



Four Sincerities: Advocacy for Benefiting

Others:

Sincerely feel grateful for being able to develop.

Sincerely feel thankful for being given a chance.

Sincerely transform oneself with Buddhist teachings.

Sincerely move others with one's behavior.

Chan Master Sheng Yen

<p>Song of Mind of Niu-t'ou Fa-jung Commentary on a seventh-century poem expressing the Chan understanding of mind. This article is the 32nd from a series of lectures given during retreats at the Chan Center in Elmhurst, New York. These talks were given on November 30th, 1987 and were edited by Chris Marano.</p>	<p>Commentary by Master Sheng Yen</p>	<p>3</p>
<p>Shifu Visits Throssel Hole In July 2000, during his fourth visit to the United Kingdom, Master Sheng Yen spent two nights at Throssel Hole Buddhist Abbey in Hexham, where forty-five monastics reside under the leadership of Abbot Rev. Master Daishin Morgan of the Serene Reflection Meditation Tradition of Soto Zen. This is the text of the first two question and answer sessions Shifu held with the Throssel Hole sangha. The session was translated live by Ming-yee Wang, and edited by David Berman.</p>	<p>Master Sheng Yen</p>	<p>9</p>

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

Commentary by Master Sheng Yen

This article is the 32nd from a series of lectures given during retreats at the Chan Center in Elmhurst, New York. These talks were given on May 28th and 29th, 1988 and were edited by Chris Marano.

The wisdom of sravakas and pratyekabuddhas

Cannot explain it.

These verses claim that the wisdom derived from the Chan experience far surpasses that of sravakas and pratyekabuddhas. Sravaka translates literally as "hearer," and originally referred to students of the Buddha. According to Mahayana Buddhism, however, sravakas refers to students of Buddhism who seek personal enlightenment through insights gained from penetrating the Four Noble Truths. Their goal is to enter nirvana and leave forever the cycle of samsara. In this sense, sravakas are akin to arhats. Pratyekabuddha translates literally as "solitary enlightened one." It is a term describing one who has attained enlightenment on one's own and only for oneself. Such beings have attained a higher level of sainthood than arhats or sravakas, but they have not yet attained the complete enlightenment of a Buddha. Pratyekabuddha also describes beings who have attained enlightenment through an understanding of the Twelve Links of Conditioned Arising, but who do not live in a world where Buddhadharma exists. In other words, they discovered enlightenment completely on their own.

In mentioning sravakas and pratyekabuddhas, the author is referring to Hinayana Buddhism. Literally speaking, Hinayana means "lesser vehicle" and Mahayana means "greater vehicle." Originally, adherents to the Mahayana school considered the Hinayana school inferior because they claimed that Hinayana emphasizes self-liberation as the goal of practice. In contrast, Mahayana emphasizes the bodhisattva ideal of saving all sentient beings. I do not wish to debate how these two vehicles of Buddhism differ and compare, because it is not relevant to our practice. However, I must offer some background information so that I can better explain these verses.

Buddhism in general speaks of three levels of practice: precepts, samadhi and wisdom. First, following precepts is a way of practicing Buddhadharma in daily life. The purpose is to help practitioners reduce their self-centered behavior and therefore

make it easier to practice. Samadhi, or deep concentration, is the result of practicing meditation methods in a diligent manner. In cultivating the mind so that it can easily enter and maintain deep levels of samadhi, one's mind and being will eventually be transformed, so that, ultimately, wisdom will be revealed.

Both Hinayana and Mahayana Buddhism agree that these three levels of practice are a natural progression that one experiences when walking the Buddha Path. Chan (which is a Mahayanist school), however, claims that through diligent practice, one can jump directly from the level of precepts to the experience of wisdom. In fact, this is the goal of *gong'an* and *huatou* practice. Therefore, though methods used by different schools of Buddhism may appear to be identical, the way in which the methods are used, or the purpose for which they are used, may differ.

For instance, the method of counting breaths is commonly used by both Hinayana and Mahayana practitioners. It is considered one of the five original methods for halting the mind. Counting breaths is an excellent method for calming and stabilizing the mind and body and for reducing wandering thoughts. According to Hinayana philosophy, however, counting breaths is not a powerful enough method for one to enter samadhi, let alone reveal wisdom. After practicing one of the five methods for halting the mind, one must then practice more advanced methods and attain three deeper levels of absorption before entering samadhi.

Why, then, do I advocate counting breaths as a method of practice? First, because it is an excellent method for concentrating the mind. Second, the purpose of Chan practice is not to enter samadhi, but to experience wisdom directly. According to Hinayana philosophy, wisdom must follow samadhi, but Chan teaches otherwise.

In Chan practice, one still counts breaths in order to become more concentrated, but when one's mind is keenly aware and free of most wandering thoughts, one is then in a better position to make good use of a *gong'an* or *huatou* to give rise to a "great mass of doubt." Further, if this mass of doubt eventually breaks apart, what is revealed is wisdom. Thus, one is able to experience wisdom without entering samadhi.

