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Four Blessings: Advocacy for Improving Well-being

1. *Always recognize blessings: only recognizing blessings can bring contentment and only contentment can bring happiness.*
2. *Cherish blessings everywhere: cherish what one has, feel gratitude and try to repay others' kindness.*
3. *Cultivating blessings all the time: enjoying blessings means they are gradually consumed, while cultivating blessings makes one blissful as they increase.*
4. *Constantly sow the seeds of blessings: develop one's potential and encourage all to sow the seeds extensively in the field of blessings so that everyone will harvest blessings.*



Chan Master Sheng Yen

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

Commentary by Master Sheng Yen

This article is the 33rd from a series of lectures given during retreats at the Chan Center in Elmhurst, New York. These talks were given on May 30th and 31st, 1988 and were edited by Chris Marano.

***The original face is limitless;
It cannot be probed by mind.***

Whatever is known, understood, or conceived by the mind is limited. In these verses, the "mind" referred to is not the pure, undefiled mind of enlightenment; rather, it is the discriminating mind of ordinary sentient beings.

When you sit in meditation for long periods of time as you do on retreats, you are probably amazed at the amount of stored information your memory holds. As you work on your method, it is as if you are watching movies unfold in your mind. Some of these might actually be movies you have seen. One of my students said that his memory becomes so vivid during retreats that he not only recalls entire movies, but also the previews of coming attractions and the credits. He knows that it is a waste of valuable retreat time, but he confessed that he wished his memory could be that keen during daily life. Everything else that runs through your mind while you meditate - memories of past events, plans and visions for the future, fantasies - are also movies which unfold in front of your mind's eye.

It might seem amazing that you can recall so much information, but is it really that much? Can you even remember everything you thought, said and did in one twenty-four hour period? I doubt it. As the Song of Mind implies, the ordinary mind of sentient beings is limited. Imagine for a moment that you could remember everything you ever experienced in your entire life, from the moment you were born until this moment. Such a feat, if it were possible, would be considered superhuman. Yet, even that would be limited, for your mind could not remember everything you ever did in previous incarnations since beginningless time, or everything you will do into the unfathomable future. And I am only speaking about you. Could you also be aware of all phenomena of all sentient beings in all worlds from all times?

Obviously, our minds of distinction are far too limited to comprehend even the tiniest fraction of the myriad phenomena that have existed, do

exist, and will exist in the infinite worlds of the universe, or what one might call totality. This totality is precisely the "original face" that the song mentions. The original face is true reality, free of attachments, discriminations and vexations. The totality of the original face includes all times, all space, and all phenomena. However, there is no specific place or time that one can point to and say, "There is the original face."

The limitlessness of the original face is difficult to comprehend. Everything we know - no matter how fleeting or enduring - exists in a particular location and for duration of time. For example, can we say the Chan Center houses the original face? Not too long ago, the Chan Center was a five-and-dime store. Before that, it might have been a house or a farm or a field. Twenty thousand years ago it may have been under several hundred feet of glacial ice, and before that, it might have been part of a great sea. Who can say how long this building will remain the Chan Center? The old center across the street is now a Seventh-day Adventist church. Perhaps the Chan Center will close down when I retire. I hope that it will continue under the guidance of other Sangha members, but even if it did, how long would it exist? One generation, perhaps two. Inevitably, it will become something else, or the building will fall apart or get torn down. Obviously, the Chan Center is not the home of the limitless original face.

A few days ago I was looking at recent photos someone had taken of me, and I decided I did not like them. Under a pile of papers I found photos of me that date back ten and twenty years ago. I looked better in those. Later, when I was in the bathroom, I gazed at my reflection in the mirror. Tell me, can any of these images be my original face? No, the body - physicality - is not the original face. Anything that constantly changes is not the original face.

When I traveled to China, I visited the underground palace of China's first emperor, Qin Shi Huang, which houses thousands of life-sized, terra-cotta soldiers. It is a testament to human ingenuity that this palace still stands, relatively untouched, after Twenty-two hundred years. However, the pillars that had once been solid wood had disappeared from long years of decomposition. Eventually, the soldiers will return to dust. Mountains will form and erode. Valleys will become oceans and seas will become deserts. None of these things can be considered the original face.

No one thing is the original face, yet the original face encompasses

everything. Not even the four elements - earth, fire, water and air - are the original face, because they too change. Buddhadharma says that the four elements are the medium through which sentient beings receive karmic retribution. Furthermore, our physical form could not exist without the four elements, and we could not create new karma without interacting with the four elements. Nonetheless, the physical realm is not the original face.

If the physical realm is not the original face, then perhaps the mind is. The question is, then, which mind is the original face? The Song of Mind already states that the original face cannot be probed by the mind of distinction, so obviously the ordinary mind of sentient beings is not the original face. Karma also, is not the original face because karma is forever changing. We receive karmic retribution for our past actions, and in so doing we create new karma. We do so because we cannot help it. As long as we cling to an idea of a self, then our thoughts, words and actions create karma. This has been so since before the beginning of time.

The truth is that we cannot know this original face with our minds. On the other hand, the original face can be experienced; but people who have experienced this original face cannot describe it or point to it. Enlightened beings are not tongue-tied idiots. They know how to communicate, but they also know that it is impossible to describe the original face, because the original face is not something that can be known by the mind. Obviously, if something can be described or identified, then it can be probed by the mind. I would also add that the original face cannot be known by the intuitive mind. Many people mistakenly equate the intuitive mind with that of the enlightened mind. It is not so. The intuitive mind is a kind of direct, spontaneous knowing, but it still incorporates an individual's point of view and experiences. Therefore, it still derives from a mind of discrimination, attachment and vexation. It can err and it is limited.

Hence, we practice in order to shatter all vexations and obstructions in our mind. Only then will the original face be revealed. The goal of practice is to put down all attachments and self-centeredness, because attachment and self-centeredness are not in accordance with wisdom. Do not ask me what the original face looks like or what enlightenment is. First of all, I am not enlightened. Second, even if I were enlightened, I could not describe it to you, because the enlightened condition is beyond the limits of the discriminating mind. Anything I can possibly say about

enlightenment is false. Third, even if I could describe enlightenment in detail, of what purpose would it be for you? I can show you a picture of Mount Everest and describe every inch of it in detail, but if you want to experience Mount Everest, you must go there yourself. The best I or any other teacher can do is point the way.

Last night I told you that nothing - including enlightenment - exists except your method of practice. Tonight, I add to that list and say that the original face also does not exist while you are practicing. If you practice with the intent of finding your original face, you will only get lost and frustrated in your own hall of mirrors. There is no need to add to the obstructions you already face in your practice.

