illuminating SILENCE

Insights on the Path of Chinese Zen

Master Sheng-yen & Dr John H Crook
Foreword by Stephen Batchelor

‘When I listen to Master Sheng-yen’s presentation of Chan Buddhist teachings, my immediate and very profound feeling is that I am listening to words of wisdom from someone who is very experienced and a great practitioner.’

His Holiness, the Dalai Lama

‘Chan Master Sheng-yen has the truly rare ability to harmonize classical teaching with actual meditation practice ...It feels as if he is taking us, step by step and with great clarity, on our own personal retreat. Here is invaluable guidance for all students of meditative living.’

Larry Rosenberg, author of *Breath by Breath* and *Living in the Light of Death*

‘… the gentleness, warmth and humour of Master Sheng-yen radiate through the text. This book thus provides a rare opportunity to listen in to the unfolding of a Chan retreat.’

Stephen Batchelor, from the foreword of *Illuminating Silence*

‘Sheng-yen was a giant among contemporary Chan masters. His teachings are extraordinarily deep and breathtakingly clear. Reading Sheng-yen is like looking through a spotless window, providing a rare view directly into the very heart of Zen Wisdom.’

Doshin Nelson, Roshi, founder and abbot of Integral Zen

‘Chan Master Sheng-yen is a great teacher, and I have a great confidence in his scholarship and wisdom.’

Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh

Chan Master Sheng-yen was a highly respected Buddhist teacher. He studied for many years in China and Japan and later ran an Institute in Taipei, as well as a Monastic Temple and an Institute in New York. He was the founder of the Dharma Drum Mountain

Association, and he opened twenty-one Chan centres throughout North America. He was the author of many books, including *Complete Enlightenment*, *Subtle Wisdom* and *Shattering the Great Doubt*. He died in 2009.

John Crook, PhD, DSc was a biologist, a pioneer in the behavioural evolutionary ecology of birds, primates and man. He was the founder and first Teacher of the Western Chan Fellowship, a charity devoted to presenting the practice and ideas of Chinese Zen in Europe. He was the first European Dharma Heir of the Master. He was the author of several books, including *The Yogins of Ladakh* (with James Low) and *The Evolution of Human Consciousness*. He died in 2011.

Simon Child is the third Dharma Heir of Master Sheng-yen, and was the Secretary of the Western Chan Fellowship from its founding until his appointment as Guiding Teacher in 2011. Based in the UK, he is a retired doctor and continues to lead regular retreats in North America and Europe.

About the Western Chan Fellowship

The Western Chan Fellowship (WCF) is a charity registered in England and Wales. It arose from a network of local groups that formed following the first teaching visit to the UK in 1989 of the Venerable Chan Master Dr Sheng-yen. Its founding Teacher, the late Dr John Crook, and its current Head Teacher, Dr Simon Child, both received Dharma transmission from Master Shengyen in the Linjii and Caodong lineages.

The WCF runs regular silent retreats in a range of formats, including Silent Illumination retreats and koan investigation retreats. Both beginner and advanced meditators are welcome. The Fellowship also publishes a journal called the *New Chan Forum*, which includes a wide range of articles such as Dharma talks, retreat reports, discussion articles, critical comment, poetry, and more.

www.westernchanfellowship.org

To all practitioners seeking to develop
a sure-footed Zen in the West

ILLUMINATING SILENCE

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&
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Foreword by Stephen Batchelor

Introduction by Simon Child

WATKINS

Sharing Wisdom Since 1893

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FOREWORD

Since D.T. Suzuki first introduced Zen Buddhism to the West in the last century, a common assumption has prevailed that Zen is a Japanese form of Buddhism. Zen has entered the English language not only as the name of an Asian religion, but as a cipher for the stark aesthetic of Japanese culture. Japanese tea bowls, archery, rock gardens and swordsmanship all bear the unmistakable imprint of what we call ‘Zen’.

Yet ‘Zen’ is the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese word ‘Chan’, which simply means ‘meditation’. Chan (Zen) originated in China in the sixth century ce as a current in Buddhism that emphasised the primary importance of meditation practice as the means to realise the awakening experienced by Buddha. Rather than encouraging one to explore the subtleties of Buddhist metaphysics, the Chan masters insisted that one return to the startling immediacy of everyday experience as the ground of awakening.

While Zen enjoyed the privileges of state patronage to become an integral part of Japanese culture, Chan, its Chinese forebear, often had to struggle to survive in its homeland. After its heyday in the Tang dynasty (618–907), Chan has had to contend with religious and political movements, including Mao’s cultural revolution, which sought to marginalise or eradicate it. Although it is now being revived, in recent decades its life has hung by a thread in mainland China. That its provocative message is still with us at all bears witness to the resilience and integrity of its practitioners who have not wavered in their courage to address uncompromisingly the deepest questions of what it means to be human.

Master Sheng-yen is one of those few who dedicated their lives to these questions in the midst of turbulent and irreligious times. The bulk of the teachings presented here are transcripts of two complete sets of talks given during retreats held in Wales in 1989 and 1995. The discourses are lucid and direct, draw widely on the sources of Chinese Buddhism, and speak in a refreshingly modern idiom.

Perhaps because the setting was relatively small and intimate, the gentleness, warmth and humour of Master Sheng-yen radiate through the text. This book thus provides a rare opportunity to listen in to the unfolding of a Chan retreat attended entirely by Western practitioners under the guidance of a contemporary Chan master.

Illuminating Silence would not have appeared at all were it not for the tireless efforts of John Crook. In creating his retreat centre The Maenllwyd, arranging for Master Sheng-yen to teach there, establishing the Western Chan Fellowship, and editing this book, John has played a key role in introducing the practice of Chan to the West. The concluding section is an honest and moving account of John's experience of his own training under Master Sheng-yen.

Stephen Batchelor
Aquitaine
September 2001

INTRODUCTION

Most Asian Buddhist teachers who came to the West in the twentieth century did so to support their own ethnic communities. Chan Master Sheng-yen (1930–2009) was unusual in that he had a specific interest in bringing Chan, a form of Chinese Buddhism, to Westerners. In his native China and Taiwan he had found that few Buddhists, even among his fellow monastics, seemed to appreciate the value and depth of Buddhist teachings, with many practising only superstitious rituals. But in the Western scholars he encountered during his academic Buddhist studies in Japan in the 1970s he recognised a serious interest in and understanding of Buddhism, and consequently he regarded the West as potentially fertile ground for serious Chan teaching and practice.

He accepted offers to teach in Canada and the US and soon found himself teaching meditation and leading retreats for a small group of mainly Western students in New York. From small beginnings arose several major teaching centres in the US and Taiwan, and other countries. His regular sojourns in the US and his many teaching trips to Europe led to Chan practice spreading in the West and amongst Westerners. Between 1993 and 2001 he appointed five lay Westerners as Dharma Heirs, four of them Europeans (two British, one Swiss, one Croatian) and one American, recognising them as fully authorised independent Chan teachers based on their personal understanding and realisation of Chan practice.

On two of the four retreats that he led in the UK, in 1989 and 1995, his talks were recorded and transcribed, and edited to create the current volume, an invaluable record both of the teachings themselves and of his mode of presentation, which was learned, practical and down to earth. These talks are typical of the style of Master Sheng-yen's retreat talks, being partly direct meditation instruction, and partly taking sections of a text or poem as a jumping-off point for more general teaching. Re-reading this book for the purpose of writing this introduction I find the teachings as fresh and

relevant now as they were on my first hearing and reading over twenty years ago.

Chinese Chan and Japanese Zen have common roots, with Chan being founded in sixth-century China, and then in the thirteenth century spreading to Japan, where it became known as Zen. But their styles have diverged over subsequent centuries and Chan is typically characterised as having the rigour associated with Zen but with a more flexible, more human approach, and this book conveys that flavour in his teaching.

Dr John Crook (1930–2011), Master Sheng-yen's host for the retreats featured in this book, and also his first Western Dharma Heir (appointed in 1993), skilfully edited the transcribed material. He also provided a full introduction, and added his own personal reflections on his training with Master Sheng-yen in the form of a collection of his personal 'retreat reports', contemporaneous written records of his own experiences on retreat.

In 1997 John Crook founded a registered charity, the Western Chan Fellowship (WCF), of which he was the principal Teacher, to enable the teachings to continue into the future. I was also a founding member of the Western Chan Fellowship. Having myself been appointed as the second Western Dharma Heir of Master Sheng-yen in 2000, I succeeded John Crook as principal Teacher after his death in 2011. The fellowship continues to be very active to this day and runs a silent residential Chan meditation retreat of 5–9 nights' duration each month, as well as other shorter events, and coordinates a network of local meditation groups around the UK. The seeds sown by these retreats in the 1990s have flourished well. Master Sheng-yen's other seedlings of Chan in the West have also been fruitful, with his Dharma Drum Mountain institution continuing to have a strong presence in several centres in the US, and also in many other countries, as well as the large Dharma Drum Mountain Monastery headquarters and its many sub-temples and branches in Taiwan and other parts of Asia.

Chan and Zen continue to grow in the West, so I hope this re-issue of Sheng-yen's book contributes to your understanding of the path and inspires you to practise it.

Simon Child

Head Teacher
Western Chan Fellowship
December 2017

PREFACE

There are few written accounts of the proceedings of a Chan – Chinese Zen – retreat. While a number of works provide excerpts from interviews with masters, with details of procedure and ritual, few books take the reader through the whole process to reveal the close interdependence of sitting, ritual, formal teaching and interviews. One of these few is Lu K'uan Yu's translation of the daily lectures given by the great Master Xuyun at two seven-day retreats at the Jade Buddha Monastery in Shanghai in 1953, and this includes some information about the events themselves.[1] Another is an account of a seven-day period of intensive Chan training given by Master Nanhuai Jin at Yangming Shan, Peitou, in Taiwan in 1962. This account, translated by Margaret Yuan and Janis Walker,[2] is full of details regarding the events, participants' responses to the master, and the master's own discourses and interjections. On both occasions the participants were Chinese and the retreats were conducted in that language.

This book provides thorough details of two Chan retreats led in Britain by Master Sheng-yen of Dharma Drum Mountain and the Institutes of Chung-Hwa Buddhist Culture in Taipei and New York. The events arose from my own training with him on retreats in New York, and from my wish that friends who had participated in Western Zen retreats with me at my retreat house, The Maenllwyd, in Wales, should also have the opportunity of working with him. We are deeply grateful to him for having responded three times to our invitations. The master's talks were spoken in Mandarin and interpreted immediately by Mr Ming Yee Wang whose English renderings have been used to construct the text of both parts of this book.

My task as editor was not an easy one. I was engaging in an exercise in hermeneutics,[3] an interpretation of the teaching in which my own subjectivity was highly engaged. The result is my personal rendering in prose of Mr Wang's recorded interpretations, and Master Sheng-yen, in consultation with Mr Wang, has approved this text.

Part I, preceded by an autobiographical account of the master's life, describes the first retreat in 1989 and the master's particular methods, together with edited versions of all the talks, short and long, given during our time together.

Part II comprises the edited texts of talks given by Master Sheng-yen during his visit of 1995, again with Mr Wang translating. The master had also been with us in 1993 but after that occasion it was not possible to prepare an account of the proceedings. On both these retreats Master Sheng-yen taught us the valuable Caodong (Soto in Japanese) method of Silent Illumination, particularly from the writings of Chan Master Hongzhi Zhenjue (1090–1157). Master Sheng-yen had come to feel that this method was particularly appropriate in Britain, where in 1989 he had requested me to lead retreats as his representative after confirming my understanding in Chan. As I felt a strong affinity with Silent Illumination his instruction was a guide to my own teaching.

Part II is a continuous narrative in the same order in which Master Sheng-yen developed his presentation. I have not felt it to be useful here to describe other details of the retreat, which were similar to those of the first one. The talks are especially valuable because they not only present the method of practice, but also discuss conditions for effective training, principles for use and the attitude essential for progress. The discussions of Hongzhi's texts are original and richly rewarding.

Part III provides an account of my personal experiences in training on retreats with Master Sheng-yen over a number of years, together with some dialogues between us. I have included these texts in order to provide beginners with some idea of the experience of participants in retreat practice. Of course, every individual has his or her own personal story, yet experience in running retreats tells me that many aspects are common to most participants.[4] Training on retreat is no easy matter yet the rewards can be highly significant in opening new perspectives on one's life.

The book closes with brief descriptions of a time spent with Master Sheng-yen in London after our first retreat, and gives an impression of a time of informal companionship spent with the master.

We beginners have to realise that, valuable as such training may be, it cannot be as thorough as monastic experience over many years. In a monastery, progress comes gradually and, plausibly, more deeply. It behoves lay people to adopt an appropriate humility, for any advance is commonly blocked by the problems of daily life. Experiences on retreats are apt to contrast markedly with everyday life and to relate uncertainly to it. For this reason, lay practitioners are encouraged to develop a daily life practice for use outside retreats. Essentially this requires one to adopt an appropriate Chan attitude because, should one be unable to bring about some change in everyday life, the value of attending retreat becomes questionable.

In 1989, the Bristol Chan Group was formed to continue the practices Master Sheng-yen had taught us and I was asked to act as teacher. As such, my task is to continue my training and to present the Dharma to others as best I may. When I asked how to do this in Europe, I was told that that was something I would have to find out for myself, as I knew European culture better than the master! In Britain we created the Western Chan Fellowship in 1997 as a nationwide institution with charitable status.

I now facilitate retreats regularly in Britain and lead retreats in Warsaw, Zagreb and Berlin and have led one in St Petersburg. I am also a member of the francophone Groupe de Recherches et d'Etudes sur le Zen of the Université Bouddhique Européene in Paris. The problems of lay training in Chan have featured frequently in our WCF journal, *New Chan Forum*, where accounts of our retreats and other writings on Chan may be found, and which has a site on the World Wide Web. The present book will become an essential training text for our new institution and is therefore dedicated to all those who join us in our endeavour.

I gratefully acknowledge the help provided me by several members of the Chan Center at Elmhurst, Queens in New York, especially the critical readings by Ming Yee Wang and The Venerable Guo-gu Shi, and conversations with Professor Dan Stevenson and Stuart Lachs. Chris Marano and Ernest Heau combed through the texts of parts I and II respectively with exemplary diligence, rooting out ineffective expressions, tidying the punctuation and improving the phrasing. I owe particular thanks to

Ming Yee Wang for the high quality of his on-the-spot interpretation of Shi fu's talks into British English from which I trust I have been able to capture something of the flavour of the master's discourse. The Venerable Guo-gu Shi kindly provided the translations of Hongzhi's verse in part II. Steve Kanney diligently proof-read the final manuscript. Iris Wang's efforts in bringing this book to publication are much appreciated. Master Sheng-yen has of course been consulted throughout the preparation of this book, giving me encouragement when doubts assailed me. To him we owe our heartfelt thanks and deep respect.

John Crook Ph.D., DSc.
(Chuan Deng Jing Di)
July 2001

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[1] Lu K'uan Yu. 1960. *Ch'an and Zen Teachings.* First series. London. Century.

[2] Yuan, M. and Walker, J. 1986. *Grass Mountain: A Seven-Day Intensive in Ch'an Training with Master Nanhuai Chin*. York Beach, Maine. Samuel Weiser Inc.

[3] Habermas understands a hermeneutic exercise of this kind as one in which 'the meaning discloses itself to the interpreter only to the extent that his own world becomes clarified at the same time. The subject of understanding establishes communication between both worlds.' See 1971 *Knowledge and Human Interests.* Boston. Beacon Press. p. 309. See also discussion of hermeneutic work in East–West psychology by Anand Peranjpe in his introduction to: Peranjpe, A.C., D.Y.F. Ho and R.W. Reiber (eds). 1988. *Asian Contributions to Psychology.* New York. Praeger. pp. 31–32.