Today, however, is the first day of a seven-day retreat, so it is highly unlikely that any of you will reach this level of practice tonight. In fact, it is rare for one to reach it at all, even after several intensive retreats. There should be no thoughts in your mind of practicing with the intention of laying the groundwork to use a *huatou* so that you may

eventually give rise to and break apart a mass of doubt. Thinking such thoughts will only serve to obstruct your practice. Initially, the purpose of every method is to gather your attention so that you can better control your mind, that is, to make your mind calm and stable, so that it does what you want it to do and goes where you want it to go. It will no longer be wild and scattered. At that point, pain, numbness and itching will not bother you or draw your attention, and neither will passing moods, feelings or emotions.

When your mind is under your control, that is the time when *gong'an* and *huatou* can be of good use. *Gong'an* are stories about enlightenment experiences of past masters and patriarchs, or encounters between a master and a disciple. A *huatou* is typically a single phrase, such as "Who am I?" The practitioner's job is to investigate the meaning of the particular *gong'an* or *huatou*. In terms of *huatou* practice, investigation means trying to find the answer to the question posed. However, there are certain restrictions. One is not allowed to use one's reason or rely upon Buddhist concepts. Usually, one is told to ignore whatever arises in the mind, for it will not be the answer. One just continues to ask the question in a concentrated, earnest manner. Eventually, doubt will rise, and it will grow until it becomes an all-encompassing mass of doubt. Typically, a practitioner immersed in a great ball of doubt is oblivious to everything but the *huatou*.

Hopefully, at some point, the mass of doubt will explode, but this does not always happen. Sometimes, one loses energy and the doubt subsides. Investigating a *huatou* is like inflating a balloon. The more air you blow into a balloon, the bigger it becomes, just as doubt will increase with the amount of concentration energy you apply to the *huatou*. The hope is to pop the balloon. Sometimes, however, the balloon springs a leak and all the air flows out. In the same way, sometimes it is too difficult to maintain the concentrated energy required investigating the *huatou*, and the doubt subsides.

Some people may experience a breakthrough in one seven-day retreat. Others work on *huatou* for years before giving rise to the doubt sensation. Chan master Lai-guo [SIC??] worked on a single *huatou* for years. He was a monk who spent most of his time traveling from one place to another. Every morning, he would pack a few provisions in a bag and walk from place to place. If he came upon a monastery, he would enter and stay for a day or two before moving on. If he found no shelter, he would sit under a tree. If he was hungry and encountered people, he would ask for food. If he did not meet anyone, it did not matter. The only thing that remained constant in Lai-guo's life was his dedication to investigating the *huatou*. His

indifference to the rest of his life existed because he was always immersed in a mass of doubt. No matter where he went or what he did, the doubt surrounded him. This went on for years. Then, one day, when he took the bag off his shoulder in order to rest, his mass of doubt broke and he had a deep enlightenment experience.

Some people are in a rush and begin to investigate a *huatou* before their minds are concentrated. Using the *huatou* in this manner will not generate doubt. Repeating the *huatou* in this case is more like reciting a mantra or counting one's breath. In such cases, it would be better to count breaths or recite the Buddha's name. Repeating a *huatou* like a mantra is dry and meaningless. In the beginning stages, when one's goal is to concentrate the mind, counting breaths is a much more efficient method than investigating a *huatou*. Hence, the purpose for counting breaths in Chan practice is this: to concentrate the mind so that it can better investigate *huatou*, in the hope that, eventually, the mind will give rise to and break apart doubt so that wisdom may manifest.

There is another point of distinction between the attainment of sravakas and pratyekabuddhas and that of enlightened beings who follow the path of Chan. When one enters samadhi -- even samadhi that gives rise to wisdom -- one cannot and does not interact with others. Such beings harm no one, but they also help no one. On the other hand, enlightened Chan practitioners, although vexationless, still interact with and help others. Mahayana sutras state that enlightenment which comes to those who have only self-liberation in mind is incomparable to the enlightenment that comes to those who practice for the sake of sentient beings. This is the Bodhisatva Path. It is the path that all of you on this Chan retreat have chosen.

***Actually there is not a single thing;
Only wonderful wisdom exists.***

These two lines of verse seem to contradict one another. First, the song says that nothing exists; and in the next line it says that wonderful wisdom exists. How can this be? If nothing exists, then wisdom must not exist as well. On the other hand, if wisdom exists, then it refutes the notion that nothing exists. Obviously, there is more to it than meets the eye.

According to Mahayana Buddhadharma, there are three kinds, or levels, of non-existence. The first is that which ordinary sentient beings perceive, the second is that which enlightened arhats and pratyekabuddhas (those who follow the Hinayana

path) perceive, and the third is that which enlightened bodhisattvas (those who follow the Mahayana path) perceive.