True enlightenment is no enlightenment, real emptiness is not empty

I have said this many times already: On retreat, there is no enlightenment, so do not seek to find it. Furthermore, there is no Buddha, so do not try to become one. Am I crazy? Here I am, sitting in front of a statue of the Buddha - a statue we prostrate to twice daily, and I tell you that there is no Buddha. Every night we read about enlightenment in the Song of Mind, and now it claims that true enlightenment is no enlightenment.

When we are studying the Dharma, it is perfectly fine to think about enlightenment and the Buddha, but while we are practicing, there should be no thoughts in our minds about these things. We should not think of the Buddha as some entity outside of ourselves that we wish to be like. When we prostrate, we should not seek the Buddha's help. In fact, if such thoughts are in our minds, we will not be able to see the Buddha at all. So why do we prostrate? Because we would not know how to practice without the Dharma, and the Dharma was given to us by the Buddha. Therefore, we prostrate out of gratitude. However, when we are engaged in the act of prostrating, the only thoughts in our minds should be that of our movements.

Make no mistake, whenever we prostrate, or engage in morning and evening services, or read sutras, or meditate, we are trying to be like the Buddha. We should express gratitude toward this great being. The Buddha does exist, but there is nothing we can get from him. The Buddha cannot give us enlightenment. To practice with the intent of gaining enlightenment is also a mistake. We practice for the sake of practice. Some of you came a long way to sit on retreat for seven days. Did you

know that you spent all this money and came all this distance to practice for the sake of practice?

You may ask, "But if I continue to sit, won't I get enlightened?" The answer is yes and no. Yes, you will eventually get enlightened; but, once you are enlightened, there is no enlightenment. The same is true for Buddhahood. I will offer a crude analogy to illustrate this difficult concept. We can all agree that the Chan Center exists. It exists in our minds, but it also exists as a building in Elmhurst, New York. Before you came here, the Chan Center was already here. But once you are in the Center, it no longer exists. Do you understand? If you say it still exists, show it to me. Give it to me. You may point to the wall, to the statues, to the rugs, to the kitchen, even to me, but none of those things is the Chan Center. When you are not here, the Chan Center is a numbered building on a street in a borough of New York City; but once you are inside, it disappears. Those who have become Buddhas are inside the building of Buddhahood, so to speak. For them, there is no such thing as Buddhahood. For those who are outside, however, there is Buddhahood.

As long as we are outsiders, we should follow the Buddha's example and teachings, but we should not strive to be the Buddha or demand anything from the Buddha.

The second line says, "Real emptiness is not empty". The other day I talked about how a poor person may not have money in his pockets, but he has plenty of it in his mind. If, on the other hand, all the wealth and money belonged to a single individual, would she feel that she had money? I have heard that some immensely wealthy people who own properties and businesses around the world do not carry any money with them. The reason is that, no matter where they go, something is there for them. Can we say that these people have no money? Actually, they are quite wealthy.

According to the vows they take, monks and nuns do not own anything of their own. No place belongs to them, yet they take care of and cherish everything they use. Wherever they lay their heads, that is their home, and they take care of it as if it were their home. Even if a nun's home for the night happens to be under a tree, she takes good care of it and leaves it better than how she found it. She does this because of her vows and as part of her practice. She should not be doing it for her future benefit: "Since I know I will be passing this way later on, I'll tidy it up for my next visit." She also does not do it for the approval of others: "Hopefully,

somebody will notice how well I took care of this place and praise me for it." Whoever a monk happens to meet, those are his close friends and relatives; and whatever events occur while he is present, those are his affairs. But when he leaves, he does not carry the people and events with him. They are already past and gone.

We can all benefit by cultivating such an attitude. Because you claim nothing as your own, everything becomes yours; and because everything is yours, you have a great responsibility to take good care of it. This is how sincere Chan practitioners should conduct themselves. Of course, this is natural behavior for enlightened beings, but we are not enlightened, so we must train ourselves to be this way.

This is an inner training. It has nothing to do with outer forms. Most of you here are not left-home practitioners, yet you can all cultivate this attitude. It is not a behavior reserved for members of the Sangha. Do not mistake outer forms for inner training. Outer forms have nothing to do with practice. The Buddha is usually depicted sitting on a lotus blossom. Does that mean you have to find a giant lotus blossom and sit on it while meditating? Perhaps you are thinking, "I have got to get myself some robes like the Buddha. And his hair is so lovely the way it curls around his face. Maybe I should get a perm." You may laugh at the ludicrousness of such an image, but we have all done something similar at one time or another. Such behavior is useless.

While I was in China, I visited an ancient Buddhist site that had been turned into a tourist attraction. The site dated from the T'ang dynasty, and they had replicas of clothing from that time period. People could dress up like T'ang monks and be photographed so they had something to show their friends and family when they returned home. I was standing off to the side watching, and many people would look at me and exclaim, "Oh, look! A true monk!" They were not planning to become monks or nuns, but even if they were, wearing robes does not automatically make one spiritually better. Really, robes are meaningless. They are just pieces of clothing. Wearing a monk's robe for a while will not plant a karmic seed in you that will sprout some time in the future and influence you to leave home and join the Sangha. Plant the seed yourself by following the teachings of the Buddha and emulating the activities of bodhisattvas right now. Some say that imitation is the highest form of praise and flattery. We should imitate the Buddha by transforming our minds, not our wardrobes.

With true emptiness, there is nothing to seek and nothing to attain. Anything we seek or wish to attain is just another wandering thought. Be totally concentrated on the method in the present moment. On every retreat, I say the same thing: practice itself is the objective and aim. You will benefit most if you have this attitude. When a farmer plants a fruit tree, he does not expect to immediately harvest ripe fruit. He knows of the tree's potential, but he cares for the tree in the present moment, whether it has fruit on it or not. Do not concern yourself with the fruits of practice. All there is the process.

Shifu at Throssel Hole, Part 2

During Master Sheng Yen's visit to the United Kingdom last year, he visited 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. The following is the text of the second 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 first session was published in the previous issue of Chan Magazine)

Q: Some of us are not from this monastery, but from some smaller communities. Before, you mentioned that we monastics should not lose touch with the surrounding society. In your monastery, how do you maintain contact with society?

Master Sheng Yen (Shifu): What is appropriate in Asia may not be appropriate in the West. However, I can briefly describe what we do to give you some suggestions. In our monastery in Taiwan, besides the regular practices and duties, home-leavers also participate in activities engaging the society. These activities are for the general public; they are not limited to the congregation or to Buddhists. There are meditation classes and programs of psychological counseling. We provide care for the dying and their families, like in the hospice movement in the West. There are also other activities designed to meet society needs and to relieve suffering in the general public. (The monastery in the US does not have enough manpower to do as much outreach as we do in Taiwan.) When we provide these services, many people benefit and feel gratitude towards the monastery. They come closer to monastery and to the Dharma, and some may further support the monastery or even join.