[4] For other people's retreat reports see issues of the *New Chan Forum* where such reporting is regularly presented.

The AUTOBIOGRAPHY of MASTER SHENG-YEN

I was born into a family of poor farmers who lived in the countryside outside Shanghai. My peasant father did not have his own land, but worked in the rice fields owned by others. He was a kind man and I never saw him angry. Both my parents were intelligent, but my father said very little, while my mother was more forthcoming. I had three brothers and two sisters. My brothers remained on the land, and none of my brothers or sisters was interested in becoming a monk or a nun.

As a child I was very slow to develop, and only when I was six did I start talking. Even then I couldn't tell left from right, nor tell the time. When I was seven, the master who was to become my first teacher wanted to find a disciple. He asked the Buddha where to look. The Buddha told him to go to the source of the Yangtze River, so he looked in that direction. One of his lay followers happened to be a neighbour of ours. One day, when it was pouring with rain, he was walking by and stopped in front of our house. The rain was so heavy that he came into our house to escape the downpour. As he was talking to my mother, he noticed a small boy in the room – myself. He asked my mother whether it would be alright if this little boy became a monk. My mother said, 'Oh, that is his choice; if he wants to, that's fine by me.' So the man asked me if I would like to be a monk, but I did not know what a monk was!

Nevertheless, he wrote down my name and my birth date and put them up in front of his Buddha image and left them there. Half a year later, he came back and asked if this was the correct choice.

And the Buddha said yes. You know in some Chinese temples the sticks of the *I-jing* book of divination are used to choose disciples, but the method whereby I was chosen was very unusual in China.

At the age of eight I started primary school, and in my fourth year of school the war between Japan and China started. At thirteen I left school to become an ordained monk, which meant having my head shaved by Lun Wei, the monk who sought me out, and I studied with him for five years. His own master had been the great Chan Master Xuyun, so I am in Xuyun's lineage in the Linji (Rinzai) tradition. None of us young monks had any idea of the nature of Chan training, and we received no adequate instruction. We simply followed the rigorous discipline of monks – washing clothes, working in the fields, and performing daily services. I had to memorise sutras and at this I proved singularly inept. My master told me that my karmic obstructions were very heavy and made me prostrate endlessly to Guanyin, Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva. I prostrated five hundred times every night, and again in the morning. After three months I felt a curiously refreshing experience. My mind became clear and I no longer found memorisation a problem. Even today I believe Guanyin came to my aid, for I was really very dull of mind until that time.

None of us knew anything of the history of Buddhism either in China or India, and few Chinese had any understanding of the Dharma or much respect for it. Buddhism was still in severe decline and the monasteries provided little in the way of an appropriate education. What education there was, was through daily experience. I felt the value of the teachings, but was sad that they were venerated by so few. I vowed to study so that I might bring the teachings to others. Due to the spread of Communism we moved into Shanghai where we monks made ends meet by performing the rituals for the dead. Eventually, I ran away from my monastery to study at a school in the city where young monks could obtain some formal instruction. My master eventually approved of this move.

The seminary was founded by Master Taixu who, with Master Xuyun, revived Chinese Buddhism in the early twentieth century. Taixu followed the line of thought of the great Ming dynasty master Ou-i, who disapproved of sectarianism, insisting that there was really

only one Buddhist tradition with varying aspects. He placed equal emphasis on the eight schools – Huayan, Tiantai, Chan, Weishi which is Cittamatra, Vinaya, Zhonguan which is Madhyamaka, Jingtu which is Pure Land, and Tantra. I studied history and the Tiantai, Huayan, Weishi, and Vinaya teachings. There was also an emphasis on the physical exercises of tai chi and boxing. Also, ritual repentance was much stressed. We practised meditation but without adequate instruction. I simply did not know what I was supposed to be doing. I puzzled over this so much that I became a great bag of doubt. Only when 'the bottom fell out of the barrel' were we allowed to see the master, but nobody seemed to know what this meant and my doubts could not be resolved at this time.

The war years were very bad. When the exiled Chinese government went to Taiwan I was in the army and went with them, so between the ages of eighteen and twenty-eight I was a soldier. There was no way I could leave the army between 1949 and 1959. After that I became a monk again and lived in a temple in Taiwan, and edited the magazine *Humanity.* I was in training, of course, and attended retreats. The great doubt persisted – I was constantly wondering what enlightenment or buddhahood was. There were so many contradictions in the teachings that I could make no sense of them. The deeper I looked, the worse it became.

When I was twenty-eight I had a profound experience of dropping the mind. I had been practising a lot and had had some small experiences, yet all these questions kept running through my head. I went on retreat in a monastery in southern Taiwan where a famous monk, Lingyuan, was visiting. One night he and I were sharing the same sleeping platform. Seeing that he was meditating, I sat with him. These questions were going round and round in a circle, one leading to another. They were all about the nature of vexations, life and death. After some hours, it was past midnight and these questions became intolerable. I asked the master whether I could ask him a question. He said yes. But when I started there was this sudden flow of questions. Like water they all poured out of my mouth. It went on and on for two to three hours. I really felt I needed answers from this monk who seemed free and easy in himself. All he did was to listen. He said nothing or simply asked, 'Any more?' It

was very strange. I had started with one question and suddenly there was this endless flow. It was the ‘great ball of doubt.’ Finally, the master suddenly sighed, lifted his hand, and struck the bed hard. ‘Put it down,’ he said. Suddenly my mind seemed to snap. I was pouring with sweat and felt a great weight being suddenly lifted from me. There was nothing there. It seemed that there was no problem anywhere in the world. Everything had gone. We simply sat on, not saying a word. I was extremely happy. The next day the whole world was fresh as if I were seeing it for the first time.

In the practice of meditation it is not possible to ‘see the nature’ through willing it, or even intending it. You have to let go into purposeless practice. If there is purpose, the discriminating mind is active and the ego is present. You just work hard on your method. It is not waiting. It is not even notwaiting. It is essential to bring positive causal conditions together so that one can practise under the guidance of someone who has sufficient insight to be a guide. Not just any teacher will do.

When I had at last left the army, I found a certain Master Dongchu who I sensed to be an extraordinary individual. He neither lectured nor gave instructions on practice. Yet, seeking neither fame nor followers, he was widely respected. He was an heir to both the Linji and the Caodong lineages. His way of speaking was startling and could affect people deeply. My stay with him was rough indeed. He treated me much as Marpa, the great Tibetan lama, had treated his disciple Milarepa. He would tell me to move into one room, and then into another, and then back again at once. He told me to seal off a door in a wall and open another. Although we used a gas stove, I had to fetch logs from high up in the hills, so that he could brew tea over them. I never got the wood the right size; it was always too large or too small. Similarly, when I sat, he would say, ‘You cannot become a buddha by sitting. Mirrors are not made by polishing bricks.’ I was then ordered to do prostrations. After several days he would say, ‘This is nothing but a dog eating shit. Go and read the sutras.’ So I would read for a couple of weeks. And he would say, ‘The patriarchs thought the sutras only good for cleaning sores. Go and write an essay’ When I had done it, he would tear it up saying, ‘These are only stolen ideas. Using your original wisdom say

something!' Whatever I did was wrong even when I had done exactly what he had told me to do. Furthermore, because we were supposed to meditate at night, he wouldn't let me keep a blanket for sleeping. This harsh teaching was actually very compassionate. Without him I would not have realised much. The message was that one had to become self-reliant in the practice. So after two years I decided to go into solitary retreat in the mountains. I told him I had vowed to practise hard so as to not fail the Dharma. 'You are wrong,' he said. 'What is this Dharma? What is Buddhism? The important thing is not to fail yourself!'

After that, I found a remote spot in the mountains and did a solitary retreat for six years. I lived in a small hut that looked out onto a cliff. There was a small courtyard and, although I always remained within it, I never felt closed in. All the time

I felt calm and settled as if I had come home. I ate one meal a day of wild potato leaves which I planted myself. Originally, I only intended to do three years. During the first one, I spent most of the time doing repentance prostrations. The second year I spent in meditation and reading sutras. And the third was the same. Then I realised there was simply not time enough, so I continued but also began to read and study. I also started to do research and to write. In this manner I spent half my time meditating and half in study.

After six years I had written several books and learned to read Japanese. I then stopped my retreat and went to Japan for further studies, taking a doctorate in Buddhist literature at Rissho University in Tokyo. I also went on retreats especially with Bantetsugu Roshi, a disciple of Harada Roshi. I attended winter-long retreats at his temple in the harsh environment of northern Japan. He was particularly scathing about my learning and studying at university. When I left him, he told me to go and teach in America. I complained that I did not know English. He said, 'Do you think Zen is taught with words? Why worry about words?'

Part I

CATCHING a FEATHER on a FAN

Introduction

Wales was doing what it knows best; the rain was pelting down into a dark night, the farmside stream was rushing tumultuously downhill and the ash twigs lashed together above the house. Indoors a fire crackled in the hearth, and the first arrivals for the retreat were finding their way damply to bed places in attics and the neighbouring barn. Suddenly a cry went up, ‘He’s here!’

A battered Volkswagen van had pulled up in the muddy yard and, as I opened the front door, a very tired Chan master was getting a shoe full of water as he stepped out. He had just completed some fifty hours of air travel and the long drive from Heathrow to reach us. Although extremely tired, he warmed up in front of the fire, inspected his accommodation and the house, and quickly began to appreciate the company. Within an hour he had grasped the reins and begun the first Chan retreat led by a master at The Maenllwyd.

I had first heard of Master Sheng-yen during a visit to Hong Kong in 1985 to pay my respects to my original teacher in Zen, the Venerable Shi Yen Wai, the director of Po Lin monastery on Lan Dao Island.[5] Although I had several marvellous last meetings with him it was clear that, due to his age and deafness, he was at the end of his teaching career. It seemed important to begin the search for a younger master from whom I could receive guidance. I was visiting a Buddhist bookshop downtown when I came across a copy of *Getting the Buddha Mind*; indeed I could hardly avoid it, since it was the only title in English there. I much enjoyed reading this work and I realised that, rather than searching around in the Far East, it would be easier to cross the Atlantic to sit with Master Sheng-yen in his New York centre. After I had attended two ‘Chan Seven’ retreats with him and enjoyed several lengthy and highly constructive personal conversations, he kindly consented to come to Britain to run a retreat

for those who, for some years, had been pursuing the Dharma with me in ‘Western Zen’ retreats at my small Welsh farmhouse.

This part of the book consists primarily of the twenty talks that Master Sheng-yen delivered to us on different occasions during the ensuing retreat. When the retreat closed, he requested me to make a book out of these recorded talks because he had given us a much more detailed presentation than was usual on such events. He told us he had unpacked his bags and let us view all his wares. In fulfilling this task I have therefore had the pleasure of receiving his instruction many times over as I wrestled with problems of presentation.

Master Sheng-yen is the founder of the new Dharma Drum Mountain Buddhist Association[6] incorporating the Chung Hwa Institute of Buddhist Studies in Taipei in Taiwan, and a related institute in the USA which also runs the Chan Meditation and Retreat Centres in New York. Master Shengyen is also abbot of a monastery in Taipei and a professor in the university philosophy department.

Chan students call their master ‘Shifu’, meaning teacher, a term equivalent to the better-known Japanese ‘roshi’. I shall refer to Master Sheng-yen as ‘Shifu’ throughout most of this text. In order to present us with an orthodox retreat, Shifu brought with him Guo Yuan Shi , a monk in residence at the Chan Center, New York and, at the time of writing, its abbot, who acted as organiser, disciplinarian and leader of chant – a man whose kindly charm won all our hearts. Also present was Mr Ming Yee Wang, an interpreter, whose skills at rendering long passages of speech with eloquence, precision and wit earned him our profound admiration. The ‘team’, as we called them, certainly fielded a strong side and it became up to us practitioners to match them with our responsiveness. In that Shifu taught us so thoroughly, I feel we did not entirely fail to rise to the occasion. I acted as guestmaster.

The Retreat

A Chan retreat is a period of intensive training that usually lasts seven days. The daily schedule was rigorous. Boards were hit at 4 a.m. for a speedy rise leading to an assembly for physical exercises at 4.15. At this time Shifu spoke briefly to give us a number of highly

useful perspectives for the day. There were then three sitting periods, each of half-hour duration, before the morning liturgy was chanted. Breakfast followed in the same silence that characterised the whole event. After breakfast there was an hour's work period for which each participant had been allocated a job, washing up, cleaning, bringing in logs, replacing candles – for we have no electricity – or filling paraffin stoves. One or two people would steal a few minutes' rest after work, but this was not on the programme. Officially it was back to voluntary meditation or walking meditatively. Work period over, there followed five sitting periods between which, except for the last two, there were periods of standing yoga, sitting yoga, slow and fast walking. Since the house is small, the walking and running went on in a circle around the centre of a nearby field – much to the amusement of our local sheep farmer friend. After lunch and another work period there were a further five sittings with similar breaks until the evening chant of the Mengshan Offering. Supper followed, and then a period for washing and rest before the talk by the master at about 7 p.m. The day ended with three further sittings without breaks for exercises – simply a stretch or a brief massage. At 10 p.m. it was bedtime – unless one wished to sit further into the night.

Needless to say this gruelling schedule is a severe test for each participant's determination, ability to endure physical and mental pain, and capacity to resist fatigue. Why anyone should attempt it only becomes apparent after the first several days are over – even for those who have completed similar retreats before! Only one special dispensation was allowed us – tea and cake in the afternoon, a genuflection to a Maenllwyd tradition.

A Chan retreat is perhaps less well known in the West than its Japanese equivalent, the Zen *sesshin.* It is therefore appropriate to provide some notes on the contrast between these two forms of Buddhist training. The differences between them are a reflection of the contrasting histories of the Zen tradition in the two countries, and doubtless also of the cultural temperament of two civilisations. Both terms, 'Chan' and 'Zen', derive from transliterations of the original Sanskrit word 'dhyana', which simply means meditation. Chan and Zen derive therefore from the same root, Dhyana Buddhism, the

doctrines of which first reached Chinese shores with the arrival of the legendary Bodhidharma in the sixth century ce. The particularity of this sect was its emphasis on the fundamental importance of meditation as the direct approach to an understanding of the Buddhadharma. The famous verse attributed to Bodhidharma beautifully encapsulates this emphasis:

> *A special transmission outside the scriptures*
> *No dependence upon words or letters*
> *Direct pointing to the human heart*
> *Seeing into one's own nature.*

The emphasis throughout the long history of Chan in both China and Japan was therefore always upon meditation rather than upon intellectual knowledge or devotional exercise. The aim is to recapture the Buddha's own experience under the Bodhi Tree. Yet the manner and method of this practice varied, and sectarian differences, which were often surprisingly loudly argued, stressed different ways of proceeding within the same fundamental view.

When Chan was transmitted to Japan from China, the sectarian divide between the Linji and Caodong sects, with their respective methods of meditation, was well established. Hence we have come to associate Rinzai with koan practice, and Soto with *shikantaza*, or 'just sitting', facing a wall. Subsequently, however, Buddhism in China went through a period of severe decline during which many sects disappeared and the doctrine fell into disrepute. Chan survived better than most other sects, but in such small units and numbers that surviving groups tended to support each other, with a resulting amalgamation of methods and practices. When the great Chan Master Xuyun restored both monasteries and practice in the first half of the century, thus giving Buddhism a new life in China, the methods he taught were derived from both the Caodong and the Linji traditions, with a liberal dose of Pure Land Buddhism as well. This eclectic approach, far from weakening Chan in China, gave it a width and flexibility which it retains, and which makes it particularly valuable in the West. Furthermore, whereas in Japan young men had to be trained quickly in order to inherit the temples of their

fathers, in China this pressure was latterly much less in evidence. The need to induce an enlightenment experience in young Japanese priests before they could be considered qualified as temple occupants, led to a system of schooling that emphasised harshness and which, particularly within the Rinzai tradition, became associated with a degree of militarism that is not apparent in Chan, and which has recently received considerable critical comment.[7] Strict as Chan is, there is a vein of humanism here that sometimes seems lacking in Japanese methods with their stress on Dharma heroism.

