that is "presubjective" -- prior to and deeper than the separation of self and world, subject and object. Thus in continuity with the world, yet without losing uniqueness and individuality (indeed enhancing it), the practice of Hung-chou Chan was thought to enable an open involvement in and responsiveness to the world. The character of this responsiveness was thus seen in radical opposition to the narrow and enclosed disposition that accompanies self-centeredness.

Polarization of self and world gives way to a reciprocity between them, or, in Huang-po's words, a "mutual correspondence". Living within such correspondence meant that the motivation for action derived from a source beyond the willfulness of personal subjectivity. Freedom of movement, therefore, meant something quite different from the liberty to move as one desires. On the contrary, it meant a freedom from the tyranny of those desires such that one could move in accordance with, and thus be moved by, the world around one. This freedom and spontaneity of speech and action became the hallmark of Hung-chou spirituality, which now, at the turn of the millennium, continue to reverberate around the world.

Sorting Out My Belongings

Retreat Report by A.B.

I have been practicing Silent Illumination for nine years on retreats in Wales (UK) led by John Crook, and at home in England. The Silent Illumination retreat was my seventh Chan retreat. It was the fulfillment of a dream to attend a retreat led by Master Sheng Yen. Previously, on his visits to Wales, I had been looking after our children so that my husband could attend, or we'd been away on holiday. I had thought of attending a retreat in Queens on several occasions, so when David read about this retreat in New York State he suggested to me that I might like to go. It didn't take long for the idea to dawn that we might attend together, since David's parents had already offered to look after our daughter if we wanted a "holiday". We decided to take them up on their offer and applied for the retreat. I was quietly overjoyed to receive the acceptance letter some weeks later.

The form of this retreat turned out to be almost exactly what I was used to in Wales, the differences being the length of each meditation period, (half again as long) and the method we were taught, which involved keeping the eyes closed.

It was easy to forget which country I was in. The landscape was similar to parts of England except that the maple and oak trees had such huge leaves. The granite rocks bordering the river were reminiscent of Scotland or Dartmoor. The beauty of the lake took my breath away on our first evening's walk there. Later, the lake was to freeze over with a thin patchwork of ice, but on that first evening the reflections exactly mirrored the delicate silhouettes of newly bared branches against the dying light. The buildings of the retreat center blended so perfectly with their surrounding trees and undulating grassland that at times, in the light of dawn, or by star and moonlight, they reminded me of the nineteenth century prints of Hiroshige, or of the more recent tree paintings of Mondrian; yet the food and culture were Chinese. If this was the USA, it wasn't anything like my expectations.

Because in England it would have been nine a.m., I found no difficulty in rising at four, but from the start, because of jet lag and a general lack of sleep, I found that in the evening it was almost impossible to stay awake. The progressive relaxation method was not difficult to do. I had been taught a similar method by a yoga teacher many years before, and had for years used her words, "Let your eyeballs shrink from their sockets, let your hairline recede etc., as a relaxation method if I had difficulty sleeping. It was a relief to close my itchy eyelids during meditation. Daytime drowsiness was an

initial problem, but Shifu instructed us to open our eyes if drowsy and I occasionally found this useful.

By the evening of the first day I felt half dead with tiredness. I heard only the first half of the evening talk. The meditation period following this was one in which thought had practically ceased through my need for sleep. There was a heavy weight inside my head, which I could barely keep upright. My bottom was sore against the hardness of my cushion, one that I had brought with me, which had always been perfect for sitting periods of up to half an hour. My knees and ankles were in agony. In my mind was one unmoving concept: not a thought, not a word even, just the knowledge of a need, for BED, that was so great that my whole body and brain ached for it. The instruction to "massage and sit again" felt like the last straw! I decided to kneel astride the cushion to relieve my aching body, and as I settled down, eyes closed to begin with, and with the pain gone, even the concept of 'bed' disappeared. I found my eyes opening slowly and resting on the cushion of the participant in front of me. It had a life of its own, and seemed to be shimmering with energy. The floorboards in front of me, between the rows of meditators, stretched away either side into infinity, with an energy that was the same as that seen in the cushion. Words from the poem came into my mind, "IT APPEARS BEFORE YOU." Just then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw Shifu walk silently along in front of the row of meditators in front of me. He stopped briefly to whisper something to one of them before walking on, and I saw that his body had a weightless quality and was shimmering. I realized that my own body had disappeared. As I lay in bed I felt like continuing the meditation into the night, but then remembered Shifu's instruction, "Tell yourself to go to sleep now. This I did, and slept the maximum amount possible.