When we engage the society, we may not ask them to meditate or prostrate to the Buddha. Without using Buddhist terms, we introduce the basic concepts, attitudes and way of life of Buddhadharma, so when members of the public encounter problems, they can face them bravely and suffer less. In this way, by engaging the society and meeting its needs, the monastery becomes beneficial and potentially influential. The monastery in Taiwan is relatively small compared to others, yet it is very well-regarded by the Taiwanese public. This is because we try to help people to achieve a peaceful and harmonious way of life.

The approach is to use the basic principles of Buddhadharma, also called the Dharma of Mind. In the past, people lived in poverty and obviously suffered both physically and mentally. In today society, people suffering

is mainly mental. They feel dissatisfied, anxious, fearful or lonely. Therefore they suffer, and cause other people to suffer. We can best help them by using the basic principles of Buddhadharma to change their negative feelings into positive feelings. If they are willing to meditate or to learn the Dharma, that would be best. If not, then we need to communicate with them and comfort them without imposing Buddhist teachings. I have a pamphlet here. If you look through this, you will probably not find a single Buddhist term. However, the basic messages conveyed are very consistent with the teachings of the Buddha.

Q: Our practice here is mainly Shikantaza. Is there any disadvantage to using this method? If so, what should we do to avoid pitfalls? Compared to Linji methods which are more aggressive, it seems that Shikantaza practitioners can easily fall into laziness. (Editor's note: The vocabulary here may be confusing. Shikantaza, meaningfully minding sitting? Is the primary practice of the Japanese school of Soto Zen. It is derived from the Silent Illumination practice of the Chinese Caodong sect of Chan. It is being contrasted here with the Huatou method, which is the primary practice of Linji Chan, known as Rinzaï Zen in Japan.)

Shifu: The problem is not with the method itself. The problems that arise come mainly from the teacher attitude or concept in transmitting the method, or the attitude of students in taking up the practice. It is not that Linji practice is more aggressive and Shikantaza is more laid back. It is the practitioner attitude that counts.

The practice of the Soto sect is different from that of Linji in appearance. In Soto Zen, the method focuses on insight, and hence it appears to be more tranquil. In Linji Chan, the use of the Huatou and the focus on the doubt sensation appears to be more vigorous. There are, however, people using Shikantaza in a very vigorous manner, they pay such close attention to their method, not allowing any wandering thought to interrupt their practice, that after an hour or so they may have broken a sweat. I do not encourage people to practice in this way. It requires a lot of physical strength and will not last long. If one can maintain one practice continuously with full awareness, one is practicing strenuously enough. I liken this kind of practice to a small stream. Although it is small, it flows continuously, and eventually will reach the ocean. On the other hand, if one is practicing the Huatou method vigorously in meditation, but totally forgets about the Huatou in daily life, one practice is slack. It is like the weather in England - the sun may shine a little bit, but it does not last long. So, in both cases the important thing is to maintain the

continuity of the method, rather than the appearance of effort.

Q: John mentioned that during your solitary retreat in the mountains, you did a lot of repentance prostration practice. Can you tell us what are repentance prostrations?

Shifu: Shakyamuni Buddha often encouraged his disciples to do repentance prostration. He always taught that repentance would lead to peace. Why is that so? Prostration is an action to purify our body and mind. If we violate precepts, or even simply make mistakes, it is very important that we feel humble, admit our own faults, and further, correct our behavior. Over and over again, every time we fall into error, we feel humble and repent. To whom do we repent? We repent to our own consciousness, and we repent by doing prostration. Prostration will also help us physically. By prostrating, we become healthy, the qi (breath energy) and the mind will settle, and hence the mind will clear. This will help us reflect better, and once we can reflect better, most likely we will not make the same mistakes again. This is why Shakyamuni Buddha preached many times, as mentioned in the Vinaya and the Agama Sutra, *hikshu, repent always*. Then, you will be in peace. It is also mentioned in the *Yogacarabhumi-sastra*. Does the Chan tradition also encourage practitioners to repent? Definitely. In the Sixth Patriarch Platform Sutra, it is called formless repentance. It is called formless repentance because you do not repent out of fear of bad karma. After all, you suffer from karmic consequences only if you are not liberated. You repent simply because you make mistakes, not worrying about yourself or the consequences. After you repent, your mind is at ease. When your mind is at ease, you practice more strenuously. When you practice more strenuously, you attain liberation.

Q: What should we do when we prostrate? What should we think?

Shifu: There is nothing particular that you should think. While you prostrate, you should be clearly aware that you are repenting. You can repent for something that you know you have done wrong, or for something that you don't know you have done wrong. A person who engages in this practice of humility and repentance will tend to be very diligent in practice. When one reflects that one has made mistakes but should not have, or that one should have practiced harder but has slacked off, one will then re-collect oneself, be more humble and practice harder. Since this person is clearly aware that he or she has made so many

mistakes, this person will not be harsh or demanding, but will naturally be humble and compassionate towards other people. As a result of repeatedly recognizing, admitting, repenting and correcting one's errors, one will not be regretful or blame oneself. Instead, one will be fully aware of one behavior and be diligent about correcting it. Such a person will practice earnestly and build strong self-esteem.

Q: Can you tell me a little bit about your relationship with your disciples?

Shifu: As my master told me, master and disciples are spiritual friends to each other. Disciples need to be grateful and respectful to their master, and in return, the master needs to respect disciples too. This is a very basic concept. If this relationship is established only one way, forgetting one's own duty and demanding that others meet their obligations, that relationship is definitely not appropriate. Besides being spiritual friends, it is very important that a master and disciples learn from each other, both from positive examples and from mistakes. The relationship is unlike father and son, because the relationship between father and son involves emotion. When emotion is involved, there is also a side effect of self-attachment, conflict and suffering. The relationship between master and disciple is based on the Dharma and on the precepts. A practitioner should always rely on the Dharma and on him or herself. The master is someone who assists you along the way. Now, who is the master here?

Q: Now, since our old master passed away, we usually treat Rev. Morgan as the master. However, we also have a master who ordains disciples, and a master who transmits the Dharma. In most circumstances, these two masters are the same one.

Shifu: When these relationships are established on the Dharma and on precepts, emotional entanglements between master and disciples will be greatly reduced. This will enhance the harmony of the Sangha. Any inappropriate actions or criticisms by either master or disciples will not affect faith in the Dharma or respect of each other. For example, there was a well-known master in China, who had many outstanding disciples following him. After many years, the master decided to leave his robe and return to householder life. Many people asked the disciples why, though they did not return to householder life as the master had, they still acknowledged him as their master. The disciples replied that when they first bowed to him, he was a monk. Although he became a householder, they still respected him as their master from the past. However, their

respect did not mean that they had to become householders like him. So, these disciples relationships with their master were established on faith in the Dharma.