The argumentative relations that have often obtained between the different Chan sects, and which tend to crop up even today, should not be supposed to be based on matters of substance. Both the main sects take their viewpoint from the *prajnaparamita* literature of India, which is largely interpreted according to the *tathagatagarbha* doctrine. The differences concern methods of practice and the mode of enlightenment whereby 'seeing the nature' (*kensho* in Japanese) comes into view. In fact, modern Japanese Zen is itself largely based on an eclectic fusion of Rinzai and Soto methods created by Harada Roshi, who was a Soto teacher who had also studied koan under Rinzai masters. This approach was brought to America by Yasutani Roshi who, like his master, emphasised the importance of an initial *kensho.* The tradition of Dogen (Soto) by contrast stresses that practice, *when rightly understood*, is itself enlightenment. This emphasis was brought to the USA by both Shunryu Suzuki Roshi and Jiyu Kennett Roshi. In Britain, Throssel Hole Abbey in Northumberland, founded by Kennett Roshi, stresses Dogen's Soto while the Zen Centre in London, founded by Dr Irmgard Schloegel, The Venerable Myokyo-ni, emphasises the Rinzai approach. Trainees in both traditions should no doubt recall Yasutani Roshi's opinion that 'Rinzai and Soto have their respective strong and weak points, but, since strong points are liable to change into weak points and evils, by correctly learning each kind of Zen the strong points of both are taken in … each [teacher] may devise his characteristic methods of guidance without imitating anyone, in accordance with the times and adapting to the country.'[8] Chinese Chan, in its own way, has come to a very similar viewpoint and sustains a notably broad range of practices.

The View

Shifu is a second-generation descendant in the lineage of Master Xuyun and has inherited his broad approach. He has received transmissions from within the lineages of both the Caodong and the Linji traditions, and these he has now combined as his Dharma Drum approach. Furthermore, having trained in Japan, where he also received a doctorate in Buddhist literature, he is thoroughly familiar with Japanese approaches. His first emphasis is therefore upon neither the koan nor upon *shikantaza*, but rather upon the negotiation of a choice of method that suits the practitioner. This is a very 'user friendly' approach, permitting the construction of a custom-built practice best suited to the needs and difficulties of individual trainees. Furthermore, he is extremely cautious about encouraging his trainees to seek enlightenment in a way that presupposes craving and creates a misleading tension and expectations. Words like 'enlightenment' and *kensho* only rarely pass his lips. He makes it quite clear that his retreats are for the development of practice. Like Dogen, the great Japanese Soto master and philosopher, I suspect he sees training and enlightenment as inseparable. To Shifu the purpose of retreat is as follows:

1 To realise one is not in control of one's own mind
2 To discover how to train one's mind in awareness
3 To calm the mind
4 To practise with an individually suitable method that will yield insight or prajna
5 To provide opportunities for repentance and thus to regain a pure mind
6 To train in replacing ignorance by wisdom through insight.

The methods used are watching the breath, counting the breath, *huatou* practice and Silent Illumination. As will be discussed in the talks that follow, the purpose of watching and counting the breath is to focus the mind onto an intentional act so that wandering thoughts are reduced. With practice it becomes possible to shift the attention

from the breath itself to the mental ‘space’ within which the experience of breathing happens. This process is sometimes described by the Chinese word *t’san*, which means, ‘to enter, to go into, to penetrate, to investigate’. In the current context, this means seeing the whole of a process rather than a part. It applies also to *huatou* practice. The *huatou* is a short phrase, often in the form of a question, which may be a crucial phrase from a *gong’an* or koan story. While an attempt to analyse the question ‘Who is dragging this old corpse along?’ may help to exhaust the mind of intellection and hence lead to a non-conceptual insight, the more direct approach is simply to witness the space in which this question moves. In Xuyun’s teaching it is the task of the trainee to shift his attention from that of a ‘guest’ to that of a ‘host’. The guest is a wandering thought, a breath or a *huatou.* It is the figure standing against a ground that is the host, within which the mind is gradually brought to settle.[9]

While Master Sheng-yen may use the contemplation of a *gong’an* as a method, he is wary of it. He says that the habit of working with antique stories is like resurrecting dead corpses. Old koans are dead koans. Furthermore, familiarity with them shows that many are essentially similar, so that it becomes possible to ‘crack’ a series of related koans quickly. This calls into question a system in which advancement through a series of koans constitutes progress. Cracking one may crack a set, but is this one resolution or many? The only relevant koans, according to Shifu, are those that refer to the self in its present situation. The only live koan is actually yourself. As Dogen said, the koan arises in daily life. It is not essential to use a fabricated one. Here we are reminded of the Kamakura warrior koans. When the Chinese monk Diakaku came to Kamakura in the thirteenth century he knew little Japanese, and his students knew little of the Chinese classical Chan literature. So, instead of classical koans, he invented simple direct questions arising out of the immediate experiences of his trainees. The method was vibrant and yielded a positive response.[10] This is instructive for Westerners today.

Methods such as watching the breath or *t’san* with a *huatou* are to be done within the maintenance of a firm sitting posture, preferably facing a wall. Shifu emphasises the desirability of an alert,

formal posture, with the back erect but not strained, the head straight with slight forward inclination, crossed legs and eyes open. However, he is not so insistent on the unmoving maintenance of a rigid posture as are some Japanese teachers. He recognises that most lay Westerners, who do not spend many hours a week meditating, have difficulties with maintaining the appropriate posture over the long hours of a retreat. There is a lot of leg and back pain. For these relatively inexperienced practitioners it is more significant to develop the mental practice than to agonise over the body too intensively. The use of special stools and variant postures is therefore tolerated and movements may be made so long as they are restrained.

Silent Illumination is the prime method of the Caodong tradition, known in Japan in a variant form as *shikantaza.* In this practice the maintenance of a still posture is important and the mind meditates upon its basic stillness. Of course the difficulties in remaining within this stillness are considerable, primarily because of the rising of wandering thoughts and drowsiness. Unlike working with a *huatou*, the mind has not been given an intentional task and it is all the more difficult to set wandering thoughts aside. Shifu says[11] that he has not often recommended this method in spite of its frequent use in Zen circles. This is because, to benefit from it, there needs to be a firm practice already established. If the mind is much given to wandering, the attempt to practise Silent Illumination can be frustrating and non-productive. 'You must be at a stage where there's no problem becoming settled, when you can sit with unbroken concentration, with almost no outside thoughts … It is hard to tell whether your mind is "bright and open" or just blank. You can just be idling, having very subtle thoughts, and believe you are practising Silent Illumination. You can be silent without illuminating anything.' There needs to be both silence and illumination present in a mutual reinforcement. Yet the method, once acquired, is very powerful:

> *Silently and serenely one forgets all words,*
> *Clearly and vividly it appears before you.*
> *When one realises it, time has no limits,*
> *When experienced, your surroundings come to life.*[12]

In a conversation with me, Shifu compared the methods of *gong'an* and Silent Illumination. In *gong'an* practice the mind generates a great 'mass of doubt' as it seeks to penetrate the meaning of the example. Similarly the *huatou* may be used to generate the same doubt. The intensity of this enquiry is such that the mind is literally possessed by preoccupation with the task. There is no room for anything else. In the course of the work, all aspects of personal being are drawn into this central inferno of questioning: bodily aches and pains, personal karma, unresolved relationships, metaphysical anxieties, alienation from the divine, the thought of death, are all dragged together at one point. When the mind is fully unified, the whole person has gathered, as it were, at one place. It is then that resolution may suddenly occur. Shifu's own first experience of *kensho* was of this type, as he described above in his autobiography. However, 'seeing the nature' does not always arise precisely in this manner. Master Xuyun, after a period of deep concentration, was taking tea. Suddenly, as tea was being poured, he dropped the cup. Then it happened. The nun Shiyono, after years of unenlightened endeavour, was crossing the yard at night carrying a pail of water. The moon shone and was reflected in the bucket. Suddenly the bamboo handle broke and the water spilled all over the yard. 'No more water, no more moon – emptiness in my hand.'[13] Shifu acknowledges that transcendental or mystical experiences, perhaps of a psychologically identical form, occur naturally in many religious practices and that they also occur to poets, such as Wordsworth, naturalists such as Thoreau or Richard Jefferies – indeed to almost any kind of person. The significance of the *kensho* in Chan, said Shifu, was related to background work within the Dharma. An understanding of self as emptiness, rather than as an inherently existing subject, provides the *kensho* experience with its unique insight into the 'reality' of impermanence.

The practice of Silent Illumination yields insight in a rather different way. Here there is a gradual stilling of the mind into a thoughtless state. The mind – that endless social calculus – comes to an end and an illumination of quiet joy arises, a release into a pure awareness reflecting that-which-is as if in a mirror. It is from such a point that 'seeing the nature' may happen. In D.T. Suzuki's phrase

this consists in ‘the absence of the separateness implied by being conscious of either oneself or of the koan’.[14] In the absence of this separateness there is simply what-is, shining with a pristine clarity.

In retreat with Shifu, the decision to use one of these methods is negotiated in interview. Shifu takes into account the understanding of self and life shown by the practitioner’s presence at interview and also his or her prior work within the Dharma. However, a rigidity of method is not imposed, as Shifu’s emphasis is very much on flexibility according to what arises. For example, a *gong’an* may suddenly arise within the context of ‘just sitting’. According to context, Shifu may suggest that such a *gong’an* should then be followed. This parallels Dogen’s view that koans arise in everyday life and do not have to be preconstituted. Although Shifu lectures with an interpreter, he interviews directly in English. He is not so much concerned with what is being said, but with what is happening within the individual process. Westerners testify to his acute perception that transcends the barriers of language.

The task of the master on retreat is to facilitate the movement of the practitioner towards a deeper and more insightful practice. Sometimes this may involve draconian methods, as when a fierce approach can deepen the mass of doubt to breaking point. Such fierceness may be entirely appropriate, particularly in the Rinzai tradition. It is a paradoxical aspect of compassion. Yet, where trainees with a range of aptitudes and methods are present, a more balanced approach and quick responsiveness to a range of trainee states is called for. I have been told that when Shifu first gave retreats in New York he was much fiercer, using the *kyosaku* (the master’s ‘incense’ stick) liberally to assist sitters, and flipping it lightly at running legs to speed up fast running in the gaps between sessions. Today, his approach is milder, reflecting the aptitudes of his sitters, many of whom are lay people from a wide range of walks of life.

The personal interview (*dokusan* in Japanese) is the key element in the contact between master and trainee. Shifu has the ability to assume many appearances. At interview he may appear remote, severe, totally detached and disinterested, even withering, waiting for you to produce something worthwhile and dismissing you

when you don't. Or he may appear compassionate and caring while always returning the problem to the trainee. He may be humorous, engaging one as would a close friend. He may reveal an unfathomable depth that leaves the mind groping to go after him. There may be silence or speech. There is always presence. Each comes to know him through their own karma. Shifu is a master of skilful means.

Ritual in Retreat

The chanting and repetition of *dharanis* or mantras form part of the liturgies that punctuate the retreat every morning and evening. These liturgies, chanted or spoken in both Chinese and English, are shortened versions of the daily monastic practices. Liturgical practice locates the retreat within the lineage and brings up feelings of aspiration and gratitude. The *Heart Sutra* is a central pivot of the liturgy, both morning and evening, evoking the centrality of the insight into form as emptiness and emptiness as form. Here, the pivotal position of the philosophical view stemming from the *prajnaparamita* sutras is reaffirmed.

Every morning we chant Samantabhadra Bodhisattva's Ten Vows:

> *The first, to worship and respect all buddhas.*
> *The second, to praise the tathagatas.*
> *The third, to cultivate the giving of offerings.*
> *The fourth, to repent all karmic obstructions.*
> *The fifth, to rejoice in the merits of others.*
> *The sixth, to request the turning of the Dharma wheel.*
> *The seventh, to request that the buddhas dwell in the world.*
> *The eighth, to always follow the buddhas in study.*
> *The ninth, to always harmonise with living beings.*
> *The tenth, to transfer all merits to others.*

This is followed by the Four Great Vows:

I vow to deliver innumerable sentient beings.
I vow to cut off endless vexations.
I vow to master limitless approaches to Dharma.
I vow to attain supreme buddhahood.

The morning; liturgy ends with the Three Refuges:

I take refuge in Buddha and I wish all sentient beings will awaken to the great path and make the supreme resolution.
I take refuge in Dharma and I wish all sentient beings will penetrate the sutras, their wisdom as deep as the ocean.
I take refuge in Sangha, and I wish all sentient beings will be brought together in great harmony without any obstructions at all.

The evening liturgy is the *Mengshan Liturgy of Food Bestowal.* This is an offering of spiritual food to all sentient beings and especially to the hungry ghosts wandering between lives in karmic distress. One may interpret this literally, as was no doubt the original intention, or read into it the meaning that all of us at some time or another are ourselves lonely souls or hungry ghosts, beset with grasping and desire, and experiencing the depths of depression, or other hells of the mind. The liturgy begins with the important statement:

To know all the buddhas
of the past, present and future
perceive that Dharmadhatu nature
is all created by the mind.

There follows a series of mantras, or power words, the recitation of which has the following functions: firstly to break the powers of hell, secondly to invite all beings universally to the offering, thirdly to loosen their knots of oppression. Homages and the Three Refuges are then chanted and a general repentance is made:

All bad karma created by Buddhists,
sentient beings and lonely souls,
comes from greed, hatred and ignorance
since time without beginning,
arising out of body, speech and mind.
For all this sentient beings do repent.

Mantras then continue: to absolve karmic obstructions, to open the constricted throats of hungry ghosts, to affirm the precepts, to convert the food into *amrita.* More homages to the tathagatas (buddhas) follow and then the food is blessed:

Powerful mantras bless the pure food given universally
to beings as countless as the Ganges' sands. May they all
give up grudging and greed and quickly escape darkness
to be born in the Pure Land … etc.

The food, which is rice and water mixed at the time, is then offered with the wish that the merits of the offering be extended everywhere. Mantras of offering are recited as the food is taken outside and donated. The recitation of the *Heart Sutra* follows, and then come the Four Great Vows. The assembly is then warned:

This day has passed.
Our lives too are closing,
Like fish with little water
Joy will not last.
Let us work with pure effort,
Work as we would were our heads aflame.
Be mindful of impermanence.
Be careful of idleness.

The ceremony closes with the Three Refuges and a short prayer transferring merit to others.[15]

The Text of Calming the Mind

The talks are presented in the order in which they were given. The reader should know, however, that these talks were of two kinds. Talks given in the early morning and at meal times were immediate responses to the retreat situations and gave specific comment or instructions to the participants. The evening talks were discourses upon the poem *Calming the Mind* by Wang Ming, a Chinese master of the sixth century ce. Shifu said that his presentation of this poem was geared to the instruction of practitioners, many of whom were beginners. He has not spoken to his theme from an academic point of view. Essentially, we have here Shifu's own meditations on *Calming the Mind* as a transmission of the wisdom of the Chan patriarchs in our time. The reader may wish to examine these talks in their natural sequence or to select the evening talks as a separate series. In either case let us now proceed to listen. As Shifu said, this is an auspicious opportunity.

The text of *Calming the Mind* as translated by Shifu and his collaborators now follows:[16]

Too much knowledge leads to overactivity;
Better to calm the mind.
The more you consider, the greater the loss;
Better to unify the mind.

Excessive thinking weakens the will.
The more you know, the more your mind is confused
The confused mind gives rise to vexation.
The weakened will obstructs the Dao.