Actually, for ordinary sentient beings, non-existence is a relative term used to compare that which does not exist to that which does exist. It is a purely conceptual construct, because ordinary sentient beings have never directly experienced non-existence. A poor man may claim that money does not exist for him, but if his thoughts dwell on the subject of money, then money does exist in his mind. Hence, the non-existence of ordinary sentient beings is a false non-existence. It is as illusory as everything else they perceive to be real.

The non-existence that Hinayana practitioners experience when they attain arhatship, however, is absolute. At this stage, there are no more vexations or attachments. They have entered nirvana and will not return to the samsaric world to help others. Therefore, for arhats, wonderful wisdom also does not exist. This is impossible for us to truly comprehend because we perceive things only from the point of view of ordinary sentient beings. We see practitioners on the Hinayana path penetrating deeper and deeper levels of samadhi until they attain arhatship and enter nirvana. We perceive it to be a karmic consequence of their intentions and actions. Arhats who have entered nirvana, however, do not perceive it as such. For those who enter nirvana, there is no longer space, time, vexations, or attachments.

The non-existence that the verses speak of refers to what bodhisattvas perceive. Bodhisattvas have nothing in their minds -- no attachments, no vexations, no ideas that there are sentient beings to save or bodhisattvas to save them -- yet they remain in the world of samsara in order to help sentient beings. Wonderful wisdom is precisely the bodhisattvas' natural and spontaneous responses to the needs of sentient beings. This wisdom is described as being wonderful because it manifests in whatever form is necessary to accommodate the innumerable diverse needs of countless sentient beings.

How do these profound ideas relate to our practice? To make good use of this retreat, it is important that you practice as if nothing else exists except your method. The outside world does not exist. Others around you do not exist. There is no such thing as pain, sleepiness, or boredom. There is no past, no future, no enlightenment. There is not even you. All that exists -- and this too is provisional -- is the method of practice. Ignore everything else.

If you think you have failed today in your attempts to clear your mind of wandering thoughts, forget about it. It does not exist. If you think you have sat well today, forget about it. It does not exist either. If you can let go of everything except the method, including yourself, then I guarantee you will experience enlightenment. But I would not dwell on that idea either. While you are practicing, enlightenment should not exist. Once you are enlightened, enlightenment will also not exist. Therefore, ignore everything, including what I just said.

Shifu Visits Throssel Hole

On June 28th, 2000, Master Sheng Yen made his fourth visit to the United Kingdom. He spent the first day visiting Sharpham College, and then went on to Gaia House where he led a seven-day retreat attended by sixty practitioners. Shifu concluded his trip to Britain by spending two nights at Throssel Hole Buddhist Abbey in Hexham, where forty-five monastics reside under the leadership of Abbott Rev. Master Daishin Morgan of the Serene Reflection Meditation Tradition of Soto Zen. The following is the text of the first of two question and answer sessions Shifu held with the Throssel Hole sangha. The session was translated live by Ming-yee Wang, and edited by David Berman. (The text of the second session will be published in a future issue of Chan Magazine.)

Q: Please briefly describe your practice.

Shi-fu: There is no practice. There may be people interested in me, but I have no interest in myself. Practice itself is a process.

I became a novice monk at very young age in mainland China. I started practice at that time, but did not have many experiences to talk about, such as seeing self-nature or anything of that sort. After I moved to Taiwan, I was in the Army for a few years. (At that time, it was very difficult to leave the Army.) Although I was in the Army, I was anxious to return to monkhood. Whenever there was an opportunity, I visited monasteries, and I maintained my practice. Then, I met my master in the Linji sect. It was that encounter that led me to the right path. After obtaining permission to leave the Army, I re-entered the monastery and obtained full ordination. I then spent six years in solitary retreat in the mountains. Those six years were very important to me. I spent most of the time meditating, prostrating, reading scriptures and writing. Prostration was especially important for me during those six years of solitary retreat. Even though I was in the mountains, the physical space was very limited. The room was only about one-third the size of this room, but it seemed spacious to me. Through meditation, prostration and reading scriptures, I met with Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and Arhats all the time, and my life was very rich and solid. Due to the intensity of practice, I had numerous experiences during those years; they were occurring all the time, and thus became part of my life. So, when people asked about my progress in practice, I answered that there was not much progress. Practice, experience and progress simply became a way of life. Although I did not really spend a lot of time writing in those six years, I wrote very quickly and finished many books. Many people find it very difficult to read scriptures or to write when they are on solitary retreats, because

those activities interfere with their meditation. However, reading and writing did not bother me during my solitary retreat. I grouped reading and writing together in a certain mental partition. Whenever it was time to meditate, I closed the door to the reading and writing partition and sat solitarily without investigating the ideas in those scriptures. When it was time to read or write, I reopened the door to the reading and writing partition and allowed myself to think and investigate those ideas.