Q: Do you have females in your Sangha? Also, what is the position of women in your lay-people's congregation?

Shifu: Shakyamuni Buddha established the Sangha by four groups. They are Bhikshu, Bhikshuni, Upasaka and Upasika. Now, not every monastery consists of all four groups, depending on the size of the monasteries and conditions. In my monastery, we have all four groups of people. Male and female are basically equal. However, at this time, we have more females in the monastery. At the time of Shakyamuni Buddha, the Sangha consisted mainly of Bhikshus. When Bhikshus were ordained, they were only ordained by Bhikshus. However, Bhikshunis had to be ordained by other Bhikshunis and then confirmed again by Bhikshus. I have been thinking about this for some time - it may be that in today society this procedure is not really necessary. Right now we still follow the procedure passed down to us by the Buddha; we have not yet made any changes. I have noticed that in this monastery there is no such difference.

Q: In translating scriptures into English, in reference to practitioners, "he" was always used. Some people think this is inappropriate. What do you think?

Shifu: In the East, especially at the time of Shakyamuni Buddha, females were to be protected. Regardless of whether at work or at home, the male held the power. Therefore sutras always referred to practitioners by using "he". Even in reference to Bodhisattvas, was always used. Bodhisattvas only manifested as females as an expedient to deliver sentient beings. It is only recently that the idea of gender equality has arisen. However, Shakyamuni Buddha taught that all beings are equal. The potential of females to attain Arhatship is the same as that of males. Also, in Mahayana Buddhism, we do not only say that male and female are equal, but also that home-leavers and lay-people are equal. So, we can understand the use of "he" in the Scriptures as due to the influence of society at that time. Since the discrimination between male and female has diminished now, we may consider modifying the pronouns when translating scriptures into English. However, we do encounter some difficulties in finding a reference that is neutral. If you use he, it is

inappropriate, but so is the use of she, and if you use he/she, it seems very awkward.

Q: Is there a gender distinction in the pronouns in the Chinese language?

Shifu: In the past, there was none. But now, due to the influence of the West, the characters have been modified to show the distinction. In some of the Japanese scriptures written in ancient language, the pronouns have no indication of gender. In studying these texts it is really hard to tell what gender the scripture was referring to. However, in today's writing, the gender distinction has become so prominent that it is unmistakable. So, this is an issue created by modern people.

Q: This morning you spoke about renunciation and strongly emphasized its importance. So, how is renunciation important to home-leavers, and how is it important to lay-people?

Shifu: To home-leavers, renunciation is important in both the realms of form and mind. In form, we lead our life free of temptation. We should be free of temptations in five ways, the first of which is to be free of sexual desire. Even if you cannot keep your mind free of sexual desire, a home-leaver must at least remain free of sexual desire in the realm of form. So, when any desire arises, a practitioner should always make an effort to remain unattached to the desire. Lay-people may not be physically separated from sexual desire, but they should at least try to remain unattached to such desire.

Some people think that to renounce in mind is more important than to renounce in form. They think it is not necessary to renounce physically. Is that right? Some have even argued that they can be like Vimalakirti, who had a wife and accumulated great wealth. But you have to know that Vimalakirti was a great Bodhisattva, who only appeared as a layperson to help sentient beings. Most people cannot renounce in mind without renouncing in form, so if they speak of renunciation in mind while remaining attached to physical things, they are only fooling themselves. If you believe that you can renounce in mind without renouncing in form, you may also think that it is useless to become a home-leaver, since lay-people can also practice renunciation. But for a normal person, you must first renounce in form, and only then will it be easy for you to renounce in mind, and maintain the mind purified. So, it is very important for home-leavers to uphold the precepts properly. Otherwise, they will be

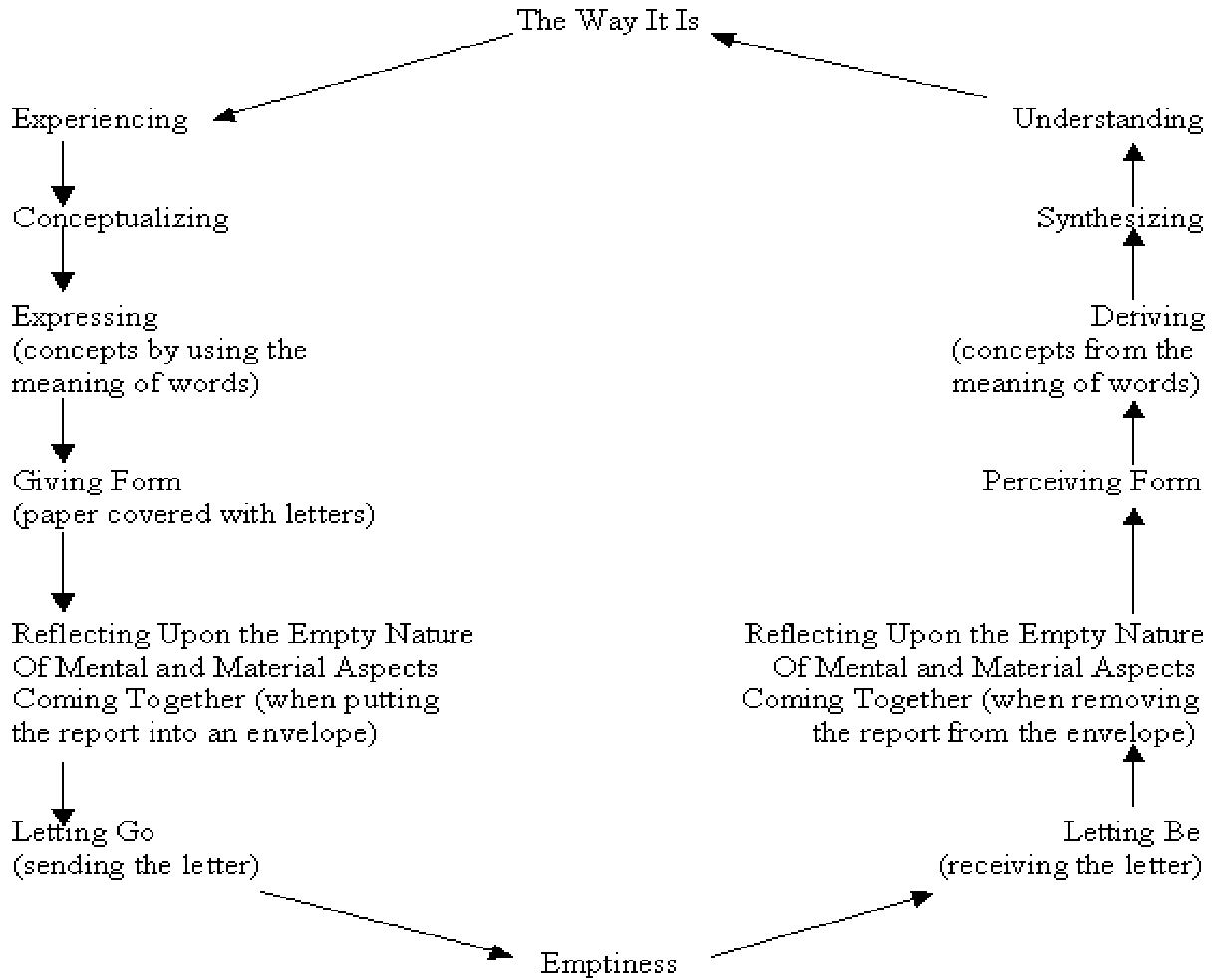
no different from lay-people.