Don't say there is no harm in this,
The ensuing pain may last forever.
Don't think there is nothing to fear,
The calamities churn like bubbles in a boiling pot.

Water dripping ceaselessly
Will fill the four seas.
Specks of dust not wiped away

Will become the five mountains.

Protect the branches to save the roots;
Though a small matter, it is not trivial.
Close the seven orifices,
Shut off the six senses.

Pay no heed to forms;
Do not listen to sounds.
Listening to sounds you become deaf,
You become blind observing forms.

Literature and art
Are but busy gnats in the air;
Technique and ability
A solitary lamp in the sun.

Those able and talented ones
Are really stupid fellows.
Discarding the pure and simple
They drown in too much beauty.

Consciousness is an untamed horse,
The mind is an unruly monkey.
If the spirit is overactive,
The body will sicken and die.

Wrong conduct ends in delusion;
Those treading this path become mired in mud.
To regard ability as precious
Is called confusion.

To exaggerate clumsiness and covet skill
Does not lead to great virtue.
Of much fame but little contribution,
Their reputation quickly crumbles.

Merely reading books
Is of no lasting value.
Being inwardly proud
Brings the enmity of others.

Using speech
Or written words
To gain the praise of others
Is something most repulsive.

What common people regard as auspicious
The sage takes as evil.
The enjoyment gained is fleeting,
But the sorrow is everlasting.

Beware of shadows and tracks;
The farther you leave them the better.
Sitting upright in the shade of a tree,
Neither traces nor shadows remain.

Worries of birth and distress of old age
Are products of your own thoughts.
If the mind's thinking is ended,
Birth and death are forever cut off.

Not dying, not born,
Without form or name
The Dao is empty and tranquil.
The myriad phenomena are equal.

What is of value? What is cheap?
Where is there shame or glory?
What is excellent or inferior?
How can there be light or heavy?

The clear sky puts purity to shame.

No brightness compares with the brilliant sun.
Stable as Mount T'ai;
Steady as a golden wall.

I respectfully present this poem
to all virtuous ones
so that this Dao will forever remain.

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[5] For an account of my meetings with this teacher see Crook, J.H.1997. *Hilltops of the Hong Kong Moon*. London. Minerva.

[6] Dharma Drum Mountain is also the name of a vast estate north of Taipei where Shifu is building a new university, retreat centre, conference hall, museum and library.

[7] Victoria, B. 1997. *Zen at War*. Boston. Shambala.

[8] Fields, R. 1981. *How the Swans Came to the Lake*. Shambhala. p. 234.

[9] See further: Sheng-yen, Master. 1988. Tso-Ch'an in *Chung Hwa Buddhist Journal*. 2. pp. 361–386. Master Xuyun's approach is described in Lu K'uan Yu. 1960. *Ch'an and Zen Training.* First series. London. Century. The use of the *huatou* in Charles Berner's communication exercise of his *Enlightenment Intensives* as applied in the Western Zen Retreats of the Western Chan Fellowship is described in the two chapters by J.H. Crook in *Space in Mind: East–West Psychology and Contemporary Buddhism*, Crook, J.H. and D. Fontana (eds). Shaftesbury. Element.

[10] Leggett, T. 1985. *The Warrior Koans: Early Zen in Japan*. Arkana.

[11] Sheng-yen, Master. 1982. *Getting the Buddha Mind*. New York. Dharma Drum. p. 78 *et seq*. Also see his chapter in Kraft, K. 1988. *Zen Tradition: An Overview of Zen in the Modern World*. London. Rider.

[12] From *Silent Illumination* by Hongzhi in Sheng-yen, Master. 1987. *The Poetry of Enlightenment*. New York. Dharma Drum.

[13] Rajneesh, Bhagwan Shri. 1975. *No Water, No Moon*. Poona. Rajneesh Foundation.

[14] Fields, R. 1981. *How the Swans Came to the Lake*. Shambala. p. 138.

[15] This wording is edited from the *Liturgy for Morning and Evening Services*. Chan Meditation Center, 90–56 Corona Avenue, Elmhurst, New York 11373. The mantras themselves are Sanskrit originals of great antiquity, written as pronounced in Chinese. Dr D.T. Suzuki has attempted to provide translations from the Sanskrit reconstructed from the Chinese into English. See his *Manual of Zen Buddhism*. London. Rider. 1950 (second impression 1956). pp. 17–18.

[16] See Sheng-yen, Master. 1987. *The Poetry of Enlightenment*. New York. Dharma Drum.

DHARMA DISCOURSES

Arriving in Wales

I expect some of you can understand that getting to Wales has been somewhat like undergoing a Chan retreat! In the last three days we have spent over fifty hours on planes without a proper night's sleep and with a complete uncertainty as to whether we were actually going to arrive! Yet, here we are. And I can see you are all ready to begin. Everything is arranged. You all have your places marked and your jobs allocated. So we must certainly start at once.

You know that I intended to come here last year, but at that time we were not aware that I had to have a visa. Then, this year, we got the visa but, when we arrived at the Taipei airport, we found it had just expired. What an obstruction! The only thing to do was to fly at once to New York where it would be easy to get another visa. So we spent a few hours in New York and got on another plane. Would you believe it, the plane developed a fault before take-off and we all had to disembark. Of course we were very tired even by that time. You can understand, that at the moment, the only thought in my head is sleep. I shall not say very much now.

Actually I should tell you that we almost gave up the idea of coming. But then I thought of all the work you have done, John especially, in arranging this event and I felt that on no account could I let you down. So here I am. This is then a very precious occasion. Despite numerous obstacles it has come about. I hope each one of you will treasure the opportunity and work hard.

Now you tell me: how many of you have never experienced a retreat before? How many of you have done three or more retreats? Has anybody participated specifically in a retreat in the Soto tradition? Or in the Rinzai tradition? Has anybody read any of my books? Oh, two of them! Great. You will know that Zen – Chan in Chinese – is not for the purpose of getting instant enlightenment. Rather the practice itself is the goal. Most people think that 'seeing into one's own nature' using some method of instant enlightenment is a convenient and speedy path. But this is a severely erroneous

understanding. Of course there is enlightenment, but mostly there are false enlightenments. If you are very anxious to get enlightened, you can precipitate a kind of mistaken experience that you call ‘enlightenment’. That can be very sad.

After so much difficulty in getting here, I have not come to give you enlightenment. That would be absurd. Rather I have come to see whether it is possible to pass on to you the methods whereby you can improve your practice. It is like eating. We cannot expect to be filled by taking one mouthful and munching once or twice. We need to ingest a whole meal until we know we have had enough. We are going to use the methods of practice to benefit the body and mind. That is the most important thing.

There are a number of methods one can use. In the first interviews I will discuss with each one of you which method is best suited to your needs. To begin with, if you are in doubt, just count the breath. The other methods are Silent Illumination, which is similar to the *shikantaza* or ‘just sitting’ method of the Japanese Soto School. There are also the *huatou* and koan methods. We shall talk about these.

Just as we had problems in getting to Wales, so too will you encounter obstructions in the practice of your method. These arise from your own mind and body, not from elsewhere. One simply has to persist and continue with practice. Be prepared for struggle. We have six days ahead of us and even to recognise the obstructions is, in itself, the beginning of true practice.

In this small house we are hidden away in the mountains. The moment is auspicious. Now, sit.

Day One First Talk

First of all, we must understand that in Chan there is no fixed method. Each retreat is unique. It adapts itself to whoever is present, to the environment, and to the time. I am responsive to these things and trust intuitively in the way that I feel things can develop. Perhaps it is like going to a restaurant and looking at the menu, except that at the moment the menu is blank. Since this is my first visit to your country, we will work out together the best way to proceed. Maybe the style of New York or Taiwan is not suited to a small farmhouse in

the hills of Wales. We shall see. To begin let us set out some basic rules for the retreat.

No talking. Of course, for some jobs a few words need to be spoken, especially in arranging the cooking, for example. But, apart from such necessary interactions, there should be no conversation whatsoever. Talking about how you are, or how you think the retreat is going, is of no help to practice. It is just a distraction and it wastes the energy of a focused mind.

No noise. Keep yourselves tidy and quiet.

No thinking! For some tasks you need to consider what you are doing or to plan the sequence of your actions. But, for many jobs, thinking is not essential. Just let the hands do it. Let the mind be on whatever you are doing. Just do it, don't evaluate it or compare yourself with others. Put your mind on the job, on the eating, on the toilet. You do not need to judge what you are eating. All you need to do is fill the stomach to have the energy to practise.

No looking at others. It is of no value to you to see how others are doing or coping with problems. On a retreat, to consider how others are, is to fill the mind with inessential concerns; it is not your business.

No looking about, no listening to pleasing sounds. Keep the senses quiet. If you look around at the scenery you will start judging it. 'How beautiful the sunshine! Oh dear; here comes the rain!' Likewise with sounds, bird songs, tractors, and sheep bleating; treat them all the same. Pay no attention. Of course you will see and hear. But do not intentionally look about or evaluate sounds you hear. The aim is to stop the sources of discrimination.

No analysis of whatever is said in the talks or instructions. If I say something that is helpful to you, fine! If not, forget it!

Maintain your separateness. Each of you is quite independent. Don't pay any attention to whoever is sitting next to you, whether they are complaining or happy. In this world, all you know is yourself, nobody else. And, in fact, you don't know yourself either! The best thing on retreat is to keep the mind filled only with practice.

Be on time. There are plenty of toilets so there is no need to be late when the bell rings or the boards are struck. Indeed, unless you

are sick or there is some special reason, you should always be early and ready to sit on time.

The whole day is practice. Whether we are sitting, doing exercises, slow or fast walking, doing prostrations or cooking, listening to a talk – the whole focus is on the practice.

Now some questions for you. How old is the youngest here? And the oldest? Has anybody a heart problem, high blood pressure, migraines or other ailments? Is anybody undergoing psychotherapy? Who has had beneficial experiences from meditation of any kind previously?

We have all learned the schedule and been taught the signals for the various events. We will talk about posture and methods individually. I shall only use the incense stick[17] if you wish for it. It may be valuable when you are sleepy or distracted. But you must ask me. I won't use it unless you ask.

Now we can start. As many of you already know something of the benefits of meditation, we can have a valuable training period. Let us have six memorable days together. Interviews will begin this afternoon.

Day One Evening Lecture

I have only been in your country for a day but already I have learnt something about you people. You have a love for ancient things. This house is hundreds of years old. You treasure the old worm-eaten beams and the crumbling stone walls, the bent timbers of the old barn. In Taiwan we are busily engaged in pulling everything down and building up the new. In Chan, we treasure the old while making it always new. So it is appropriate here that I should talk to you about one of the oldest of the Chinese scriptures.

I don't know what was happening in Britain in the sixth century. In China it was the time of the Liang dynasty (502–556 ce). Buddhism was already established and Chan was developing. Yet, in those early years, the Chinese did not distinguish too clearly between their own Daoist ideas and those of the new religion. So in this text you will find a number of Daoist ideas which give a particular flavour to the Chan of that period.

The text is so ancient that we are not sure who wrote it. He is known as Wang Ming, but that may be a pseudonym. His surname was Sung and he served as a government official, but when the dynasty ended he became a monk and took his vows under a Chan master. His intellectual ability implies that he studied theory with numerous teachers.

Wang Ming emphasises the unification of mind as especially important, and this goes back both to old Daoist notions and to the Indian idea of bringing the mind to singlepointedness. He calls his poem *Calming the Mind* and it is a valuable one for beginners. It describes the method of practice and how to do it. Wang Ming advises us to let go of our anxieties and vexations and to let life unroll naturally.

In the poem, ‘mind’ can be used in two senses. As we shall see, the first usage refers to the worried mind of discrimination, the tense mind that needs to relax. It is this mind to which the title refers. Yet when the mind becomes relaxed what is the ‘mind’ then?

This is the second usage: a mind beyond illusion, discrimination and the need to relax.

One of you has remarked how difficult it is to concentrate. Which mind are you trying to concentrate? We must be certain that we speak here of the mind of illusion that needs to become calm in order to see clearly. It is the mind that discriminates, and then favours one thing more than another, that always creates tensions.

When you try to calm the mind, there are two important principles to observe. We need to be clear about these. The first is to cease worrying and the second is not to be concerned with knowledge. For your practice to be effective you don’t have to worry and you don’t need to understand intellectually.

We would like to be able to concentrate fully on our method, be it counting the breath, Silent Illumination, or working with a koan. Yet the more we try, the less concentration we achieve. Our minds simply do not obey our intentions. We try to stay with the method but, before we know where we are, the mind has drifted away onto something else. Our attitude is wrong somewhere; we feel frustrated and lost.

This morning I asked you to leave behind, for the moment, all those people and events with whom you have been relating. We should stop thinking about the ongoing problems of our lives and relationships. Of course these things are important and after the retreat we shall take up such issues again. But here and now, in the retreat, we should let them go. Keep your distance from the past and the future.

What is it that makes this so difficult? Mostly the thoughts that arise are concerned with the past, or perhaps with the future that will arise as a result of the past. This involves discrimination, judgement, comparison and memory; it provokes an anxious tension that varies in strength according to the topic that comes up, and your own disposition. It is vital to practise putting all this down. Just put it down. Leave aside all past, all knowledge. With practice you can let it go. When you can do this for as long as you wish, you have found a certain freedom.

Please do not misunderstand me. It is not that knowledge and experience are to be avoided or condemned; they are to be valued, but we need to gain control of their use. If we leave them to ramble haphazardly through our heads, sowing worries and agitation, then they become a burden to us – a vexation and an obstacle. Some people spend all night worrying; others put away their thoughts and sleep soundly. We need to cultivate the art of putting aside our memories, our concerns and our intellectual knowledge.

The first stanza of the poem reads:

> *Too much knowledge leads to overactivity;*
> *Better to calm the mind.*
> *The more you consider, the greater the loss;*
> *Better to unify the mind.*

The more you know, the more things can cause you distress. When you know little, then you can be simple. In practising do not consider what you are doing intellectually or theoretically. All you need to do is the practice. Use it to replace everything else. When you are confused and filled with conceptual fog, you may get depressed and struggle. It is important not to become too judgemental. In fact, any

thought is illusory; it is never the thing in itself. Whatever you think is illusory. Illusion is normal! Do not be afraid of the rambling mind, nor condemn it angrily. The important thing is simply to recognise the state of thought that at that moment inhabits you. Recognising an illusory thought will usually get rid of it. To have an aversion to thought is to sustain yet another level of illusion.

In Chinese, ‘better to unify the mind’ can be translated as ‘guard the one’. What is this ‘one’? There are two meanings here. The first applies to the mind that is split up, discriminating, filled with illusory intellection. This mind needs to be focused, brought to a single point. ‘Guarding the one’ means bringing the mind to this single place. And that is done through the method of practice.

Training is portrayed in the Chan tradition by the parable of the oxherder. The ox has to be trained to do its job and not wander about over other people’s gardens. To begin with, the oxherder must use his whip and apply discipline. Later, the ox is tamed; when eating it eats, when drawing the plough, it pulls. It does the thing in hand without distraction. This is guarding the one.

Once the mind has come to a single point, the term ‘one’ acquires a further meaning. The mind is now no longer practising; it has arrived. The whip can be put away. Three things are happening: 1, body and mind are one, 2, internal and external are unified and 3, previous and subsequent thoughts are continuous.

No longer is there an experience of the mind being separate from the body. No longer is the observer separate from the observed; experience flows without time being split into now and then. These three conditions arise together; if one is present, so are the others. Once the mind is unified, the one is guarded. I am sure those of you who have participated in several retreats have had some experience of this.

Excessive thinking weakens the will.
The more you know, the more your mind is confused.
A confused mind gives rise to vexation.
The weakened will obstructs the Dao.