When I was practicing in the mountains, I did not give any name to my practice, but I think the method I used was in accord with Silent Illumination. It was Silent because I simply ignored all those ideas and thinking. It was Illumination because I had great clarity and was fully aware of what I was doing. After practicing for some time, Silence and Illumination can function simultaneously.

Then, I went to Japan. I went to Japan not to seek Zen Dharma, but to obtain a degree. In the past three or four hundred years in China, Buddhism was in decline. Monks and nuns had a low level of education and were looked down upon by the society. I was therefore determined to go to Japan to get a degree so that I could begin to provide more education for the Sangha. The education I sought would normally have taken a long time, but with the blessings of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, I finished both master and doctorate degrees in six years.

Since obtaining the degrees, I have spent the years making efforts in two directions: one is to spread the Dharma to both Sangha and lay people; the other is to provide education for the Sangha. I started by establishing a Buddhist research institute for people holding bachelor degrees. Now, I am starting a university. John Crook has participated in both efforts. He has assisted me in spreading the Dharma in England, and has also participated in several conferences held by the research institute. He has also been instrumental in arranging my trips to England, including this one.

The organization that I established is called Dharma Drum Mountain. Currently, there are more than 100 left-home Sangha members. Although I have been teaching Chan for more than 20 years, this organization was only established about 10 years ago, and has grown very quickly. Recognizing that I am now quite elderly, I am making preparations for other people to take over this mission.

Q: You just mentioned that Silence and Illumination could be practiced simultaneously. Is it like taking refuge in Buddha?

Shi-fu: What do you mean by taking refuge in Buddha?

Q: Taking refuge in Buddha to me means the Chan way of living.

Shi-fu: Do you mean that other than sitting meditation, no matter what you do in your daily life, in walking, talking to people, doing your work, you also maintain your meditation practice? Is this what you mean by taking refuge in Buddha?

Q: Yes.

Shi-fu: According to Chinese Chan (which was later transmitted to Japan and Korea, so the teachings should be no different), practice should not be separated from living, and living at all times should be one's practice. So, what does Silent Illumination mean? Silent means completely ignoring wandering thought. Wandering thoughts are thoughts that are unrelated to what you are doing at this moment. Illumination means complete clarity on what you are doing at this moment. So, if one can maintain Silent Illumination all the time, one will experience peace, tranquility, openness and brightness. There will be very little disturbance in one's emotion. Even if one encounters disturbance, one can easily return to Illumination.

Of course, when you are doing formal sitting meditation, there should be a method that you can apply. In the Japanese tradition, one may be using "Shikantaza", full awareness that your body is sitting. If you maintain full awareness of your body and ignore wandering thoughts, you will very easily get into the practice of Silent Illumination. Similarly, people practicing Vipassana, especially practicing the contemplation of sensation, can connect their method to Silent Illumination. However, the objective of Silent Illumination practice is not to enter the four sequential levels of Samadhi. When you enter Samadhi, you achieve Silence, but not Illumination.

Q: In Chan, we talk about enlightenment a lot. What is enlightenment?

Shi-fu: Good question. Due to time constraints, I will provide a brief answer for a very difficult question. Enlightenment is seeing Nature. What is Nature, and with what do we see it? First, we have to talk about wisdom, in the Dharma sense. Wisdom manifests when self-centeredness completely severs. What is wisdom? Wisdom is basically a selfless attitude. That is, whatever you encounter, you do not relate to it based on "self" or anything that is related to "self". This "self" can mean an individual self, or a group of selves, or the universe as a total self. When one has no attachment to this notion of "self", one's attitude in dealing with any situation is called wisdom.

When wisdom manifests, the Nature is seen. What is Nature? Some called it Self-Nature, Buddha-Nature, or the Nature of Emptiness. When one thinks of seeing Buddha-Nature, one may think that there is something concrete to be seen, but it is rather the case that seeing Buddha-Nature entails realizing the conditional arising of whatever there is to be seen.

When you practice, you encounter all kinds of experiences, physical and mental. For example, you may feel like you are in the state of unity; you feel like you have completely unified with the universe. This can be described as phenomenal unification or the state of one-mind. There are also other kinds of phenomena, like the manifestation of supernormal powers. One such phenomenon is the sudden manifestation of great intelligence. You may suddenly understand Sutras that you did not understand before, or you may learn skills very quickly and easily that were previously very difficult. These phenomena may be considered good experiences, since they enhance your confidence and faith in your practice and in the Dharma. This is not, however, genuine enlightenment. Genuine enlightenment must be in accord with the principles described by the Sixth Patriarch, Master Huineng: no form, no thought and no abiding. No thought is related to no abiding, as described in the Diamond Sutra. When the mind functions without abiding, it is called "no thought". When the mind functions and abides on certain things, it is called "having thoughts". No form means no unchanging and definite form. The Diamond Sutra also refers to these principles when it says, "Wherever there are phenomena, there is illusion". In your meditation, you may experience some of these phenomena. Insofar as they are phenomena, they are illusory.