In 1998 after I heard the Dalai Lama talking about renunciation, Richard Geer came to talk to me. He said it was very hard for him to give rise to renunciation. It would be easier, he thought, for him to give rise to Bodhichitta. He was accompanied by his girlfriend at the time. I told him that being a lay person, he might be unable to renounce physically, but that he could renounce greed, desire and anger. At the same time, he could develop more compassion for other people. If he could do that, it could also be considered a form of renunciation. After listening to what I said, he was very happy.

Retreat Report

Dear Shifu,

Please accept this text instead of the retreat report.



I hope you all feel well. In Poland everything improved greatly after the retreat. People started to understand each other more and to show more friendship and respect to one another. With best wishes in the Dharma,

B. K.

"Enlightenment" Makes The Cover of Science News

David Berman

Science News, the country's leading weekly newsmagazine of science, featured a picture of the Buddha with the headline "Enlightenment Science" on the cover of its February 17th issue. The article, by behavioral sciences reporter Bruce Bower, covers the efforts of a small number of psychologists, physicians, neurologists and cognitive scientists to investigate the brain processes that may underlie spiritual or mystical experiences.

The report begins with a description of the experience of neurologist James H. Austin, who, after 8 years of Zen training, spent a sabbatical year at the London Zen Center. One morning, while waiting for a train, he suddenly felt the loss of his "I-me-mine" perspective, and the scene around him seemed to acquire an "absolute reality, intrinsic rightness, and ultimate perfection." He felt that his experience was impossible to fully describe, that he had nothing to fear, and that he immediately took himself less seriously. In his book *Zen and the Brain* (1998, MIT Press), Austin described how the experience inspired him to initiate a scientific investigation into the neurology of enlightenment.

Spiritual experience is not yet a popular field for scientific inquiry, but Austin isn't the only researcher interested. A small band of scientists has issued a sort of manifesto in *Varieties of Anomalous Experience* (2000, American Psychological Association). The new book --- edited by psychologists Etzel Cardena, Steven J. Lynn, and Stanley Krippner, looks at scientific data on various altered states of consciousness associated with mystical experiences, and calls for a study of the characteristics of consciousness that make mystical experience possible.

Such a study may be easier to call for than to carry out. Cognitive science is a young and developing field, which as yet includes no full explanation of the nature of consciousness. Austin believes that a better understanding of the brain areas that contribute to the sense of self, possibly including the thalamus and amygdala, will lead to insights about spiritual enlightenment.

But psychologist Eleanor Rosch, who has studied Buddhist meditation traditions since 1977, takes a different view. She rejects the idea that the brain interprets information from an independently existing environment.

Along with neuroscientist Christine A. Skarda, she has proposed that people initially perceive the world as a seamless whole, and then organize those perceptions to make them easier to process. The resulting perceptual world of separate entities is useful, but is a creation of the perceptual system rather than a reflection of the actual state of affairs, they contend.

Rosch previously collaborated with cognitive scientist Francisco J. Varela and philosopher Evan Thompson on *The Embodied Mind* (1993, MIT Press), a review and critique of the state of cognitive science. In it, they describe organism and environment as a fundamental circularity, in which no subjective entity can be established, and no objective ground can be discovered independent of our interaction with it. Nevertheless, they point out, our experience of the world seems unshakeable and firmly grounded in an objective reality. They conclude that Western science and philosophy have brought us to the point where we can no longer believe in a solid "foundation" for experience, but have given us no means to develop insight into groundlessness, largely because first-person inquiry into the nature of one's consciousness is not a part of the Western tradition of doing science "objectively." They go on to describe the Buddhist mindfulness-awareness tradition as just such a program of first-person inquiry into the nature of groundlessness, and call for a dialogue between cognitive science and the Middle Way as a means of integrating experience and science.

Rosch notes that if it is true that the brain creates the sense of self and other from "a seamless fabric of sensations", then the moments of no-self described by meditators could be evidence of direct perception of a larger reality, and everyday perception could be, as Zen practitioners have long believed, only a useful fiction.

Views like Rosch's and Austin's are far from the consensus among scientists, but Cardena believes that research into mystical experience may flower as researchers become increasingly interested in positive mental phenomena like happiness. "Psychologists haven't really entered into the study of mystical experience, but they're parked just outside the door," he says.

News

Local News:

Chinese New Year Celebrated at Dharma Drum Retreat Center

John Roth

On January 27th about twenty people from the Pine Bush, NY area joined the volunteers at the Dharma Drum Retreat Center to celebrate the beginning of the Chinese Year of the Snake. The New Year's gathering was arranged to help integrate the DDRC into the local community and make Buddhism more accessible to the population.

The celebration began with a video about Chan Master Sheng Yen. Jay Bemis then gave a talk about the Chinese New Year and its significance in Buddhism. Jay also read a letter of welcome and New Year's good wishes from Guo-yuan Fa Shi, who was unable to attend. After Jay's talk there was a pot luck luncheon, and then a walking tour of the Center, including the new Chan Hall (still under construction), during which our guests learned a bit about what happens during a Chan retreat.

Taiwan Visitors to the U.S.

Jeffrey Kung

On the heels of Shifu's trip to Malaysia, 77 of the Taiwanese contingent who had followed him to Kuala Lumpur accompanied Shifu all the way back to New York. They made the 18-hour flight from Taiwan to NY on April 29th.

The visitors from Taiwan arrived at the Chan Meditation Center in Queens on May 1st. The reception team of the DDMBA-NY chapter greeted them by giving them a tour of the facility. Many of them were moved by the simplicity of the humble structure, when compared to the grander DDMBA facility in Taiwan. Shifu warmly welcomed them and related the history of CMC -- his arrival in NY 25 years ago with only \$300 in his pocket, his struggle to acquire his first temple in Woodside, and his eventual move to current CMC in 1987. Afterwards, the visitors enjoyed one of CMC's fabulous lunches, and then boarded buses for a trip to the Dharma Drum Retreat Center.