Again do not fall into the mistaken belief that Chan is antiintellectual. I myself have persevered in scholarly studies and looked into theories and explanations, and so have many of you. These lines refer to the inappropriateness of thinking in the context of practice. Sometimes somebody comes to me with an answer to a koan. I may ask them from where they got it. Sometimes it obviously comes from a book. The answer has been a consequence of knowledge, of thinking. It is not an answer arising from a mind free of illusion. This is not wisdom. If you are relying on books or theories or other people's descriptions, you can never solve a koan. The wisdom of the book is not the wisdom of seeing. If you deliberate, you are far from the mark. If you are far from the mark, you are confused and there will be vexation. If there is intellectual doubt, there is only faulty awakening.

Day Two Early Morning Talk

I have three words for the day. These words are:

Isolation
Non-dependence
Non-attachment.

The purpose of these words is to give you a focus for attention within your practice, an awareness from moment to moment, whether in sitting or in relation to the group while you are working or eating.

Isolation means keeping yourself separate from the environment and from others. Isolation is an attitude of practice. Even though you are sitting and working with others, let it be as if you were the only one here, as if there was only one sitting place in the meditation hall, in the whole building. It is as if you are alone, a solitary practitioner in the mountains. It is important sometimes to withdraw and to be solitary, to be isolated and separate. Usually we are in constant interaction with the environment – our everyday worlds. We are disturbed by the ongoing concerns of the world, the news bulletins, politics, new taxes, old commitments. All this involvement causes us to lose touch with our basic being. We get filled with the noise of the world. If you isolate yourself in practice, from past and from future,

just being present, then you can see your self-nature more easily, without interference. As you go into this you may eventually isolate yourself from previous thought, and again from subsequent thought. As you withdraw from your own thoughts, you begin to discover what the independent, unconditioned self is.

By non-dependence I mean not being concerned with what others are thinking, doing, or saying. Most of our lives are spent in some sort of adjustment to other people whom we want to influence in some way. Maybe we want to please somebody, or we feel obliged in some way; or we owe somebody a favour; or we may want to reject or harm somebody. We are driven by our involvement with others and cannot let it go. This is dependency. When we let ourselves be ourselves, we are not involved with others. We may still be concerned about other people but not dependent on their thoughts, attitudes or opinions. Even here on a retreat, with the rules of silence and such, where it would seem easy to be free of dependency, you may not find it so. You may be aware of others' attitudes; you may develop feelings of attraction or repulsion towards another; you may be concerned whether I am thinking well or unfavourably about you. You are not independent in your inner self. You are still bound by habits of dependence which you are throwing out around you as you sit or as you work. If this is the case, notice it. Separate yourself. Find a mind that is not dependent on others. Even if you are afraid of loneliness, you need to experiment with this to make progress.

You need to train yourself so that at any time and any moment you choose, you can free yourself inwardly from your world, from others, from the past, from the future, from the previous thought and the next thought. That is to find freedom. Yet if you then think you are free and have some wisdom, this is not so. You should not be attached to solitude or to experiences of relative freedom. When you are attached neither to independence nor to company then wisdom will manifest. Isolation and independence constitute non-attachment. I mean non-attachment to your self, to the devices by which you make yourself safe. When you go beyond this illusory safety, you find freedom and wisdom; and from wisdom, as you look at the world, comes compassion.

Day Two Lunchtime Remarks

Whether we can get to that stage, where the mind and body are united within practice, depends on whether we can relax our tensions and allow the body to be at ease. This is like learning to ride a horse. For a beginner the motion of the horse is very tiring. Even for an accomplished equestrian, if the horse is a wild one, the rider can have an exhausting time. Yet, for a beginner with a tamed horse or a skilled rider with a wild one, the riding can become comfortable and effortless. The rider and the steed are one. There is no feeling of struggle or separation.

If the body is having a hard time – getting tired of sitting for example – then we feel fatigued from effort. Yet, when the method runs along smoothly, we forget about the body and mind because they are united. We feel pleasant and relaxed. When we meditate for long periods, it is important to forget the body. Likewise in retreat, when we have a task to do, just do it and do not be concerned with how the mind feels.

If the mind is scattered when we are doing a task, then many thoughts arise, one after the other. The mind separates from the action of the body. If we concentrate on the task, just performing – it cutting up the carrots, cleaning the table, or sweeping the floor – then we are unaware of the mind.

On the first day of retreat most people are not accustomed to the schedule. Now that it is the second day, whether meditating or doing your task, let your mind and your actions become one. Do not allow them to become separate.

Day Two Evening Lecture

Don't say there is no harm in this,
The ensuing pain may last forever.
Don't think there is nothing to fear,
The calamities churn like bubbles in a boiling pot.

Wang Ming does not intend us to take him lightly. He is very much in earnest. He says that if we cannot put down the habit of reasoning,

of turning our knowledge over and over, then we cannot obtain the benefits of meditation. To continue with such a habit constitutes a serious problem. No one should think there is nothing to fear. Rather, you need to know that such a habit generates harm that can continue indefinitely.

In the sutras there is a particular term which points at our capacity for tolerating this world of suffering. Although we recognise that this is a world of suffering, we continue to put up with it. Not only that, we are willingly tolerant of suffering. We remain attached to the concerns of worldly life, the worries, the vanities and the discriminations we use to judge one another. This is a world where we endlessly cope with suffering and rarely go beyond it.

Likewise, a practitioner of Chan may know very well that wandering discursive thoughts are potentially harmful, but, nonetheless, she may remain positively attracted to them. After all they are amusing. When told not to entertain such tantalising ideas and to think of nothing, the practitioner soon finds practice very boring. For example, we have agreed not to talk to one another. We know very well that talking causes us to lose our meditative focus. Nonetheless situations arise in which a few remarks are passed. We cannot resist prolonging the interaction with a few more words in reply. It seems such an enjoyable thing.

Since we are indeed serious about practice, we should not think lightly of these warnings. If we heed them, we can go beyond knowledge and true practice can begin.

Water dripping ceaselessly
Will fill the four seas.
Specks of dust not wiped away
Will become the five mountains.

Don’t think that a tiny bit of wandering thought is irrelevant. Maybe there is only a tiny bit of wandering thought in this sitting, this day, this retreat. But the accumulation of these tiny wandering thoughts becomes one gigantic wandering thought – a monster.

This habit has been formed since time without beginning. Endlessly we are judging things and one another by using our

knowledge and our memory of past experiences; and this has been passed down from life to life. Indeed it is karma itself. We are this habit, entangled and constrained within it, and of this we are unaware.

When we focus in practice, it becomes quite easy to see the truth of this. We can see the scattered thoughts and how difficult it is to let them go, the endless cycling of our limited and caging ideas and judgements, our prejudices. And the clearer we see such things the better the chance of our success.

Now, in the last two days, what have you found to be the most difficult element in practice? Is it when we are dozing off or is it when we have wandering thoughts?

When sleepiness is the greater problem, it may be due to lack of energy or to a temporary malaise, a cold or a virus. If you are practising well and a great sleepiness comes, then sometimes there is nothing that can really help. If you become very exhausted then it is important to take a rest. But if you lack energy through laziness or are merely a little drowsy, then if you increase your breathing, take some fresh air or do some exercises you may energise yourself again. In fact, Wang Ming doesn't discuss the problem of falling asleep. Perhaps in his day practitioners never lacked energy!

The remaining problem is the wandering thoughts. Do you know how to deal with wandering thoughts? The first step is to recognise when the mind is wandering. Often it comes over you so subtly that you do not even notice it. Then suddenly we say, 'Oh, what on earth am I thinking about?' So we have to be mindful of what we are doing in our practice. And when we do detect that our minds have wandered, it is important not to feel an irritation with oneself or an aversion towards the thoughts. It simply tires you out if you take up a belligerent attitude towards your own mind! The paradoxical thing is that very often, as soon as you recognise the fact of wandering, the mind clears. Recognition itself can do the trick.

Sometimes the wandering of the mind is due to fatigue or lack of energy. There may be a physiological cause for it. Maybe you do not actually feel drowsy but, nevertheless, the energy for concentration is lacking. The art of it is to recognise, again and again, the state of the mind. If it is wandering, simply bring it back into focus. By doing

this again and again, eventually the body energy will be renewed and you will have fewer periods of wandering thoughts. There is a daily cycle of energy. Within some periods you will have less than at other times. This is natural. There is no need for a fight. Simply be attentively aware at all times.

We can make use of an analogy here. Meditation is like using a fan – the old-fashioned hand-held type. You have the task of catching a feather on the fan. Every time you move the fan, the feather is likely to be blown away. It is a delicate business. You have to hold the fan quite still, just under the space through which the feather is sinking of its own motion. The feather then comes to rest on the top of the fan. You can imagine how difficult or how easy this may be! Any use of force and the feather is lost. Yet, once you grasp the principle it is something very easy to do. Stilling the mind is like catching a feather with a fan. It needs patience and persistence. When practising, do not be afraid of a distracting thought. If your body has a problem do not be concerned with it. If your mind is worrying, put the worry down. Keep the mind on the method, waiting for the feather to sink onto the fan. Supposing you are in a very good situation – no distractions, no wandering thoughts. Whatever you do, never congratulate yourself. Away goes the feather at once! So don't be happy! Do not think how successful you are. Just observe the situation without movement towards or away. If the mind moves, wandering thoughts begin.

Another analogy: some feathers come from chickens, some from ducks. Now the duck's feather is waterproof. A duck floats happily in water. No trouble! The chicken is a different case altogether. Imagine the state of the feathers of a chicken trying to swim! When we train, the mind begins with feathers like those of a chicken. It is easily disturbed by anything. But in time we find a state where equanimity appears and we are not bothered by any passing thought. At that time we have duck feathers! Of course, chickens cannot change into ducks but, through practice, the mind can become impermeable to the showers of passing thought.

Protect the branches to save the roots;
Though a small matter it is not trivial.

Close the seven orifices,
Shut off the six senses.

Here the branches are the minor vexations while the roots are the major ones that may last a lifetime. If one is not careful with the minor vexations they may develop into major ones. For instance, you may not be about to rob or kill anyone; yet, if the mind is filled by little hatreds or avarice, although you do not act upon these promptings, one day they may propel you to commit a crime. It is important to protect the mind from such a possibility. Not only do we have to be aware of how our minds function when meditating, we also need to be mindful in everyday life. When meditating you may put aside evil thoughts; but as you go about the world they may often assail you.

There are many examples of lives full of mistakes of this kind. Some people go into the mountains and practise, maybe for years. They come to feel that they have gone beyond all greed and hatred. The mind is calm so how could such negativities arise? They may even feel they have attained liberation. So they come down from the mountains and start interacting again in the world. Quite quickly they may get irritated by others or form some emotional attachments which they find they cannot handle. Greed and hatred appear and they are forced to recognise that they still have major vexations.

This result occurs because, even though people were hidden in the mountains and not experiencing any major trouble, still the minor illusions – the stuff of wandering thoughts – have not been put down. You can see how important it is to cut off even minor wandering thoughts. One who works hard with a method may not be able to cut off all illusory thoughts for all times. But at least he or she can get to the stage of cutting them off for a few seconds, minutes or hours, even a few days. It is important to recognise that your mind can be free from illusion.

When such a person is faced with difficulty in daily life, it becomes easier to recognise the nature of that difficulty. Even as the vexation arises, the practitioner is aware of it and prevents a negative manifestation. But if one fails to practise after returning from the mountains, even though awareness may be present, a

manifestation will usually occur. This is why many of us look forward to spending time in retreat or to practising in the mountains.

Closing the seven orifices – two eyes, two ears, two nostrils and the mouth – and shutting off the six senses – seeing, hearing, smelling, taste, touch and cognition – is the discipline of withdrawal from the attachments we have to worldly things. Such discipline in retreat enables us to perceive how the mind of illusion functions and provides a space in which clarity develops.

Wang Ming's poem may be causing some of us a problem. Simon, the cook, was puzzled when I praised the cooking at lunchtime! Simon was worried that his good cooking might be distracting me from meditation! I told him he need not stop cooking delicious food! A dish that tastes good, well, it just tastes good. The message is simply this – don't get attached to it. After you have finished, let it go. You never know, next time you could be disappointed. And the whole rigmarole of pleasure and disappointment gets going. Then your meditation is indeed disturbed.

When Wang Ming tells us to close the orifices and shut down the six senses, he does not mean that we should become senseless zombies, not seeing, hearing or feeling. What he cautions us against is perpetually wondering what kind of food we will have. Anticipation and disappointment create attachment and greed.

Once upon a time, when I was a young monk near Shanghai, I was with a group of boys who were so poor that we hardly ever had enough food. One day an old monk of better means provided us with some additional dishes. Amongst them was a plate of bean curd. It was such a rare treat that one boy set aside a small slice so that he could relish it later on. He nibbled a tiny bit every day. For three days he managed to stretch it out. But then one of our teachers saw what was happening. He slapped the boy and threw away his bean curd. The teacher told him, 'With this kind of attitude you will end up as a hungry ghost, never having enough to eat!'

When we are engaged in meditation, our practice should not be suffused by attitudes of comparison. Maybe something is good-looking, maybe something sounds bad. If it is so, leave it at that. We should act as if what we have seen we have not noticed, and what

we have heard we have not regarded. We train ourselves so that the mind does not give rise to comparisons and illusory preferences triggered by the environment. Whatever we have experienced is simply so. There is no need to get worked up about it.

Perhaps you see a beautiful flower in the hedgerow. You like it, you pick it, you bring it home. Then it fades and dies. Maybe you forgot the water. Every day we hear the baaing of sheep and the bleating of lambs. When the animals are in the yard there is indeed a great noise, like waves breaking on the shore. If you are truly practising, you witness the sound and nothing more. You will not be thinking 'Oh, how cute the little lambkins are! Oh, what a sad sheep that one must be! Perhaps it has lost its lamb.' Sheep are in the yard. That's all. When engaged in practice, you need not be concerned with them.

Pay no heed to forms;
Do not listen to sounds.
Listening to sounds you become deaf,
You become blind observing forms.

There is a deeper meaning here. When you listen to sounds you interpret them according to your nature. When you observe forms you likewise create a story about them. But these ideas you have are not the actual reality. The actual nature of the sound we do not hear. The actual nature of form we do not perceive. In that we do not perceive reality when we look at things, we are as blind; when we hear things we are as deaf. Understanding the illusory nature of experience, we should not get disturbed by whatever arises.

One of you has objected that, if one lived as blind and deaf, one could not perceive the beauty of the world and could not experience gratitude for life. Pleasure and gratitude are related. Surely it is not wrong to feel gratitude.

Again it is important not to be mistaken about Wang Ming's message. We need to understand it with subtlety. He is simply saying that sentiments like gratitude have no place within practice. Before practice and after practice you experience the pleasures and pains of this world. Gratitude arises, compassion arises, love arises.

It is in order to have a clear perception of the natural state that we need to practise without these things. The natural state is just as it is, naked, unintentional, unadorned by sentiment. We are speaking here of the vital elements of intensive practice where it is essential for us to have a mind of clarity. In everyday activity we experience the whole of life, including illusion. Through practice we can penetrate to the core and mindfulness can become part of everyday life too.

We are still in the state of the chicken feather. We do not yet perceive the meaning of the phrase in the *Heart Sutra* – 'Form is emptiness and emptiness is form.' In our practice, therefore, it is vital to investigate vigorously. In cutting offthe senses we perceive mind without the intrusion of wandering thought. It is an essential aspect of training.

Day Three Early Morning Talk

I have two themes for the day:

> *Every thought a present moment*
> *Every moment a rebirth.*

As time passes, you witness the passage of thoughts. As thought succeeds thought, you experience the passage of time. In your practice it is important to make every thought the present moment. If you make yourself one with the moment, you stop the thought. There is simply experience without time because, without thought, time becomes a continuous present. You have to discover for yourself what being one with the moment actually is.