I had a slight problem the following morning with attachment to this experience. I knew from similar experiences on past retreats that such things are never repeated, and that it is a mistake to even desire a particular state of mind to return, but it was difficult to forget. In my interview I asked Guo-yuan Shi whether it was necessary to try to forget good experiences. His reply was, "Let it fall naturally away," and he added that this was true of both good and bad experiences. "You will never have another experience the same, and it is necessary to move on." I sensed a feeling of freedom in the truth of these words, and was able to "let it fall."

Wandering thoughts were not a problem at all during this retreat, which is unusual for me. However, I became aware of an emotional attachment to the music of the services, particularly to the tunes I knew less well. Since first hearing them, I have

always loved the morning and evening Chan services, both the words and the music, and the Chinese words no less than the English. On a slow, frosty morning's walk to the riverside, I found that I was breathing the rhythm of these tunes as I walked; afterwards, in meditation, this subtle kind of 'thinking' continued, though it was not through conscious effort. It was simply there. Most of my life I have some tune or other habitually "stuck in my head", (as my daughter used to say!) I once heard John Crook describe such a habit as "an evasion." Could I be evading silence unconsciously? And why did my mind do the opposite of what I really wanted it to do? I was going to have to make a deliberate effort to reverse it. On becoming conscious of this and aware that I needed to change, a significant step in the right direction had been taken.

In my second interview, I asked Shifu about this problem. His reply was that it was good that I was aware of my breathing, breathing being part of the body, and that I should consider this as having reached the first stage of silent illumination. That he completely ignored my concern with tunes showed me the possibility that I could ignore them too. There were times during the remainder of the retreat when I did sometimes manage to have a tune-free mind, and the silence then was something extraordinary. Dropping whatever tune had taken over became increasingly possible, but it was something that I never ceased to have to work at... and still work at now.

During our afternoon walking meditation, Shifu sat motionless, center stage. I glanced at him only once, and had the immediate impression of a slowly melting snowman, wrapped up in hat and scarf, so still, so small, almost not there at all. Walking to the Chan hall before dawn, in temperatures well below freezing, I felt like I had as a child on receiving a glittery Christmas card for the first time: the sense of wonder, as a million diamonds littered the ground and sparkled with every step. Above, the "river of stars." In the pale green dawn, before breakfast, seeing the crescent moon, like a smile in the sky, together with a nearby bright star, brought tears to my eyes.

My job was after lunch, so most mornings during the work period I walked over the frozen field as the sun rose, causing blue shadows to fall in the pale orange light. I marveled at the intricate beauty of frosted grass and leaves crunching under my feet like glass Christmas decorations. The low angle of the sun brought every detail of the frozen ground into sharp relief. The river on the fifth morning, in temperatures of 20F, was steaming in the dappled shade. I felt slightly guilty that I had this free time; I could see that my husband's job took up both work periods. So I made the best use of it that I could, keeping my eyes fairly close to the ground, noticing every movement and

breath that I took, and noticing the stillness and silence that sudden stops, backward steps and changes in direction revealed.

In the first meditation period of the fifth day there was a brief arising of Bodhi mind. This followed a talk on the importance of vows, diligence and having faith in the method, during which I felt a greater need to look at the floor, to be less distracted. Feelings of gratitude also arose, particularly toward John Crook, without whose efforts I would probably never have encountered Chan, and would not, therefore, have been sitting there. At this point, I actually felt John to be present in the room. During the morning service I was aware of feelings of compassion, particularly toward those who were sitting out and not participating for reasons unknown to me.

Something strange happened during the afternoon. I sat with no detectable thought in my mind, when suddenly words appeared as if being spoken to me, "WHO'S BIRTHDAY IS IT?" Completely surprised by this, I began to work out what day it was, and realized it was my son's twenty-second birthday. I hadn't given a single thought to this since leaving England! Had I been asking myself the question, I would have asked, "I wonder when Daniel's birthday is?" or, "What day is it today?" not, "Who's birthday is it?"