Q: According to Master Dogen, practice and enlightenment are one. From my understanding, the practice itself is to let go; let go of everything that arises.

Shi-fu: That's right. No doubt about Master Dogen. Otherwise, Master Ju-Ching (sp?-should be pinyin) would not have transmitted the Dharma to him.

Q: How did you come up with the name "Dharma Drum" for your organization? For a drum to make sound, there must be someone striking it.

Shi-fu: Did you hear it?

Q: I can't say that I hear it.

Shi-fu: Shakyamuni Buddha said the true Dharma cannot be spoken. Any Dharma that is spoken is only an experienced teaching. I named the organization "Dharma Drum" because the term is mentioned in many Sutras. In fact, there is a Sutra called the "Great Dharma Drum Sutra". The Lotus Sutra and the Avatamsaka Sutra use many terms to describe the Buddha spreading the Dharma, including "striking the Dharma drum" and "dropping Dharma rain". All these are analogies for spreading the Dharma. They remind sentient beings that they are still in delusion and need the Dharma to free themselves from suffering.

You are very honest by saying that you did not hear it.

Q: I have been a left-home person for some years, but my thoughts about monkhood are changing constantly. I still cannot find a true and good reason for continuing as a left-home person. What is the true objective of monkhood?

Shi-fu: It is quite normal that after one becomes a monk, one's perceptions about being a monk change over time. You can try to imagine the life of a monk, but things become very different after you actually become a monk. Before your ordination, you may think that you have learned enough about monkhood by talking to people, but different people have different mental states, and hence experience monkhood differently. Also, after one becomes a monk, one is constantly practicing and the mental state matures over time. Therefore, one will naturally have different thoughts, reflections and perceptions of monkhood. There are, however, some basic reasons, in principle, for one to maintain one's status as a monk. They are Bodhichitta (also called Bodhi-Mind) and Renunciation. Bodhichitta here means offering one's life for renunciation. And renunciation, for monks, primarily means the lifestyle of solitude. A person who takes up the Bodhichitta way of life is one who renounces civil life and offers his life in gratitude to the three Jewels.

Some people have the misunderstanding that once they leave home, they will be free from vexations and immediately attain liberation. But even in the Theravada tradition, once you attain the first level of Sainthood, you still have to go through seven lifetimes to attain liberation. Even at the second level of Sainthood, there are still three more lifetimes to go, to say nothing of the fact that there is no guarantee you will attain any level of Sainthood in this lifetime, even if you leave home. In the Mahayana tradition, we talk about enlightenment, and indeed, enlightenment is very important on one's path of practice. That does not mean, however, that your monkhood is meaningless if you don't attain enlightenment. Your decision to take monkhood should not be

confused with your goal to attain enlightenment. As long as you hold on to the two basic principles, Bodhichitta and Renunciation, your determination as a monk will remain firm, no matter what situation you encounter, and with such determination, you will definitely be liberated from your vexations.

Q: Since you have taught regularly in both the East and the West, what are the differences between Easterners and Westerners in terms of practice? As Westerners, in what areas should we pay more attention?

Shi-fu: It is difficult to say how Easterners differ from Westerners. After all, we are all human beings. Especially in this information age, with the advantage of telecommunication, as soon as ideas come up in the West, those in the East catch up with them. Therefore, I really don't see that there is anything Westerners should pay more attention to. However, it is my observation that Westerners are usually more diligent in practice.

There is currently the problem in Western religions, such as Catholicism, that fewer and fewer people are willing to enter monastic life, and this tendency has now appeared in the East as well. My organization is relatively new, and in Taiwan, there is a lot of enthusiasm for such newer organizations. But older organizations within Chinese Buddhism have great difficulty finding people who want to leave home. I am quite impressed by seeing so many people in this monastery. One thing I would like to caution you about is that you should not lose touch with the society. Otherwise, twenty or thirty years from now, this group will have become very old-fashioned. Old monastics will die, and young people will not want to join. Then, this group will disappear. So, please pay attention to this.

Q: It appears to me that listening is a real problem. We listen to other people talk and we listen to the Dharma, but with our differences in cultural background and experience, we tend not to listen to the true meanings. In this Center, we always say that when Wisdom manifests, all obstacles sever. Can you elaborate more on this?

Shi-fu: You are quite right. When Wisdom manifests, all obstacles sever. But what is Wisdom? As I previously said, it is the attitude of selflessness. But that alone is not enough. In dealing with various situations, you need various tools, information and experience. For example, if your car breaks down on the road, you can't simply say that all I need is Wisdom and I will have no obstacle. You will still need to know how to fix the car. People need all kinds of skills, information and experience to deal with

various situations. When I was touring this Monastery, I found that many people here are very skillful in different areas. That is very good. So, when we say that when wisdom manifests, all obstacles sever, we mean that when one encounters a situation, one will learn how to deal with the situation without any vexation in one's mind. As such, there will be no obstacle.