When you make every thought a present moment, there is no continuity of time, no carry-over from moment to moment. Everything is continuously fresh, like the water of a spring endlessly bubbling up into the open air. In such practice every moment is a rebirth. Here we have no thought succeeding thought; rather there is endless re-creation, an endless continuity without discrete moments. As one ancient master has said, 'One thought for a thousand years.' Yet, in these thousand years, there are no thoughts. There is simply a continuous unbroken newness.

This is why it is so important for a beginner to cultivate going beyond thought. Today, therefore, focus directly upon the present moment. There is no need to think about it. Just enter the present moment like a diver who has left the springboard. Plunge into it without judgement or consideration. When the diver dives, he lets go. There is only the long fall into the water, which takes no time. Each time you sit down on your cushion, dive into the present moment, becoming thoughtlessly one with it. And you will find that every moment is indeed a rebirth.

Day Three Breakfast Table Remarks

In the USA there is a particular question which my Western students find especially important and which I would like to put to you here. In the Eastern tradition there is a major emphasis on no-self. It is no-self that has to be discovered. Yet, in the perspective of Western psychology, the most important thing is to develop one's personal self to a maximum degree, emphasising one's individuality, uniqueness and admirable qualities. One cannot get on in the world, it seems, without developing this assertive self. There seems to be a contradiction between East and West here. How can this be resolved?

Actually both the East and West are talking about the same thing, but they are emphasising different levels. When we are young we have to develop our sense of personal identity in order to take on the world. If we did not know that John, Mary, Esmeralda, or Harry was the name for this thing we call 'I', it would not be possible to relate conventionally with others, to pass examinations, or to get a job. And since personal welfare depends on income and we need a livelihood, we have to function within that livelihood as individual persons. Which means we need to know how to manage ourselves in our relations with others. The Western psychologist is making a realistic point in stressing the importance of becoming an individual.

In fact, without having a grasp of your personal identity, of who you are in the usual everyday sense, it would not be possible to train in Buddhism. The practice of Dharma starts with an individuality that has the will to train and practise the methods. To go beyond self there must be first a firm sense of self. Someone who is all over the

place, who changes mood or intentions with every shift in circumstance, who has not been able to distinguish him- or herself from others who are potent influences, is not equipped for the practice of Chan.

Yet wisdom comes from going beyond the elementary constructions of identity, from investigating who this is that walks, talks, argues and quarrels. When we go beyond, we develop a larger sense of self. A major step in this progression is the discovery of the undivided mind, one in which the splits produced by discrimination are healed. This is what I meant the other day when I spoke of the internal and external being united, or the body and mind becoming one. Yet the unified mind remains of the same structure as the divided one. It has not yet gone beyond. It is not the no-self.

What then is no-self? Look at the words. It is a state of being in which the self is absent. There is no self-centre, no habit of self-reference. Everything else in experience is the same as before, but the quality of being has become radically different. It is usually the case that the appearance of no-mind depends on the prior integration of the mind. So long as self and its object are separate, the one regarding the other, there is duality. The split mind of discrimination cannot transcend its own habits. You cannot experience release into no-mind from a divided mind; you can only do it from a unified one. And where there is no-self we may say there is no-mind. For, in this perspective, the ordinary mind is the activity of self.

Practice, therefore, focuses on methods that unify the mind. We discover ourselves as whole beings through practice. Gradually, as we master the mental processes and bring about calming and integration, so we master ourselves. We gain control over the monkey mind. This wholeness is always a novel experience. Its discovery is a source of freedom, relaxation and clarity. It is the completion of the self as self. To reach this condition is already a major step. Most of us remain scattered in mind and body, discriminating and arguing within ourselves and with others.

Today is the third day. Let us attempt to integrate mind and body. This is the first step. Allow yourself to become one. Attain the state where body and mind are not separate in experience, and then

the external and the internal will also be united. Dive into your method wholeheartedly, without doubt or reservations.

Day Three Lunch Time Remarks

This morning I said that every thought is a present moment, and that every moment is a new birth. Time will not pass if every thought remains in the present. If every moment is a new beginning, time passes. If every thought is a present moment, can there be such a thing as time? Again, if there is time, can there be such a thing as the present? Yet, if there is no time, there is no present.

For an untrained practitioner it is impossible to be continuously in the present. It is therefore impossible for him to know that there is no time. Yet, so long as you are entangled by thoughts of past and future, the present is the best place in which to be.

For us who are beginners, there is time, there is past and future. And between past and future there is this present moment that we constantly try to capture; and because of this attempt, every present moment is a new beginning. Since our minds are moving, we are constantly starting afresh. Yet, when every present moment is a new beginning, there cannot be failure, displeasure or disappointment for these imply a carryingover of time.

Enjoyment follows the moment of pleasure but, so long as that moment exists, there is nothing to enjoy and nothing to be sad about. There is nothing intrinsically good or bad about each new beginning. One thing is simply following another.

When you are working in the kitchen and cut yourself by mishap there is a new wound. Your appearance is new when you buy fresh clothes. When you brush your teeth, even if the mouth is old, the teeth are newly brushed. Every day I find a new white hair. This is something new; a new grey head is appearing. If we always know that every present moment is also a new beginning, a new birth, then there is nothing to be happy or sad about. It is simply that new collections of experience are appearing.

When I was a young boy, China and Japan were at war. The whole country and my own village were very poor. In the old days it was the custom every New Year’s Day to wear new clothes and shoes. But in that year there could be neither new clothes nor new

shoes. So I said to my mother, ‘This year everything is old.’ My mother said, ‘Not so. Everything is new. The clothes are freshly washed. Trousers have new patches. Shoes are freshly repaired and cleaned.’ That made me happy.

Whenever you practise, be in the present moment. Each one of them is a new birth.

Day Three Everting Lecture

Continuing our commentary on Wang Ming’s *Calming the Mind*, we have this stanza:

> *Literature and art*
> *Are but busy gnats in the air;*
> *Technique and ability*
> *A solitary lamp in the sun.*

Whatever our skill or learning, we should not consider ourselves to be extraordinary, or our abilities special. There is a Chinese philosopher who said that whereas one’s life is limited, knowledge is unlimited. How then can one be proud of attainments?

Intelligent people who are learned and proficient in complex disciplines or who practise skills in the arts, often think of their activities as the most important in the world. They take pride in their accomplishments and look down on those less skilled. They have the habit of comparing the grandeur of their abilities with the mediocrity of ordinary folk. Doubtless such people are exceptionally talented but they would have great problems in the practice of Chan.

The accomplished academic, polished in his field and skilled in its discipline, tends to see everything through the perspective of learning. A scientist may see everything from the point of view of an exciting paradigm. A philosopher usually praises a certain school. The artist practising one style admires it more than others. All such tendencies are actually attachments to self rather than to knowledge. To have developed a skill becomes a mark of what one is and we defend it by superior attitudes, with pride. Such techniques and abilities are like lamps standing in the light of the sun. Being constrained by pride prevents one from becoming one with the

sunlight, extending one's mind to infinity. There is a fabulous bird with wings that extend from one horizon to another. In comparison gnats are insignificant.

Once, when I was in Japan, I attended a Zen retreat. In the evening the master gave a talk. He spent two whole hours in scolding me, all because I had a doctorate in literature. 'What is the use of all this reading and scholarship?' he said. 'It is only an obstruction to practice. Such study only leads to arrogance, a bellyful of straw.' Afterwards I thought about it and went to see the master. I said 'How come you spent so much time scolding me?' He replied, 'If my words had not got to you, you would not have come to see me.' I had to acknowledge that this was indeed the case. Too much learning may indeed become an obstruction. At the beginning of this retreat John remarked to me that most of the participants were well educated and intelligent, and that this in itself could constitute a problem. Is that so?

Those able and talented ones
Are really stupid fellows.
Discarding the pure and simple
They drown in too much beauty.

Those who consider themselves able and intelligent are actually foolish. You possess the seeds of wisdom if you think of yourself as a fool. A practitioner who experiences problems is doing well. One who thinks he has no problems really has difficulties! Of course, if you are fully enlightened, there are no problems. But, for those of us who have barely started to practise, it is important to recognise our problems, otherwise we are likely to have a troublesome time.

Often I find myself counselling practitioners who have lots of problems with vexations of body and mind. I tell them that, if you recognise your obstructions, you are certainly practising well and with sincerity. Find out what you can do about your vexations. If you are stuck then come and see me. Eventually the difficulty will be resolved. If the vexation is the belief that you have no problems, that is sometimes a very difficult case! It is difficult for such a person to find the right motivation. Wang Ming tells us that if we can let go of

our attainments and return to a pure and simple state, then we can make progress. If not, there is trouble in store.

Practitioners of Chan should learn all kinds of skills and attain excellence in many disciplines. These things are the light of the mind and show us the breadth of our mental scope. They may also be the means whereby we can help others. Yet never mistake them for the unlimited wisdom. In these skills and attainments there is nothing reliable. If you are attached to them, then your intelligence has made you stupid.

Consciousness is an untamed horse,
The mind is an unruly monkey.
If the spirit is overactive,
The body will sicken and die.

If you recognise the unruly monkey, then perhaps you can set about finding out what sort of wandering thoughts possess you. If you examine them you will find that rather than being of unending variety and interest, they are in fact few, limited in scope, repetitious and boring!

Maybe you don't know how many wandering thoughts you have, or what their nature is. They are like the sheep around here. Of course, being good practitioners in the middle of a retreat, you have not seen them! But you probably saw them before the retreat started. To find out how many sheep you have, how many black ones and how many white, you need to be like the Welsh shepherd who rounds up his sheep with skilled dogs and corrals them in a pen. Then, when they are all collected, he can count and examine them, give them names even. Whether you are like an untamed horse, an unruly monkey or a bleating sheep, the same principle applies. Be like the shepherd who rounds them all up. Then you can see what the problem is.

The problem is how to tame the monkeys. The first method of practice is to pen them up. You can do this by holding them in one place. You catch the thoughts as they come up and prevent them from wandering on. A device for doing this is the method of counting the breath. There are many variations of this method, depending on

the unruliness of the monkeys. If the mind is quite concentrated, then all you need to do is to be aware of the breathing. You don't need to count at all. With a less concentrated mind, counting is useful since watching the breathing is insufficient to prevent wandering thoughts. If your mind is badly scattered, even counting the breath fails to focus the mind adequately. Discursive thinking keeps breaking through. So you make the task more difficult by counting the breaths in a reverse order, or by odd numbers and even numbers alternately. While the activity is simple, you give yourself more to do, so that wandering thoughts cannot gain a foothold. It is like tying the monkey to a tree after you have caught him.

The method of *gong'an* is based on a similar principle. It enables us to reach a point where we do not even have to concentrate. To begin with, using the *gong'an* is just like mechanically counting the breath. One repeats the *gong'an* over and over, like a mantra. As the mind becomes more focused, you can use the *gong'an* in a more precise way. In Chinese this is called *t'san.* It means investigation; looking into the mind to perceive its nature. When the mind is focused, you get a certain flavour from using the *gong'an*, and derive power from it. It is like eating ice cream on a summer day. It gets more and more attractive; and, as you immerse yourself more and more into it, wandering thoughts lessen. They may even disappear completely. However, this does not mean you are enlightened. It simply means that thinking in a random way has come to an end. The *gong'an* ties the monkey to the tree. You go deeper and deeper into it until you reach the point of enlightenment. What is that? No explanation will help you. You must experience that insight yourself.

Although the *gong'an* method resembles counting the breath at the beginning, it will take you all the way. This is unlikely through counting the breath alone. Even so, through counting the breath one can enter samadhi, which is a valuable aspect of training.

Wang Ming says that if the spirit is overactive, the body will sicken and die. He means that if you struggle too hard with too much discursive thinking you will get very exhausted. Wild monkeys in a cage rush about destructively. You must consider the methods of

training. To catch the feather you need to practise with a peaceful frame of mind, a gentle approach.

> *Wrong conduct ends in delusion;*
> *Those treading this path become mired in mud.*
> *To regard ability as precious*
> *Is called confusion.*

You probably think that you must start climbing by going up, or that you must study to find wisdom. In the perspective of Chan this is inside-out thinking. Whoever seeks to climb, ends up going down. Whoever seeks wisdom falls into confusion.

Where is the highest mountain, in the Karakoram or the Himalayas? Let us say in the Himalayas. And where is the deepest part of the ocean? Maybe in the Atlantic or somewhere off Japan. We are lucky we haven't got an oceanographer here! We might discuss it all night. The more we know the more we find problems.

In our commonsense perspective, we say that the Himalayas are the tallest and the Atlantic perhaps the deepest. But if you go flying in a satellite then you get a different view. What then is high? What then is deep? Far or near, tall or short, big or small, these are all relative to the standpoint we adopt. 'High' to an astronaut is altogether different from what 'high' means to an inhabitant of Holland. Usually our mental scope is narrow and limiting. It is as if we create absolute values and scales with which to judge things. On the other hand, with a big enough mind, we do not attach ourselves to commonsense conceptions. We can contemplate with an unlimited range. From an earthling's viewpoint, however high one climbs is nothing compared to the altitude of the astronaut's experience. Divers who go deep in rivers cannot conceive of the depths of an ocean.

Knowledge is framed by our viewpoint. It is necessarily limited by the scope of intellection. If we spent a whole lifetime accumulating knowledge, it would still be like a termite mound compared to Mount Everest. It is not at all in the same dimension as wisdom. What then is wisdom?

In the Chan perspective wisdom is a state that is free from attachments, free from measurement, free from selfreference and empty of vexation. It cannot be found through accumulation, through adding to a pool of knowledge, or through measuring how far we are ahead of others. On that path we only pile confusion on confusion.

In using the *gong'an* we usually focus on just one saying from the story. This saying is the *huatou.* We use it like a kind of lens to peer closely into the mind. Yet this is not an intellectual process. We are not saying, for example. 'Who am I?' or 'What is not?' or 'What is *wu* ?' in order to pile up descriptions or to elaborate theories. To *t'san* the *huatou* means to look into it, to peer with the mind's eye rather than with the mind's reason directly into the moment of experience that is happening, right now. Description takes time, it accumulates, piles up; *t'san* has no time, for it occurs in the durationless present. It is a bare looking into the space of the mind, like peering thoughtlessly into a goldfish bowl. There may be movement, sunlight glinting on the scales of fish, but there is absolutely no conceptual examination. There is merely the bare observation itself. It goes on and on. The *huatou* is, as it were, merely the target set up for you to aim at. Furthermore, although it may have the form of a question, the mind cannot make a quick intellectual reply. The usual sort of clever response is quite short-circuited. A fuse is blown somewhere!

Such looking generates a great doubt. The doubt becomes so intense that the mind automatically comes to one place, totally immersed in the paradoxical unresolvability of the *huatou.* You are lost in the *huatou.* When you are totally lost, that is *t'san.* When this intensity of focus is long sustained, suddenly the whole mass of doubt breaks down, dissolves. That moment is enlightenment. Nothing can be said of what is there then. It is beyond words.

There is also another method that I do not usually recommend to beginners. It requires a measure of prior practice. This is the Silent Illumination method of the Caodong School, advocated particularly by Hongzhi Zhenjue in the eleventh century. This was the method favoured by the great Japanese Master Dogen, who took it to that country where it is known as *shikantaza.* Actually, it is probably a very ancient method going back to the times of the Indian patriarchs. You might say it is *t'san* without the *huatou* as a target.

You sit gazing silently into experience as it arises. Hongzhi said of it, ‘In this silent sitting, whatever realms may appear, the mind is very clear as to the details, yet everything is where it originally is, in its own place. The mind stays on one thought for a thousand years, yet does not dwell on any forms, inside or outside.’ In this method, we let the mind go quieter and quieter, immersing itself in its own silence. It is like allowing the water of a pool to become utterly still. Every speck of mud drifts to the bottom and the water is crystalline in its clarity. This crystalline clarity becomes enlightenment naturally and without effort. Like the method of *gong’an,* this is a wonderfully direct path. As you see, no knowledge, no attainment.