At the end of day five, Shifu gave a very helpful reprimand for our lack of concentrated effort. His final words, "FOCUS. FOCUS." stayed with me throughout the night, and until the retreat ended... and have been helpful ever since. His talk the next morning was on the necessity of cultivating feelings of repentance and shame for good practice. This made good sense. After the talk, there was a renewal of effort and resolve, and an almost tangible calm energy in the hall. Even those with coughs and colds were silent. On two separate occasions in the morning, I briefly saw a vision of a silhouetted, bare-branched tree, symmetrical in shape, stretching upwards into the sky.

Considering that by this stage I had very little going on in my mind to disturb me, I was surprised by my ego's brief appearance after lunch, when I found another participant doing 'my' job, and I realized I still had attachments. I would never have believed I could get attached to rinsing dishes! I dried them instead.

At the end of retreats I never look forward to the breaking of silence, but once it is broken I welcome the opportunity to talk to people whom I feel I have come to know quite well without words. The discussion on the last evening helped to break us in

gently to the ending of silence after breakfast the next day. However, the hard work, over six days, of stilling the mind had had a profound effect. In the afternoon, while waiting for our taxi to arrive, I walked down the steps and out over the warm, unfrozen grass. Several hours of talk and activity fell away as the silent world opened out before me. It was alive and singing -- in the air, the trees, the space -- and in me. Up to the lake I walked, as a totally relaxed body -- part of my environment completely -- slow, unthinking, still. I felt complete in my surroundings, and strangely, this feeling was far more obvious AFTER the socializing than it had been before the retreat ended, when I had never broken from it. It was as if, as an electrical gadget that had become detached from its source of electricity, I was plugging myself in again to the vastness of the Universe. Would I ever be so still and silent again -- so much in unity with my environment?

Unpacking my luggage at home, walking about the house, at a particular moment, as I passed through the hallway, the meaning of the opening words of the evening service were clearly understood:

> *To know all the Buddhas*
> *Of the past, present and future*
> *Perceive that Dharmadhatu nature*
> *is all created by the mind.*

No one has ever explained to me what Dharmadhatu nature is, but as I sorted out my belongings, I knew exactly what it meant.

Silent Illumination

by Harry Miller

It is a frame of mind
It is a frame in the mind
Awareness aware of awareness

Two days later I walk out - expecting
A perfect bright circle in the sky
But the overcast night is uniform

Walking beyond the meditation hall
A bright night - I look around for a streetlight
But it is the two-days-from-full

Leaves left on only one tree
Clumped and shaken in the wind like a gloved hand
Cling to safety or longing for release?

Moon, bright cream
Swamps the landscape
Lit with shadows

Two leaves float by
One half dry, the other submerged and quivering
As if bowed by a cellist

I pass an oak
Our shadows cross on the gray grain road
No motion

By day in the water
Trees are upside down
Agitated with sun sparks

One tree begins to move and walks
On the brightest point in the sky
The Man in the Moon

Someone on the opposite shore
Dressed in blue and white
Bends like a butterfly with folded wings

An etching of what is hidden
Form and character we invent
From absence

I open, then shut my eyes
Orange and red lanterns on a string
Burn and fade to the edge of my eyelids

Ancients saw moonlight
But did they know it was a reflection?
The sun the source? And the sun's source?

Calm water
Mirrors the sun, but the bottom is dark
A round edge of stone visible

NEWS

Chinese New Year Celebration at the Chan Center

The Year of the Dragon was ushered in at the Chan Meditation Center on Sunday, February 6, 2000 with recitation of the Heart Sutra and a talk and blessing by Master Jen Chen. Following the offering to the sangha and the midday offering, all enjoyed a superb vegetarian lunch prepared and served by many volunteers, coordinated by Judy Chen. The highlight of the day was a screening of a documentary film on Master Sheng Yen's life called "Looking Backward and Forward: Spreading Dharma in the West," compiled by Kevin Chen at the Chan Center.