Upon arrival at DDRC, the visitors were amazed at the beautiful scenery --the lake, the creek, the spring flowers, green leaves and wild deer. But the main purpose of their visit was to attend a two-day retreat specially arranged for them.

The retreat started at 5:00 the next morning without a hitch; most of the visitors were veterans of Shifu's retreats in Taiwan. The only surprise was a morning walking meditation along the shores of the lake. It was early and mist still lingered on the surface of the water. The silent walk along the foggy lake generated a surreal feeling -- if there were a pure land in this world, this must be it.

In the evening, Shifu gave a talk on the origin of his inspirations. He said that most people in Taiwan believed that Shifu's inspirations must be rooted in Taiwan. But the reality was that he had found his own retreat place in NY, most of his books had been written in NY, all of his retreat teachings and methods had arisen here, as well as his first Bodhisattva precept transmission, and his first 7-day and 49-day retreats. He wanted the visitors from Taiwan to remember NY as the birthplace of his inspirations. They were here not only as visitors but also as pilgrims. This was a talk that opened a new door for all the Taiwan visitors as well as the NY followers; it was a new revelation to all of us.

The next morning, the retreat included another trip to the lake -- each retreat participant was asked to fill a bowl with water. They were then required to walk back to the Chan Hall without spilling a drop. This was a good practice of concentration and contemplation. Afterwards, the water was used in a special ceremony of bathing the Buddha, scheduled to accommodate the visitors from Taiwan.

In the afternoon, Shifu gave another talk, this time on making vows. He clarified the difference between taking an oath and making a vow. He said that although taking an oath may require a strong commitment, it often comes from outside influence, whereas making a vow comes strictly from one's own initiative. A vow is a goal people set up for themselves; it works as a stimulus and a motivation. Without making vows, people can easily get lost in the pursuit of their daily lives.

That evening, a performance was given by the DDMBA-NY chapter. About 20 members performed in a choir, in sword and fan dances, on Chinese instruments, and in a talk-show format. The visitors then gave a brief presentation of the DDMBA activities in Taiwan. The evening was a useful exchange between two groups geographically half a world apart.

On May 4th, the Taiwanese visitors boarded two buses for a morning visit to the Chuang-yen Monastery in nearby Carmel, NY. The trip was not only to visit the largest Chinese temple on the east coast, but also to pay homage to Shifu's mentor, Mr. Jia-chen Shen, who lives in the monastery. The visitors were awed by the monastery's giant Buddha and beautiful structures and scenery.

Finally, that afternoon, there was just time to visit the Metropolitan Museum in NYC before boarding buses for the airport. This jam-packed 5 day visit, including the humble Chan Center, the beauty of DDRC, the rich cultural variety of New York, and the revelations in Shifu's teachings, made for a memorable experience.

Dharma Gathering Welcomes Shih-fu Back to U.S.

Buffe Laffy

Dharma Gatherings are held twice a year to welcome Chan Master Sheng Yen when he returns from overseas. At these gatherings Master Sheng Yen gives an informal report of his activities since he was last in the US. On May 4th approximately 70 people attended a Dharma Gathering at the Chan Center. In his talk Master Sheng Yen reported on the following:

- An increase in Chan Retreats held in Taiwan
- Panel discussions with Nobel Laureate scientists
- The formation in Taiwan of a Regional Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders
- His visit to Malaysia
- Ongoing earthquake relief efforts

These topics are discussed in great detail elsewhere in this issue. Master Sheng Yen also commented on high-tech workers and their increasing interest in Chan practice:

"Among the newcomers to Chan practice, there are many people who work in the high-tech sector. These people work in fields such as bio-technology, electronic technology, and information technology. They work with machines a lot, and they themselves work like machines, and being engaged in this kind of work can be pretty boring. They can feel rather empty spiritually. They know that if they continue working like this, the rest of society will also become more and more like this as technology continues to develop."

"If we do not cultivate spirituality and do not engage in practice, but only focus on satisfying ourselves through material things, we will hasten the destruction of our earth. We seek to satisfy our material craving in two ways. One is that we constantly invent new things to increase our pleasure and convenience in life. The other is our curiosity for something unknown, something new. Both of these cravings are very dangerous."

"First, in our effort to satisfy our curiosity we may invent all sorts of high-tech things that can have a negative effect on our psychological health as well as our ecological balance. Just imagine what can happen if we keep inventing strange new things using our biological and chemical technology. This will contribute to the unhappiness of human-kind and the destruction of the world."

The other danger is our continual craving for pleasure, for more convenience. This desire cannot be satisfied. We get new things and when we are not satisfied, we throw these things away and then we get newer things again. We do this continuously because material possession can never satisfy us. This is wasteful, mere destruction of our environment. This will hasten the destruction of our earth."

Many high-tech workers are becoming aware that if they do not try to develop spiritual aspects of themselves, the world will move closer to destruction. For this reason, more and more high-tech workers are turning toward Chan practice."

Before and after the talk, refreshments were served in the pleasant evening air, with the garden in bloom all around the patio. After the talk there was an informal viewing of the film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden*

Dragon. (A copy of the film was given to Shifu by one of his disciples, Gao Xi Xian, a martial arts expert who appears in the film.)

Buddha's Birthday Celebration At The Chan Center

Steve Kanney

On May 6, 2001, a typically large crowd graced the halls of the Chan Meditation Center to celebrate the 2625th birthday of the Buddha. The day began with the bathing of the baby Buddha ceremony and continued with chanting of the Heart Sutra and receiving the Three Jewels. Shifu lectured to a crowd filling the upstairs and most of the basement, equipped with television screen and speakers, on how Buddhism teaches us to transcend suffering to lead a more joyous life.

Nancy Makso and Wei-wu Tan narrated a brief description of the life of the Buddha, and then the history of Dharma Drum Mountain and the Chan Meditation Center. Following a vegetarian lunch, there was entertainment, of typically high-quality. The youth group performed a sign language dance, followed by the choir's rendition of a Japanese folk song. Lindley Hanlon performed "Song to the Moon," by Dvorak, and Stella Shieh choreographed and led a dance by the Chinese Culture Association of Long Island MOM's group. Monica Feng and Nicolas Steele read their respective poems followed by Jane Huang conducting several more songs from the choir. The day was wrapped up with the Chinese equivalent of charades, led by Chou Ping and Dehua Chang. Acting out ideas does not require a common language, but guessing the words does. With a little translation, it went over quite well.

The Chan Center would like to thank not only those named above, but all the people who helped coordinate this function, and without whose help the celebration would not have been possible.