If I say any more there will be nothing to say tomorrow!

Day Four Early Morning Talk

This morning I have another three key words for you. These are:

Confidence
Vows
Compassion.

The confidence I am speaking of here is not simply a matter of self-assertion. This confidence is in knowing at what level one’s mind is working, in knowing what situation one is in; and thereby knowing what one can do, or what it is one has to do. It is the self-knowledge and the self-awareness that you have when you are mindful.

Confidence in Chan practice has three aspects. The first is the confidence that comes from mindfulness. The second is confidence in the Dharma and in the method of practice. The third is confidence in the teacher.

Confidence in the Dharma is what has brought you all here. You know the history of the Chan lineage. Many people have come to wisdom through the Dharma and through the methods of Chan. We need not belabour the point.

Confidence in the teacher is often a problem. Each one of you has to find the teacher in whom you have confidence, and this depends on a sense of affinity. For example, this is the first time that most of you have met me. You have known me only a short while.

You will not automatically have confidence in me just because you have heard others speak of me, or because you have read one of my books. We have to stay together for a while and get to experience one another in the retreat, in the interview, and simply as two people. If you find that being with me is in some way beneficial to you, then you will begin to have confidence. It is not necessary for the practitioner to know everything about the teacher, to speculate about his personality or his disagreeable or agreeable qualities. If there is this sense of affinity, confidence grows. Without this faith there cannot be faith in the method or the guidance.

The word ‘vow’ has the meaning of aspiration and determination. Without a vow to overcome vexation, the Buddha would not have come to enlightenment. When he sat down at the foot of the Bodhi Tree he made the vow that he would not rise again until he had awakened. It was the strength of the vow that carried him through. The Buddha could see that sentient beings were in a pitiable state. He could have easily remained solitarily enlightened, but he made the vow to help others. Even earlier, when the Buddha decided to leave home and begin practice, his vow was not only for his personal benefit. Already, he had seen the sadness of the world, of sickness, old age and death. He realised that if he could attain buddhahood – liberation – then, and only then, could he be of real help to others. Without such attainment he could only be as a blind man leading the blind. His vow was not self-centred. It was large in scope.

Every morning, afternoon and evening we recite the Four Great Vows:

I vow to deliver innumerable sentient beings.
I vow to cut off endless vexations.
I vow to master limitless approaches to Dharma.
I vow to attain supreme buddhahood.

Note that the vow to attain buddhahood is the last of the four vows. The first is to help sentient beings.

Now we come to the third word, compassion. Compassion without wisdom is a sentiment coloured with emotion and

attachment. This sort of self-concerned compassion may produce good acts but they will be within a limited frame. Doing good is often seen to be mistaken when the larger context is appreciated. The Buddha waited until he had realised wisdom before he began to help others.

In our case we should not wait so long. This is because we have the example of the Buddha before us. We have the teachings, the Dharma, as a guide. While we practise to attain wisdom, we may also practise compassion based upon the Buddha's teaching. Yet, if we rely only on the words of the Dharma and do not meditate and train ourselves in the Dharma, then our compassion will remain weakly based. It will not be the compassion arising within wisdom.

Let me repeat what I have said. If you do not have confidence, it will be easy for you to get discouraged. If you do not have vows it will be difficult for you to persist in practice. If you do not have vows, when you find you do not get instantaneous benefit from practice, you may regret it. Without vows you lose determination. The vow to work for the benefit of all sentient beings is a great vow. It will help you to have persistence. Furthermore, a truly compassionate thought is selfless and will lead to the beginning of wisdom. In the Dharma, wisdom and compassion always go together, reinforcing one another.

From now on, every time you sit down to meditate, to practise your method, you should stand before your cushion and make the vow that on this occasion you will practise well. When sitting, do not stir. Concentrate the mind within the method. Vow to penetrate the method before you rise from your seat. Vow that you will not abandon the sitting. Make a vow not to leave your seat voluntarily even if you collapse from bodily weakness. This is called making the vow to 'die on one's seat'. Of course you are not going to die. Your body will ensure that. But if you vow not to get up until weakness overpowers you, then you will find remarkable strength. It is hesitation that divides the mind and makes for weak sitting.

We should know that in the whole world there are very few people who understand Buddhadharma and actually practise it. The fact that we are practising together here means that we have good karmic roots. You may gain great confidence from this. There are so

many people in the world who need help but if we do not practise we cannot even help ourselves, let alone others. When we practise with confidence and with vows, then wisdom and compassion mutually enhance one another.

Day Four Breakfast Table Remarks

During retreat the experience of time varies. The first three days drag by slowly. Each day may seem as long as a whole year. On the other hand, the last three days seem to run past like a swift horse. This is because, during the first half of a retreat, participants are neither used to the retreat nor to using their method; they have a hard time. During the second half, both body and mind are adjusted to the retreat and time seems to pass quickly.

Today is the fourth day. Do not think that there are only two days left and that, because nothing has happened in the first four days, you cannot discover anything. If you feel this way, then you may become lax in your effort and feeble in diligence. This would be regrettable and a great mistake. The retreat is like a race. Only when you cross the finishing line is the event over. You may manage a spurt in the last seconds and carry off the prize. But you are racing against yourself.

To practise with the method is like climbing a high mountain. You can only say the climb is over when you reach the summit. Perhaps you are climbing the mountain in a thick fog or a cloud. From the beginning, you have no idea how high up you are. You may think you have come no way at all, and then you suddenly arrive. You may think you are nearly at the peak, and then you find further slopes rising before you. All you can do is climb. Without climbing you will get nowhere. In an act of faith you simply place one foot before the other. If you believe you are getting nowhere, you will become lax and the climb will exhaust you.

On retreat do not set yourselves particular goals for practice. Just keep going in the right direction. Every single step is then an act of reaching the goal. Going on is the goal. The goal is in the going. If you run a race and your mind is on the winning post, you split yourself into now and then. If you forget the goal and just place all your attention on the energy of running, you will suddenly find

yourself there. If the climber has his mind focused on the summit, he may easily find the climb exhausting and stop halfway, giving up.

In climbing a mountain, sometimes we encounter a steep slope. At other times we find a flat area to stroll across. The wise climber does not take particular notice of these differences. Both the steep slope and the flat area are high in the hills already. Likewise, when we practise, sometimes there arise good conditions and sometimes troublesome ones. If you find yourself in a good place, don't get too happy. There may be a steeper slope just ahead. On the other hand, in difficult times do not get discouraged; the slope will ease off shortly. On retreat you cannot predict how one sitting session will be from the previous one. You simply have to sit down and find out. Every sitting is a new birth.

When climbing the mountain, you constantly experience differences in slope, differences in the demands made upon your energy and resilience. This goes on until the summit is reached. Similarly on retreat, do not be too eager for results. Take up an attitude of going forward without seeking anything. Use the ordinary mind to practise diligently.

People sometimes feel that all they ever encounter are the steep slopes. They never come across flat areas. What bad luck! Remember, you are indeed tackling a steep mountain! When this is the case, you need to build stronger foundations for your practice.

Day Four Evening Lecture

Let's continue tonight with Wang Ming's verse:

> *To exaggerate clumsiness and covet skill*
> *Does not lead to great virtue.*
> *Of much fame but little contribution,*
> *Their reputation quickly crumbles.*

Many people suffer from feelings of inferiority. Others feel themselves to be very important; they exaggerate their selfrespect into aggrandisement. Both of these feelings arise from comparing oneself with others. When you live alone you find that such feelings arise less frequently.

I do not know how modern psychology analyses these feelings, but from the viewpoint of the Buddhadharma, each of these feelings is a different manifestation of the same basic inclination. A person who feels inferior is obviously lacking in confidence, but so is somebody who exaggerates his or her importance and behaves arrogantly. Both inferiority and a sense of superiority come from lack of confidence.

You cannot practise well if you lack confidence. You look at others and think how well they must be getting on. You feel as if nobody else has a problem, as if you were the only one sitting there worried and anxious. Sometimes, when I find a practitioner is troubled in this way, I say, 'Don't be so lacking in confidence! I too came by the same route. When I was young I also had to endure great difficulties in practice. It was only through hard work in applying the method that eventually I had a tiny bit of understanding.' Sometimes such a practitioner says to me, 'Shifu. How can I compare myself with you? You are a Chan master, so how can I expect to get the same sort of accomplishment?'

Then there is another kind of person, not so common as the first, who may say to me, 'Shifu, you are now so old and I am young. By the time I reach your age I will definitely have surpassed you!' Such a person evidently has great confidence. But then, upon what is this practitioner basing his opinion? How can he be so sure? Actually, even with such confidence, there remains a big problem.

The first of these practitioners is putting him- or herself down. There is a feeling of inability and inferiority. The second type is filled with arrogance. Of course, I shall be very happy if all my disciples surpass me, but when practitioners show either of these attitudes, I am not so happy. Neither attitude is helpful in practice. In particular, a person who shows his lack of confidence through arrogance has very little chance of making progress so long as he thinks that way.

Now let me ask you, do you think it possible to be feeling inferior and behaving in a superior manner at the same time? Have you ever manifested such sentiments? I see by the show of hands that many of us recognise such problems! The fact that we can perceive them is already a sign of progress. If you know you have such weaknesses and yet still you try to cover them up and act as if you

were truly confident, then you are like the praying mantis. There is a fable in which the mantis saw a carriage rolling towards it. It raised one of its legs to stop the carriage. Actually, it knew very well that such a thing was impossible but nonetheless it wanted to put on a show. The mantis is actually very pitiable. Such a pretence of ability is simply a manifestation of self-centredness.

Of course, there are also people who never try to resolve difficulties. They like to evade a difficult situation as much as possible. Such a person is like the ostrich sticking its head in the sand and hoping the lion will go away. The truth is that all of us are mantises and ostriches by turns, and we remain thereby in delusion.

In the Orient many people are like this. Perhaps it is the same in the West. Have you not met the man who is approaching thirty and begins to lose his hair? So, in case others should notice, he begins combing his hair in such a way that the hair on the left side goes over to the right. Yet anyone who really takes a look can see at once that he is bald in the centre! Of course if you are a Chan practitioner and you are bald in the centre, well, you are bald in the centre.

A Chan practitioner needs to have this self-knowledge. He should know what sort of appearance he has and feel at home in it. In whatever situation, you should know how far your ability will carry you. With the ability, you act; without it, you do not. No fuss, no pretence.

When I came to this retreat, I knew that many of you were well educated with degrees in psychology and other subjects. I did not think about it very much or trouble to look up these subjects in books and prepare myself for questions about this or that. I did not prepare myself at all in fact. I just came over. Here I am. I can tell you what I know. If there are things I cannot answer, so what! We can still talk together. The important thing is to recognise ourselves for what we are. Just recognise whatever you are, whatever abilities or inabilities you have, and accept yourself. There is no need to get vexed over comparisons. If you can manage this, you will become firm in character, more healthy and at peace.

Now let us look at the next two lines of Wang Ming's verse;

Of much fame but little contribution

Their reputation quickly crumbles.

During an interview today one of you told me that he would like to help society. I said, ‘Well, in that case, you must finish your studies, get a reputation and some fame. Then you may be able to influence the course of social events.’ It is not wrong for Chan practitioners to become famous. If the reputation coincides with ability then there is nothing problematical about it. I myself have become quite well known. I have worked hard and have been of use to people. People have come to hear of me and this may perhaps be of value. More people may be helped as a result. If and when reputation and reality coincide, the truth is just as it is. On the other hand, when a reputation does not coincide with reality but is simply the result of misleading self-advertisement, then there is danger. The empty arrogance of such behaviour can be harmful to others and deeply damaging to a person’s progress on the Dharma path.

We can see that the four lines of this verse are connected. A person who feels inferior may be tempted to seek a reputation that goes beyond his or her real ability. This is arrogance based on weakness. It harms others and it harms oneself. Chan practitioners need to know their weaknesses. If you seek to correct them and do not try to cover them up, then you will become a more complete character and one who others will trust. You do not have to become a saint, just a whole person in balance with yourself.

Suppose you were to meet two people, one of whom was over-praising himself and the other who straightaway said to you, ‘Hey, look out, I’m a rascal! If you hang around with me you had better be careful.’ Which would you prefer to deal with? The first may seem easier but the latter may turn out to be more reliable. Actually, neither of these types knows himself well enough to behave genuinely. Neither the rascal nor the selfadmiring guru needs to proclaim it. Their crumbled reputations have probably preceded them.

Merely reading books
Is of no lasting value.
Being inwardly proud

Brings the enmity of others.

What you get from books is merely knowledge. It is not your own experience. An author only tells you what he wants to say. He has not written to speak to you in a current situation. Books are useful in setting a general direction, but you have to confirm what is said in your own way. Answers from books are mere descriptions. A book answer belongs to somebody else and not to yourself. In my own books, I have written at the beginning that they have been compiled mainly for my own benefit.

If you cannot find somebody near you who can be your teacher, then you can refer to books for some guidance. They give ideas about how to approach and solve problems. Yet, if you have only accumulated knowledge from books and not practised, then you are likely to think that you know a lot. This can be self-deceiving.

The best thing is not to compare yourself with others. In attempting to prove your superiority you may only demonstrate the opposite. Sometimes a monk or layman may come to me saying, 'Shifu, I am sure you have high attainments in Chan. May I ask you this question? I have had such and such an experience. What do you think of this accomplishment?' I say, 'I am not you, so how could I know?'

Of course there are criteria for accomplishment, but I cannot use my personal perspective to judge another person. I am not that individual. All I can do is to respond to need. There is no benefit in confirming another person's insecurities. When there is no need for accomplishment, perhaps something has indeed been found.

Using speech
Or written words
To gain the praise of others
Is something most repulsive.

Chan tells us that we should not rely on words. Often it is better to say nothing. In Chan practice, the spoken and the written word are superfluous. Only a communication through a genuine mind is reliable. When old friends or family members have been separated

for many years and meet again, what are the first words they say? Often there is so much that could be said that they cannot say anything. They just embrace or shake hands and that is enough. The contact says everything.

Last year I went to Mainland China for the first time in many years. I had not seen my brothers for thirty-eight years. So much had happened to them in that time. So much had happened to me also. When we met, we couldn't say anything. There were simply tears rolling down our faces. I myself was too embarrassed to cry, but tears were falling inside me and racking my stomach. Everything was communicated just like that.

Legend tells us that Shakyamuni passed on the whole Buddhadharma to First Patriarch Mahakasyapa without saying anything. In an assembly of monks the Buddha had refused to answer metaphysical questions to which no sure answer could be given. He was just holding a flower in his hand. No one spoke, but Mahakasyapa smiled, and the Buddha said, 'Mahakasyapa understands!'

In interview, one of you told me that his wife had said, 'I hope you will see Bodhidharma in Wales.' Well, I don't think I am Bodhidharma. If I were, I would probably spend my time facing the wall and not talking to you people! Would you like me to be Bodhidharma and yourselves to be the second Chinese patriarch, Huike? If that's the case, then I must stop talking, turn around and face the wall and decide what to do! Ah, Richard is showing me his arm. Perhaps I should cut it off just as Bodhidharma accepted the arm of Huike when he offered it in exchange for the teaching. Yet here that would be useless. Even if I cut off three arms it would not be useful now.

Actually, you do not need to have Bodhidharma come to Britain; he is here already. If you do not understand this, treat it as a *gong'an.* Work on it.