Following the screening, members of the Buddhist Youth Group ushered in the Year of the Dragon entertainment program with their Dharma Dragon Buddhadrama, complete with a 30-foot long high-tech dragon created and paraded by members of the group under the direction of Lindley Hanlon. An improvised duet for voice (Lindley Hanlon) and erhu (Chen Ping), a flute solo and duet (Jennie Lin and Yilien Hsu), a performance by the Dharma Drum Mountain Choir (directed by Jane Huang), guest performances by a Chinese Folk Music ensemble, and a tenor solo by Huo Lei completed the program. Guo-yuan Fa Shi closed the day by offering gratitude and guidance in the Dharma to all participating in the day's festivities. Special thanks went to Sylvie Sung and the sangha members for their great efforts and success in organizing this festive beginning of the New Year.

The Dharma Dragon Visits the Children's Museum of Manhattan

On Saturday, February 26, 2000 The Dharma Dragon participated in the New York City Neighborhood Festival at the Children's Museum of Manhattan at 212 West 83rd Street. Members of the Buddhist Youth group paraded the Dragon through the museum and presented their Dharma Dragon Drama live to an audience at the Time Warner Media Center Television Studio at the museum. The group celebrated with a dinner at Ernie's and attended a screening of the Tibetan film The Cup at the Lincoln Plaza Cinema. Next year the Dharma Dragon will be featured at the Queen's Museum of Art Chinese New Year Celebration. Many thanks go to Jane Chen, youth group organizer, Agnes Ho, Kathleen Feng, and Lindley Hanlon for their efforts in organizing the event.

Chinese New Year in the Catskill

by Carolyn Hansen

Golden ornaments, highlighted with red, hung from ceilings above the old farmhouse floor and framed windows showing snow-covered grounds. Happy guests clustered inside, each choosing a unique Chinese-style hand-painted card to which was added their Chinese name.

Photos of Shifu, of retreats and ceremonies, sitting with the Dalai Lama and with Thich Nhat Hanh matted on red and yellow were placed above the tables of food and beverages. Tablecloths, napkins and plates in red, yellow and floral designs and crepe paper of red and yellow finished the cheerful decorations. Chinese sweets were placed next to Western sweets. Salty snacks and a large fresh vegetable platter also attracted the guests who enjoyed gold colored fruit punch.

Young children with sparkling barrettes, mingled with town officials and friends. Government officials from the Town of Shawangunk, including the Town Supervisor, Town Clerk, Superintendent of Highways and two members of the Town Council attended along with the Pine Bush Postmaster, a woman. Most guests brought spouses, friends and children. The Main Contractor on the renovations of the Dharma Drum Retreat Center, and the construction supervisor who assists her, as well as owners of some of the companies helping with construction or maintenance also came. With them were old friends and new from our neighbors on Quannacut Road and nearby towns.

After all gathered, Retreat Center Director, Carolyn Hansen, invited the Town Supervisor to speak. He expressed his and the town's good will towards the Dharma Drum Mountain Buddhist Association and the Dharma Drum Retreat Center. Carolyn Pu Sa, then introduced the Shawangunk volunteers. Guo Zhen Pu Sa, sat by a lovely display of brushes. She added the calligraphy of a Chinese name to each hand painted card chosen by a guest from the lovely selection she prepared in advance. Shlomo Shafir from Israel and Ryszard Hutt from Poland were also acknowledged. From Queens, Jeffery Kung came for the day.
She then introduced the Abbott, Guo yuan Fa Shi, who gave a thoughtful and warm welcome address. Next, the guests watched a new English language video of Shifu's work in North America.

Athletic brothers, Christopher and Donald Chuang displayed amazing skill with Chinese Yo Yo's. Beautiful sisters, Mindie and Cindie Wu gracefully preformed a Chinese fan dance. The children were warmly applauded as was Mr. Jau fang Wu

who drove two hours each way that day to bring them from Connecticut to the Retreat Center.

Guests mingling after the performances received red envelopes containing Shifu's New Year's advice in golden calligraphy on a red card with an English translation:

"Be down to earth,
With a broad mind.
Work in a balanced way,
With complete understanding."

As the party was winding down, the editor of a near-by newspaper, took pictures for an article about the fete.

Smiling guests, with hand painted cards and red envelopes in their pockets went home in a white winter world, later sending warm thank-you cards to let us know this had been a special day.