Tiger Crouches, Dragon Hides at Chan Center

Buffe Laffy

Martial arts Master Gao Xi Xian led a gongfu class and demonstration for more than sixty enthusiastic participants at the Chan Meditation Center on Friday, May 11th. Shifu Gao who recently took refuge with Master

Sheng Yen, appeared in the film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, and served as its martial art consultant and trainer.

Among the attendees were a number of the Chan Center members who are themselves martial artists, including gongfu stylist Benjamin Chin, Wu Mei Gongfu teacher David Berman, longtime aikidoist Steve Kanney, and the Center's own taijiquan instructor David Ngo.

Shifu Gao taught the group two sets of gongfu movements, one with fists and one with palms, that he had used to train the actors on the set of "*Crouching Tiger...*". During both he emphasized soft, relaxed, natural movements that gently stretched the body to its full length. He recommended that everyone practice them in the morning and again in the evening before going to bed.

Master Sheng Yen then addressed the group. He spoke of how the practice of gongfu was naturally compatible with the practice of Chan, because it depends on relaxing the body and clarifying the mind, and, in its highest stages, on putting down the sense of self. He emphasized how important it is for martial artists to maintain a spiritual practice, if they wish to avoid psychological problems and difficulties with the ego.

The afternoon ended with a gongfu demonstration, Shifu Gao showing his lithe, graceful Snake Fist and one of his students demonstrating the more muscular Tiger style. Master Gao's gongfu can be seen at Gao's Kung Fu Academy at three different locations in the New York area.

Bathing of the Buddha Ceremony at DDRC

Jay Bemis

On May 15 Dharma Drum Retreat Center (DDRC) held its Bathing of the Buddha Ceremony. This year the participants were all local residents who regularly take part in DDRC activities. Being so isolated from any Chinese-American community, DDRC events of this kind give us a clear look at how Buddhism can flourish in America. All those who took part in the ceremony were Westerners, both male and female, ranging in age from 9 years to over 70.

The ceremony started at 7:00 pm with a wonderful talk about the true meaning of the Bathing of the Buddha by the Abbot of DDRC, Guo-yuan Fa Shi. Then we took a 10 minute hike up the pond, and each of the participants filled a bowl with water. Guo-yuan Fa Shi explained that we should try to remain mindful of the water and not spill a drop, just as when we meditate we should be mindful of our method, and not spill a drop of our Bodhi mind. Upon returning to the Chan Hall, which took much longer than 10 minutes, everyone made an offering to the Buddha of the water in their bowls, and then proceeded to bathe the effigy of the baby Buddha. There was then a little time to socialize and enjoy some snacks before a final period of sitting meditation. We finished up at 9:00, and everyone seemed to agree that they had enjoyed their first Bathing of the Buddha ceremony.

International News:

Regional Summit of Religious Leaders

Buffe Laffy

In August of 2000, Master Sheng Yen was invited to the United Nations World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders. This group enthusiastically promotes harmonious relations among different religions, as well as peace and safety in the world. This April, the Secretary General of the Summit, Mr. Bawa Jain, and the Vice Chairman of the Summit, Mrs. Dena Marriam, were invited to Taiwan by the DDMBA. While they were there, on April 14th 2001, Master Sheng Yen hosted a roundtable discussion on religion, world peace, and spiritual environmentalism.

Among the participants in this panel discussion were the president and vice-president of Taiwan, the chairman of the executive branch, the chairman of the judicial branch, and more than 20 high-ranking leaders of all the different religious groups in Taiwan. One outcome of this discussion was the establishment of a Regional Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders. This regional summit currently includes Taiwan, with the eventual participation of mainland China's People's Republic of China, and the rest of the Southeast Asian countries as well. Master Sheng Yen serves as the coordinator of this group, and in this capacity also serves as a consultant to the UN on religious matters.

Another outcome of the April 14th panel discussion was the signing of a Declaration of Commitment to World Peace. (The original peace declaration signed by the UN World Peace Summit attendees in August was translated into Chinese and copied onto a beautiful scroll.) All participants of the Regional Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders signed this scroll, which will be presented to the United Nations on June 9th.

Master Sheng Yen Receives "Nation's Award"

Buffe Laffy

Last December, Master Sheng Yen received an award in Taiwan known as the "Nation's Award of Lifelong Contribution to the Culture". It is awarded each year by Taiwan's legislative branch to one or two people who have made important contributions to Taiwanese society. Note was made of his world-reknown as a Chan Master, his advocacy of education and spiritual environmentalism, and his leadership of Dharma Drum Mountain Buddhist Association. This was the eleventh time Master Sheng Yen has been honored with a national award in Taiwan.

Dalai Lama Visits Taiwan

Buffe Laffy

In April, His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama visited Taiwan for a week. He held several Dharma gatherings while he was there. Master Sheng Yen was able to visit with him during this time, and joined him in a press conference just before the conclusion of the visit.

Shifu's Lectures in Malaysia

Jeffrey Kung

Malaysia is a country of many nationalities and cultures -- its population consists of 60% Malaysians, 30% Chinese and 10% Asian Indians and others. Among the Malaysian Chinese, Buddhism is flourishing. Ever since 1983, the Malaysian Chinese community has invited Master Sheng Yen to visit Buddhist temples and give lectures. Shifu twice missed opportunities to do so when he became sick during trips to Singapore,

first in 1983, and again in 1999. Finally, Shifu was able to accept an invitation from June Lim, president of the DDMBA chapter in Malaysia, for two lectures in Kuala Lumpur, the Malaysian capital, on April 26th and 27th of this year. Having disappointed the Chinese community in the past, Shifu called this his "pay-back" trip to Malaysia.

Shifu arrived in Kuala Lumpur on April 24th with 280 followers from Taiwan, Singapore and the US. The normally quiet KL airport was overwhelmed with such a crowd, which included a large group of uniformed Taiwanese in formation, displaying the discipline typical of DDMBA members participating in a public event. They wore white shirts or blouses, black pants or skirts, and the distinctive DDMBA ties and hats, and arranged themselves in groups of 45, in the order of their chartered buses. Each group had a leader who was responsible for keeping order, counting heads and giving out instructions. The whole group proceeded to their accommodations to two luxurious hotels near Shifu's lecture hall at the Mines Beach Resort.

The next day, five chartered buses took the DDMBA members for a KL city tour while Shifu was busily attended press conference, visiting local temples and presiding over the opening ceremony for the new home of DDMBA's Malaysia chapter. Chapter president June Lim had donated the proceeds of the sale of one of her two restaurants and two of her cars, in addition to her unlimited time and energy, to the creation of this new facility.