This is why I just mentioned that we should not lose touch with the society. You may think that it is good to get away from the vexations and obstacles in the outside world, but when you do so, you also lose touch with resources that the society might provide. You also limit your capacity to assist sentient beings, and you therefore limit the development of your own Bodhichitta.

Q: As people, we are always limited by our physical bodies, as well as by culture, education and experience. It is therefore really hard to see or listen to the true meanings. Everything we perceive is already colored by various existing conditions. How can we bypass these conditions and see or hear the true meanings?

Shi-fu: That is very difficult. You can only do so after you see the True Nature in a very thorough manner. Only then can you truly perceive without "self" or conditions interfering. Before you see the True Nature, you must rely on the fundamental principles taught by the Buddha, such as conditional origination and karma. You can handle situations by using these principles.

Words of Blessing for the Chinese New Year

Master Jen Chun

Presented on January 28, 2001, and translated by Wei-Wu Tan

Receiving blessings, we reflect on what we receive, and respectfully transfer the blessings.

Learning of the wisdom bequeathed by the Buddha, we humbly put it into practice.

The Starting Point of Living Fully as a Human Being:

With Great effort [a], we strive to relinquish the view of self. With the view of self relinquished, obstacles will cease [b], and inner peace will manifest freely.

[a] An unrestrained self wreaks havoc with a harsh temperament. A well-cultivated one is virtuous, kind, tender, and is able to embrace both friends and enemies.

[b] If we be of service and be of refuge to each other, attainment will be reached by all. Live according to this principle and look to the Buddha for the example of true equality.

The starting point of the Cultivation of Buddhadharma"

Expand our mental capacity [a] and devote ourselves completely to the service of others. When one lives in true equanimity, one accords with the Dharma fully [b]. One's outward action will then be pure [c] and swift [d].

[a] Bodhisattvas possess great love and infinite mental capacity; vast and deep, bright and clear, like the ocean, the sun and the great void.

[b] The light of the Dharma shines on everlastingly. When one develops a great depth in the experience of the Dharma, one's power will be secure and fulfilling, manifesting in one's action, speech, and mind.

[c] Immune to the three poisons, life and death are no longer burdensome. The three virtuous actions established, both inside and outside are undeviating.

[d] Give rise to the vow of being ready to serve at all time. Always aspire to be the first to volunteer!

2000 Bodhisattva Precepts Training

A. M., Kanagawa, Japan

After having just received the Summer 2000 Chan Magazine and read the wonderful reports about the Bodhisattva Precepts, I felt that I also needed to write about the experience. It has been almost five months since the ceremony, but the seed that was planted during that week continues to grow.

I began meditating at the age of fifteen. At the time, meditating just felt right, and although I was a teenager, who probably would have slept the extra half-hour every morning, I am now very grateful for having begun practice at such an early age. When I began university and was on my own, I found it difficult to maintain my sitting practice - it was something I had done with my parents. Sleeping in was easy, and slowly I think I began to forget about practice, or at least about meditating. I had attended several Zen Sesshins in my late teens, and although they were mostly positive experiences, they didn't do much to deepen my meditation or my practice in daily life.

After very unfortunate circumstances, my parents and I left the Zen Center. Being deeply hurt by what had happened, I lost faith in the Dharma - it was too painful. I fell into a rut and stayed there for almost four years. Fortunately, a bodhisattva led me to one of Shifu's retreats in New York. After much encouragement and persuasiveness, my dad talked me into going to a seven-day retreat with Shifu. Attending this retreat propelled me out of another unfortunate, consuming situation, and for this I am truly grateful. It also helped me to let go of the past experiences that had caused me to lose faith.

More years passed and I sat from time to time, mostly when I was with my parents; I rarely meditated alone. I always felt I needed to walk the path of the Dharma, but I never really put it into practice. I guess I was just going through the motions. Four years after having attended my first retreat with Shifu I went to the Bodhisattva Precepts transmission, and this was a week that truly changed my life.

I had wanted to attend the usual seven-day retreat at the end of June, but found out that there would be some kind of precept ceremony instead. Not knowing what it would be, I went anyway. This was the first time I had gone to a retreat on my own initiative, without any encouragement from my dad. Arriving at the Retreat Center, I felt like I had come home after a long and empty journey. The first two days I had the usual resistance and negative thoughts, "Why am I here? This is crazy...", but I tried

to keep in mind that I had come of my own free will and should make the most of every moment. I became very upset when I found out that we would have to wear robes - it brought back many bad feelings about the last Zen Centre I had attended. After a few tears I decided, "It's just a robe, and I am here, so whatever happened in the past is in the past. I should just let it go." I put on the robe and never thought about it again.