Special Thanks to the Chinese New Year Volunteers

Main Facilitator: Guo-shen Fa Shi
Event coordinator: Sylvie Sun
Kitchen facilitator: Guo-huan
Kitchen coordinator: Judy Chen
Receptionist coordinator (for Westeners): Anselma Rodriguez
(For Chinese): Wendy Cheng & Lee Shu-Jen
Publication coordinator: Guo-chung
Entertainment coordinator: Jane Huang
Art Design: Li Si Hey & Susana Huang
Filming: Kevin Hsieh & Li Ping
Audio: Ho Chia Ching
Publicity & PR: Olivia Li, Estelle and Lindley Hanlon
Child Care: Chang Hwa Tai
Cleaning: Jer Chang Chow
Computer support: Alice Chen
Treasurer: Zhang Jie
Accounting: Judy Chou
MC: Paul Li & Lindley Hanlon
Traffic: John Huang & Chieu-hwa
Medical: Hoo Bo Gee
Facility set up: David Ngo

Guo-Yuan Fa Shi on Channel 13

On January 28, Guo-yuan Fa Shi was invited to Channel 13, in New York, for an interview. Channel 13 is a well-known station of the Public Broadcasting Service in America, specializing in the production and broadcast of educational, cultural and socially enriching programs.

The programs aired on Channel 13 are commonly used by hundreds of other public broadcast stations in the U.S. and in various academic institutions. The program involving Guo-yuan Fa Shi was a joint venture of PBS with the New York Museum of Natural History, focusing on the question of "how did the universe begin?" Various religious organizations' representatives were invited to speak on this topic from their own points of view.

Guo-yuan Fa Shi explained that Buddha taught us not to vainly pursue the answer to moot questions like "Where did the earth and human kind come from?" Human kind is already too immersed in vexation and suffering for us to focus on pursuing such a meaningless metaphysical question. He also gave a supporting example from the sutras: "If a person got hit by an arrow, what that person should do first is remove the arrow and cure the wound, instead of asking obtuse questions like 'where did the arrow come from?' or 'why was the arrow shot my way?'

He also stated that the origin of the earth and humankind is circuitous, there being neither a starting nor an ending point. Buddhism mainly is to teach people how to solve their own problems and other people's as well, and avoids obsession about metaphysical questions.

After the taping, many people found that Cuo-yuan Fa Shi's witty and eloquent explanation had succinctly delivered Buddhism's point of view. Channel 13 set the broadcast date for the program near the end of April, 2000.

Four Awards in the Dharma Training Program

On December 19th, 1999, Master Sheng Yen presented four of his students with Certificates of Completion for Part One of the Assistant Meditation Instructor Training Program: David Berman has been a student of Shifu's since 1994. He has been a practitioner of Kung Fu since 1980, and a teacher of Kung Fu for the past 10 years. Lindley Hanlon has been a student of Shifu's since 1995; she is a professor of film at Brooklyn College. Nancy Makso has studied with Shifu since 1978, and has served as Chan Center secretary for the past 20 years. She teaches English at Dolam Middle School in Stamford, Connecticut, and has a 20 year old daughter. Buffe Laffey first started studying with Shifu in 1975, and was one of the founding editors of the Chan Magazine. She has been a Human Factors Engineer in software design for the past ten years. These students earned their certificates by presenting topics of the Beginner's Meditation Class in front of their peers and Guo-yuan Fa Shi, the program advisor, and by passing a written exam on the material. Lindley Hanlon and David

Berman already have had experience teaching the Beginner's Meditation Workshop during the past year. The four students continue with Part Two of the apprenticeship, during which, they will gain further experience as instructors of beginning meditation, and will be trained to assist with timekeeping and monitor duties at retreats.

Retreat Center in the Press

In the March 15th issue of the Upstate paper, the Ellenville Press, the Dharma Drum Retreat Center was featured in an article. The article spoke of the Chinese New Year Celebration that was held at the Retreat Center earlier this year. It also gave a brief but, interesting biography of Master Sheng Yen and Carolyn Hansen, the executive director of the Retreat Center. It seems we are a hit with the neighbors in Shawangunk.