On the 26th, Shifu attended a special meeting with a group of more than 200 Malaysian Chinese business leaders. Due to the global economic recession in recent months, many local businesses were suffering, and looking for advice for the future. Shifu's talk, entitled Crisis is a Turning Point, gave them the psychological help they needed to face their current difficulties. It was warmly received as a gift of wisdom.

That evening, the lecture hall was filled with an audience of over 6000, eagerly awaiting Shifu's arrival. The majority were young people in their 20's and 30's, many of whom had come from other cities in Malaysia as much as 6 hours away from KL. The audience also included over 50 sangha from temples all over Malaysia.

Shifu's talked on Buddhist Practices in this Mundane World. He emphasized the importance of uplifting the character of all mankind and making our world a Pure Land, and he spoke of the five fourfold attitudes and actions that have become the basis of DDMBA's advocacy in recent years: the Four Tranquilities, which is the advocacy for uplifting the human character; the Four Pursuits, which is the advocacy for stabilizing people's minds; the Four Steps to Handle a Problem, which is the advocacy for overcoming difficulties; the Four Sincerities, which is the advocacy for benefiting others; and the Four Blessings, which is the advocacy for improving well-being.

The following day, the 27th, much of the previous night's audience returned with their friends and relatives. Shifu's talk was on Sheng Yen's Chan Practices, and began with the whole audience practicing the method of counting the breath. Shifu took the mystery out of Chan practice, clarifying the concepts of gradual and sudden enlightenment, and describing the steps from scattered mind to unified mind.

Taken together, the two days of lectures plainly laid out the daily practices that people could use in their normal lives to reduce their suffering in body and mind. Rather than emphasizing the profound and difficult concepts of Buddhism, Shih-fu persuaded a great number of people in KL that Buddhism is not hard to understand after all.

In addition to attending Shifu's lectures, the visiting DDMBA members had their own itinerary of practice to follow. They spent two mornings in walking meditation along the beautiful golf course in Mines Beach Resort, and two afternoons sharing their experiences in Chan practice. The entire five day stay in Kuala Lumpur was a unique and memorable experience for everyone --- for the important lectures by Shifu, the beautiful scenery of the host country, the hospitality of the host DDMBA chapter, and for the sense of belonging to the family of DDMBA.

Discussions With Nobel Laureates

Buffe Laffy

In April, Master Sheng Yen attended two unique discussions with several

Nobel Prize winners. Among these Nobel Laureates were: Mr. Esaki Olei, a professor from Chikuba University in Japan; Zen-Ning Yang, a professor from New York University, Long Island Campus; and Yuan-Zhe Li, director of the Central Academic Research Institute of Taiwan. The participants discussed world crises involving issues of humanities, technologies, religion and environmental protection. Their consensus was that the 21st century should be a time of making important changes to avert a larger crisis ahead.

Shifu spoke of these meetings during the May 5th Dharma Gathering:

Question: "It's very unusual that someone has the chance to speak to one Nobel Laureate. You spoke with several. I'm curious to know if you want to share with us what you learned from them? I know that they learned from you."

Shifu: "I have been engaging in panel discussions with Nobel Laureates in chemistry, biology, and other fields. I learned a lot from them. I found out that there are really two different branches of science. One is what we call basic science, or theoretical science. The other branch is called applied science, which is more involved with technological development. Nobel Laureates are often theoretical scientists."

"The highest level of theoretical science always has to do with philosophy. When scientists get to that level their thinking is actually very much in accordance with religion. That's why even though I myself am not a scientist I find that when I have a dialog with these Nobel Laureates we come to a common understanding, which is that if we do not work on our cultivation of spirituality, but only focus on material development through technological advances, then there will be major crisis facing the world."

"When I talk to them I realize that in the beginning in theoretical science, one may have to depend on empirical research and logic for one's discoveries. But after a while one must break away from one's existing mode of thinking, from the existing concepts, in order to bring about the kind of groundbreaking new theory that will earn the Nobel Prize. I find that quite interesting, because it's very much in accordance with Chan practice. A Chan practitioner also has to put down self-centered thoughts, put down everything one has known before, all the concepts that have

bound one's thinking. Only when one can do that, will one be able to see the Buddha Nature."

Earthquake Update

Buffe Laffy

The Winter 2000 issue of Chan Magazine included a first-hand report by Master Sheng Yen on the earthquake which struck Taiwan on September 21st, 1999. Now, a year and a half later, the huge cracks which rent the earth may no longer be visible but the effects of the disaster are still evident. Some of the schools that collapsed have been rebuilt but many of the houses remain in rubble. Large numbers of people moved out of the stricken area, leaving mostly women and children behind. This has resulted in a relatively low productive force in the area, leading to an economic downturn. Because of this, people are still experiencing a great deal of psychological distress.

The DDMBA has established two foundations to help with earthquake recovery. The first foundation is an aid station set up to help the earthquake victims recover from the emotional trauma of the disaster. This aid station was first set up immediately after the earthquake and is still in operation. The second foundation established by the DDMBA funds a research group to study the psychological effects of natural disasters, such as earthquakes, in order to determine the best treatment for recovery from such trauma. The results of this research will be published in English and shared with the rest of the world to help people everywhere.

Some of this work has already been shared. The foundation studied work done with disaster victims after the Kobe earthquake in Japan six years ago. Some of the Kobe methods were applied in Taiwan, and some things were done differently. The foundation wrote reports of its research and experience, translated these into English, and sent them to India, where there was a devastating earthquake earlier this year.

The DDMBA has also raised funds to help earthquake victims in India and Taiwan.

International Publications

Buffe Laffey

Master Sheng Yen has published eleven books in English in recent years, and many of them have subsequently been translated into different European and Asian languages and published in various countries.

Subtle Wisdom (Dharma Drum Publications, 2000) was recently translated into Italian and published in Rome. A collection of instructions on Chan practice by Master Sheng Yen has been translated into Russian and published by Saint Petersburg Buddhist Dharma Center in Russia. And last year Faith in Mind (Dharma Drum 1987) was translated into Indonesian and published in Jakarta.

Move Magazine Article

Buffe Laffey

Mrs. Dena Marriam, chairman of the UN World Peace Summit for Religious and Spiritual Leaders, wrote an article for the magazine "Move" 2001, Volume 2, published by the Ruder Finn Company. In the article she introduces 31 unique religious leaders of the world. Master Sheng Yen is introduced first in the section on leaders of Buddhist groups.

More Retreats Are Being Held In Taiwan

Buffe Laffey

Master Sheng Yen's organization in Taiwan has been promoting Chan practice at many levels. They have been leading Chan practice sessions that last two hours, half a day, a day, two days, seven days, and even forty-nine days. These Chan practice sessions are led mostly by Master Sheng Yen's disciples, using videos of his talks. Master Sheng Yen himself led the forty-nine day retreat, and one of the many seven-day retreats