As the week progressed, we learned about the meaning of the precepts and practiced for the ceremony. The repentance ceremony every evening was heartfelt and very moving, and it allowed me to release a lot of anger that I think I have been carrying with me for lifetimes. I felt my faith was beginning to be renewed. Shifu's talks about the precepts were very helpful; I started to realize things about myself, and have since tried diligently to let go of my vexations. An energy began to generate inside of me, something that I have never known before. It was as though I had finally awoken from a long sleep.

After preparing all week for this one morning, the day finally came. The ceremony was extremely beautiful and moving. When we summoned the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas into the Chan Hall the energy was so strong - I could feel it entering me, and a seed truly was planted! Shifu's talk at the end of the ceremony was very humbling moving as well.

Having attended this week with my parents made it all the more meaningful for me. I am so grateful for the causes and conditions that brought me to the Chan Center, and for the good fortune to have been able to take the Bodhisattva Precepts from Shifu, and with my parents.

Usually after a retreat I have difficulty adjusting back to daily life; I often feel that my whole life has been thrown out of whack. This time was no different. Although I was meditating more than before, I was also heading down a dark road. I became involved in a destructive relationship, and tried to avoid the decisions that lay before me. Socializing and partying, I used up and wasted all the good energy that had been generated during the Precept week. This lasted for a little over a month. The difference was that this time I got out of the rut much more quickly than I had before - I pulled myself out of the negative situation and made the decisions necessary for my future. I did go through a little bit of depression afterwards, but turning to the Dharma helped me deal with the situation and move forward.

Now I am living in Japan; I have been here almost three months. I meditate on a regular basis and on Sundays I wear my Bodhisattva scarf and practice prostrations and meditation. I often find myself reciting the mantra Shifu taught us, "I vow to refrain from all wrongdoing, I vow to do all good, I vow to deliver innumerable sentient beings," and I find this particularly helpful. I also find that I think differently after this experience - I make a concerted effort to be more kind and compassionate to others. The Bodhisattva Precepts have changed my life forever and instilled in me a sense of faith so strong that I will continue to practice until I reach Buddhahood. It was an experience I will never forget.

I would like to thank Shifu for his astounding efforts putting together and writing such a wonderful ceremony and for transmitting the Bodhisattva Precepts. Thank you, all the monastics, especially those of you who came all the way from Taiwan. Thank you, all the participants, for working so hard during the week and making the ceremony so heartfelt and meaningful. And a very special and heartfelt thank you to my parents, who have generated so many of the causes and conditions that have brought the Dharma into my life, and that allow us to continue to practice together.



Computer Haiku

Pia Giammasi

With searching comes loss
And the presence of absence:
"My Novel" not found.

A file that big?
It might have been very useful.
But now it's gone.

First snow, then silence.
This thousand dollar screen dies
So beautifully.



The Four Great Vows, a Sunday Talk by Guo Xiang Fa Shi

Charlett Mansfield

Guo Xiang Fa Shi, a resident nun of Nung Chan Monastery in Taiwan and one of Shi-fu's translators, has been visiting the Chan Center in Elmhurst, New York for the past few months. On Sunday, January 7, 2001 she gave a talk on the Four Great Vows, vows which are common to all Mahayana Buddhists:

- 1. I vow to deliver innumerable sentient beings.**
- 2. I vow to cut off endless vexations**
- 3. I vow to master limitless approaches to dharma**
- 4. I vow to attain supreme buddhahood**

Guo Xiang Fa-shi reminded us that it is primarily vexation that distracts us from our concern for others and causes us to refocus on our concern for ourselves. She explained that even at times when we are victims of tragedy, perhaps even at the cost of our own lives, we can nevertheless be of service to others. In such circumstances, Guo Xiang Fa-shi described not only the victim as a Bodhisattva, but the tragedy itself as a Bodhisattva as well. In explaining why this is the case, she offered as an example the loss of lives in the recent earthquake in Taiwan. She described both the casualties and the earthquake itself as Bodhisattvas, since the combined effect has been to cause the authorities to improve the future safety of buildings and to cause individuals to confront the impermanence of life.

Guo Xiang Fa-shi emphasized the importance of cultivating the mind of compassion and enlisting its aid in subduing aversion. She explained that hatred gives rise to a multitude of karmic obstructions and indeed burns down an entire forest of merit. Through cultivating compassion we can avoid giving rise to hateful thoughts which obstruct our spiritual progress.

She also explained that while the great strong attachments to power, fame, knowledge and wealth can make positive contributions towards helping others, a self-centered point of view will make these attachments problematic. Guo Xiang Fa-shi offered an example through citing a survey of suicide rates of three American racial groups for both men and women: Caucasian, Asian and African. The highest rate was among older Caucasian males, perhaps attributed to the loss of power and influence that accompanies the onset of old age. Through our early practice of detachment and service to others we will find ourselves prepared for the relinquishment of external attachments.

Guo Xiang Fa-shi suggested that we keep in mind that generosity also extends to giving the gift of fearlessness to those around us. Kind words of encouragement, sympathy and concern can have a longer lasting positive influence than we might ever suspect, such words may help an individual to find their inner courage and determination in difficult times, and we should therefore be generous with our strength.

Guo Xiang Fa-shi has returned to Taiwan and will come back to New York in May, when she will continue her talk on the Four Great Vows.

Musicians Learn to Meditate

Lindley Hanlon, who completed Part One of the Meditation Instructors Training Program in December, 1999, has been teaching meditation to students at the Manhattan School of Music for the last two semesters. In the classes, Lindley likens the mind to a musical instrument, which requires tuning and practice to perform well. She emphasizes relaxation, to reduce the tension and stress of musical performance and competition, and concentration, to keep the mind on the music and free from internal thoughts and judgments.

The classes, and subsequent performances, are part of a doctoral study of the effects of meditation on musical performance, which Joanne Chang is completing at Columbia University's Teachers' College.

In a wonderful concert on December 9, 2000 the students tested their newly-acquired skills of concentration and composure. Students meditated together as a group before the concert, and practiced self-composure and direct contemplation backstage before playing. Joanne monitored heart rates and other indicators before and after meditation, and the performance, to collect scientific data for her study. In their comments after the concert, students mentioned that Lindley's emphasis on feeling united with the audience, and on thinking of their performances as priceless gifts they were offering to others, helped them overcome their feelings of separation from the audience and the resultant anxiety.

These students are already world-class performers, some having successfully competed in international competitions. The majority are piano students. Everyone is invited to attend the students' spring performance at Horace Mann Auditorium at Teacher's College on March 10, 2001 at 6:00pm, where twenty top-ranked musicians will play some of the great masterpieces of musical literature.

NEWS

New Year's Celebration at the Dharma Drum Retreat Center

"Every day is a good day, and every year a fulfilling year"

So begins the New Year's greeting from the Dharma Drum Retreat Center in Pine Bush.

January 27, 2001 DDRC held a commemorative celebration, the program began with a reading of the Sutras in English, a video of worldwide activities of the Dharma Drum organization, followed by a festive buffet meal.

In addition to these wonderful programs, Abbot Guo Yuan Fa-shi offered even more important message to all the guests: "A person with a clear and concentrated mind, who is filled with wisdom and compassion," explained the Abbot. "Peace begins with oneself and spreads to others, even to the whole universe."

Guo Yuan Fa-shi let all the guests understand that DDRC promotes a kind of "Spiritual environmentalism" where individuals start by purifying their mind, filling it with gratitude, kindness, and compassion for life. "To uplift the quality of humankind and build a pure land on earth", as stated in the New Year's greeting deeply carved in every ones' mind.

Chinese New Year Celebration at the Chan Meditation Center

Chinese New Year 2001 was celebrated with an all day program of wonderful variety at the Chan Center in Elmhurst on January 28. The morning service began an hour earlier than usual with a recitation of the Heart Sutra, followed by the blessings and Dharma talk of Master Jen Chun. He reminded us that Bodhisattvas are the core members of humanity and they will always be found on the frontier of service in times of calamity or suffering.

A delicious variety of vegetarian dishes were prepared for lunch and enjoyed by all, which was followed by the afternoon program. It began with our appreciation of Master Sheng Yen's contributions to Chan Dharma. His lifetime of hard work and determination were illuminated by a video which traced his footsteps in the accomplishment of his vision. Shi-fu's commitment and service is an inspiration to us

all.

The Youth Group, under the direction of Prof. Lindley Hanlon, presented a puppet show based upon the Buddhist fable, "The Fish King's Power of Truth" with musical accompaniment on the pipa. The children, parents, and staff did a beautiful job in the construction of an ocean stage, shining fish puppets and a giant bird, which all drew the delighted applause of the audience.

This was followed by a traditional Peking Opera performance offered by a husband and wife team of gifted professionals. The excellent costumes, songs, dances, and dramatic sword display were so truly captivating to the assembly.

Alex Lesokhin performed an oboe solo with piano accompaniment by Hsu Yi-Lien, with their musical program bringing calls of "Encore, Encore" from the crowd. The Dharma Drum Mountain Choir was at their best for the next part of the musical segment and as always it was such a pleasure to hear them sing.

Finally, a hilarious comedy segment was presented by Tang Min Ru and Chou Ping, with audience participation in the show. They then led us all in a group game, tossing a ball through the crowd, ending the day with laughter and good fun.

We offer our fullest expression of thanks to all those who made this celebration of inspiration and Dharma spirit possible, a happy and prosperous New Year to all!