Wang Ming is saying that if you do not truly practise but merely use the spoken or written word to tell others about your attainment, then that is shameful. In fact, talking is useless. If people do not act upon these evening lectures and mealtime talks then these too are useless. If people do not act, then this whole retreat, the lectures, all

the words, would be comparable to my bringing a lump of clay from an eastern mountain and dumping it on a western one. The propaganda of mere information is not of use to you within your practice. Some may say, although Chan speaks of no-self, the bodhisattvas still teach compassionately to others. These are good teachings. Just to hear them is good, and they should be handed on. So it is. Yet, I say to you, without practice the teachings are not manifest in the world.

Day Five Early Morning Talk

Today there are two important phrases for you to bear in mind. These are:

Ordinary Mind
Wanting Nothing.

The unbiased content of the ordinary state of mind is both natural and everlasting. To be natural, the mind needs to be free from anything artificially created by thought or reasoning, from anything shaped by an experience or judgement. When these things are absent we say the mind is in its natural state. When the mind is natural, it is in conformity with Dao.

Let me put it this way: here in the mountains in this old farmhouse of stone and wood we are living close to nature. Yet the tools we use and the clock that tells the time remain manmade. They are not completely natural; but, for us, the use of such simple tools is natural enough. It is of our nature to use such things. To wear clothes is natural and we feel comfortable. To take them off and be uncomfortable would not be natural for us, even if at first sight nakedness might be nearer our original condition. Natural is what is appropriate. Natural is this: when there is one there is one, when there are two there are two. Things are as they are. We do not need to add criteria of evaluation to fit our moods, thoughts or judgements.

Whatever is truly natural is everlasting. I mean to say the natural forms part of a timeless process that obeys unchanging principles. The sunlight from the window moves as a patch across the floor. It comes and goes as the clouds move across the sky. The sun itself

follows its own varying path relative to the earth. The earth revolves on its axis so that we have the experience of the sunrise in the morning and sunset in the evening. The patch of light on the floor appears according to the rules of place, time and weather. All this is natural and everlasting. Water becomes rain and rain becomes water. This too is everlasting; it is of the eternal.

In the practice of Chan it is important to discover and to maintain the natural basis of the mind. If a practitioner remains with his illusory thoughts, his mind is split; it does not come to rest in its natural state. Without discovering the natural basis, the practitioner sooner or later abandons his quest. He has not hit upon the eternal. Once the eternal is perceived, the practitioner is unlikely to give up, for he has discovered his own basis.

When we are born, the body-mind is in its natural state. Gradually we adopt unnatural contortions, defending ourselves where, if we were wise, we would find that no defence is needed. The practice of Chan enables us to go back to being natural, to rediscover the eternal quality of being. Every day we get up, wash, eat, go to the toilet; all this is natural. Similarly, we need to build into our everyday lives the practice of meditation. Let it be a natural part of daily life, not something special with a time set aside for it, but a quality of ongoing awareness.

When we look at the stream outside, we see the water flowing. What is its purpose? There is no purpose. It is simply flowing. So let it be with practice. Practice itself has no particular purpose. If you give practice a purpose, then it is not natural practice. It is not rooted in the eternal. When your practice has no purpose, when practice itself is the purpose, then it is natural practice. Only this natural practice has the quality we call everlasting.

When your practice has no purpose, you are not seeking anything. You want nothing. When you want nothing and there is nothing to want, what is there then? Please just use an ordinary state of mind to practise. No need for assumptions, moods, emotions, judgements. Simply follow your method. Work hard for no reason. Sit without any purpose in your sitting. Let the natural state arise everlastingly.

Day Five Breakfast Table Remarks

The attitude we need to adopt in the practice of Chan is different from the attitude we take when doing work of other kinds, such as an academic study. Not only is it different; it should be quite the opposite.

Usually, when we are involved in a task that needs discipline or study, we like to get on with the job, to get things done fast. If we hurry and get a move on, then we can get as much done as possible. If we hurry and work hard, then the result is usually proportional.

On the other hand, if you take a hurrying attitude in the practice of Chan, you may achieve merely an undesirable result. The more you try to hurry in calming your mind, the more obstacles you will generate. The more you hurry to get enlightenment, the more vexations you will create and you will be further away from your goal.

The practice of Chan involves training in patience, in determination. It requires the development of the will. The purpose of practice is to free ourselves from the self, to go beyond attachments to the self. If we are seeking rapid results, seeking to gratify ourselves in reaching some goal or some attainment, then this is the opposite of the purpose of Chan. If we get anxious because there appears to be no result from practice, we are making a mistake. In Chan, trying to make progress ensures no progress.

Let us return once more to the analogy of the feather and the fan. Before you can get any result from your practice you have to hold the fan in a very stable and peaceful manner; and if the feather does end up on your fan, it is important not to get excited. If you get too happy, there will be a slight stir of your hand and the feather will be gone. The question is, when will the feather drop on your fan and never fly away again? As long as there is an idea of attainment in which you imagine something and want it, the feather will keep floating away. In fact, the problem will last just as long as the feather and the fan exist for you. Only when there is no person seeking an attainment and no attainment to be realised will the ultimate solution arise.

Day Five Lunch Time Remarks

During practice a lot of people find it difficult to distinguish between being diligent and being tense, between being lazy and being relaxed. In fact, the mind sometimes needs prodding, or even whipping, while at other times it needs comfort or consolation.

Applying the method has to be done skilfully. We have to learn through experience the skilful means of practice. If you feel tired or exhausted, it is probably because you have been sitting in too tense a manner. On the other hand, if you are dozing off and nothing seems to be happening, you may be too relaxed and becoming lazy. To find the right balance between tension and relaxation is not always an easy matter.

Sometimes you may find that you have become too tense. At such a time the best thing to do is to take a rest. Simply close the eyes and let the mind relax for five to ten minutes, not trying to do anything. It is important, however, to remain in the meditation posture. To lie down would be to lose all focus. Even though you have temporarily abandoned the method, you should not let go of the posture.

Sometimes you may become exceedingly sleepy. You may experience dullness in the head that does not lift; or you may experience agitation and restlessness with the body shifting about and unable to sit still. In such a case it would be wise to break off from meditation altogether. You may go off somewhere, lie down and take a nap for half an hour. To do this you should leave the room. It would not be appropriate to lie down where other people are sitting. Find a place to rest and relax, take a nap until you recover your energy and focus, and your mood is more peaceful. Then you can come back to practice.

In the first days of the retreat it is important to maintain the posture rigorously and not move about. Tomorrow is the last day of the retreat. The important thing now is to maintain the focus and peaceful quality of your mind. There is no need to drive the body too hard. If you are still having a lot of pain in the legs or back then adopt a less problematical posture. If you still have pain, you must nonetheless maintain a minimal amount of discipline. Do not move about too much because that will disturb others.

As the retreat progresses, some people can concentrate more and more effectively. But for others, an opposite tendency emerges. Their legs or back ache more and more, and they find themselves fidgeting about a great deal. Again, this fidgeting may disturb others and it is important to create a time to relax and to become more peaceful. If you happen to be sitting next to a fidgety person, or even between two of them, then you should assert yourself and maintain the peaceful stability of your mind. In this way, by discovering the skilful means for practice, you become mindful within the practice. You become able to maintain stability and peacefulness irrespective of disturbances within your body, or in the room around you. Such training within practice has benefits in everyday life. You cultivate mindfulness and are less susceptible to the impact of others. You are not so easily thrown into laughing or crying fits or a bad-tempered tantrum. Instead, you maintain an evenness of awareness and are able to respond appropriately to whatever is happening around you.

Day Five Prostrations

In Chan we often perform prostrations. On retreat we do it together facing the Buddha statue. The monk sounds the handbell and we bow; he sounds the bell again and we rise from the floor. He sounds the bell again and we prostrate. So it goes on. We establish a rhythm of prostration in which all of us participate. You have been shown the correct methods of prostration according to Chan but there are some further remarks to be made before we begin.

There are several different reasons why a practitioner may wish to make prostrations. It is right that each practitioner chooses to bow according to the motivation of the moment that is of greatest importance to him or her.

The first reason for prostration is to pray. Why does one pray? Praying is common to many religions. Basically, one is praying for a response from the being to whom one prays. Here, whatever your understanding of the Buddha may be, you are praying for some benefit for yourself or for others.

The second reason is to express respect. We bow down mentally or physically to those we respect. We indicate an aspiration to emulate the respected one.

Thirdly, the practitioner may prostrate in order to show gratitude. We feel we have received benefits from the Dharma, from the Sangha and from the Buddha. It is impossible to pay back these debts, so we show our gratitude through prostration.

The fourth reason is to express repentance. We recognise that we have made many mistakes, said unkind things, lied, harboured harmful intentions towards others, entertained wicked thoughts, broken the precepts that we may have vowed to keep. Sincerely we wish to repent for all this.

Often, when the mind is confused, full of vexations and obstructions to practice, it is beneficial to prostrate again and again with the attitude of repentance. Each one of us has made our own karma. We are responsible for our vexations, even though we often wish to evade responsibility and attribute our problems to others. To bow in repentance is appropriate. When you bow in this way you come face to face with yourself, your weaknesses, the harmful mistakes you have made, even the wicked thoughts and acts you have committed. You do not try to avoid them as you make these prostrations. You do not cover them over and run away from such thoughts. Acknowledge and admit your faults and mistakes. Acknowledge your responsibility for your own karma. Recognise and seek to correct your weaknesses. It is with such an attitude that we do the prostrations of repentance.

The fifth reason is to do prostration as meditation. When prostrating pay attention to the precise movements of the body. Make the intention and the action into one thing so that the state of body and mind is united. This method of prostration is valuable for those whose minds have attained a level of stable tranquillity.

Prostrating as meditation can be done at several levels. The first is when you consciously direct your movements and pay attention to them. As you continue, this moves to the second level where you find yourself simply watching the movement. You are very clear about each movement of the body but you are no longer consciously controlling it. It is simply going on. The third level follows from the practice of the second. The body is now moving by itself, very slowly going down and rising up again. You yourself are no longer watching

the body, you are no longer aware of yourself as a person at all. There is only the flow of movement.

So you may prostrate for praying, respect, gratitude, repentance, or meditation. The last is a prostration of the mind in which you allow it to move from the first to the third level as it will. To begin with, the mind is controlling the movement; then the mind and body are moving together; finally the body is moving but the mind has become still. Now each of you must decide what kind of prostration you are going to do. You make your own selection. I will find a place for myself. Here will do.

Day Five Evening Talk

Wang Ming goes on to tell us:

> *What common people regard as auspicious*
> *The sage takes as evil.*
> *The enjoyment gained is fleeting*
> *but the sorrow is everlasting.*

Today is the fifth day of retreat. By now some people have had some experience of the meaning of practice, and others may feel envious of their good fortune. From an ordinary point of view, such experiences are indeed valuable; but from an ultimate point of view are not to be regarded as good. They are nothing special.

We have been talking about people climbing mountains. On their way some encounter flat areas while others come across exceedingly steep slopes. We are pleased with the easy slopes and feel the mountain climbing is going well. But on the flat area the climber is not getting any higher! Someone struggling with cliffs and boulders on the steep slope may be on the quicker path. The climber wandering along on the flat area may be going around the mountain rather than up it! This is especially likely if he is climbing in a cloud.

Yesterday morning I said it was bad luck if someone seemed always to be on a steep slope. Actually, this may not be the case at all. Such a climber may be most fortunate.

Some years ago, during a retreat in America, I described the practice of Chan as like climbing a glass mountain. Furthermore its

surface is covered with oil, making it extremely slippery. If you try to climb it, there is no way you will not slide down! Nonetheless, this is the task before you. The mountain is very tall but still you must climb. And still you slide down. This is how Chan practice is.

In the end you discover that the glass mountain is an illusion; it has no real existence. One day, when you climb up some distance and then fall right back to the bottom, you suddenly come to see that top and bottom are the same. To understand this you have to become a climber. You have to make the effort to climb the slippery mountain. Unless you climb you can never know that top and bottom are the same.

Wang Ming is saying that for one who has never practised, certain states and certain experiences are good and valuable. The sage, however, recognises that attachments to experiences or high states are a hindrance, for they do not lead to liberation. The exalted states, the peaks, must also be put down. You have to go beyond this type of evaluation.

You may enjoy certain states or conditions and come to value them highly. It is like climbing up to a flat area with beautiful trees and running brooks. You arrive there and find it quite gorgeous. So you sit down saying, ‘Oh, how beautiful this is!’ You forget about the climb. The next time you make the ascent, again you sit down in the comfortable spot. Perhaps you enjoy a snooze. In your dreams you are lotus-eating. Have some of you found such a place on the mountain?

The ancient patriarchs cautioned their disciples about this, especially those who had had a first taste of enlightenment. They told them that the road ahead was still very long. If you have only just begun to walk, then there is a long way to go. If you have had a glimpse of ‘seeing the nature’ then you have to practise even harder. Of course, when you fully understand, there is nowhere to go.

The danger is that people who have had a taste of enlightenment confuse pleasing sensations with the real thing. They believe, ‘That’s it’. These sensations are perceptual experiences, mental responses or states, which are refreshing and give one a feeling of calm, peace or even a unity of body and mind. All these

pleasing experiences have nothing to do with enlightenment. They simply arise on the path.

At this point the wise practitioner should be very careful. Maybe you have come to experience the unity of the previous thought with the subsequent one. The experience is valuable. It is a sign of strong meditative practice. Yet this is not enlightenment. Becoming one is becoming one, that is all. Yet, because it feels good, and because you do not know what enlightenment is, you may mistake it for the real thing. So be cautious. Just continue without attachment to states that arise. As Wang Ming says, such enjoyments are fleeting but the illusion might last forever.

Again, perhaps you have ‘seen the nature’. You have perceived the emptiness of self in all things. You have experienced an awareness of the absence of self. You have seen the empty state where there is no-self because the self has vanished. You have had an initial taste of enlightenment. You need no longer doubt it. Yet, as soon as you realise it and think about it, you are no longer there any more. When you speak of it. you are speaking of something past, a one-time experience. Such an individual is in danger if he then thinks he is enlightened. What was it? Now it is only a dead experience.

If you take this attitude, there is no way you can make progress. Wang Ming tells us that if we have a good experience and hold onto it, evaluating it and wanting to repeat it, then we will have a very long night ahead of us.

> *Beware of shadows and tracks;*
> *The farther you leave them the better.*
> *Sitting upright in the shade of a tree,*
> *Neither traces nor shadows remain.*

The shadows and tracks are the stimulations of the world. Some practitioners believe that the best thing is to shun society, stay remote from humanity in deep mountains or vast deserts. There is so much negative experience in worldly life. Actions of others, ideas, the need to rush, stress, confusion and politics all seem to offend. Better to leave them and go far away. Everyday life is full of problems: finding food, eating it, relationships, washingup, all a heap

of trouble. It would be much better to live simply in the hills. If this attitude becomes deeply engrained in you, it only takes you farther from the path.

The Buddha said that the Dharma is within the world. Enlightenment is not separate from the mundane. If you seek enlightenment apart from this world, it is like seeking a rabbit with horns. However, Wang Ming is speaking to beginners here. When you are beginning to practise, it is valuable to isolate oneself for a while. The shadows and traces are the retribution of previous karma, the negative features of the environment we have built up around us. This environment can be overwhelming. To isolate oneself is then valuable, for it enables us to begin to see clearly.

Here in the Welsh hills we have a secluded environment. Ricky here is an accomplished musician. We could ask him to play for us and to sing songs for us while we are meditating. While this might be enjoyable, it would make progress in the practice very difficult. The wise beginner separates himself from such stimulation. In training, therefore, it is often wise to stay away from busy places.

Yet there will come a time when it is important to test the strength of one's practice. Then you must come down from the mountain and meditate at the crossroads. It becomes essential at some point to practise Dharma in the marketplace.

When you sit upright in the shade of a tree, neither shadows nor traces remain. But where is the tree? The tree may be either in the mountain or in the marketplace. In either case, you are surrounded by the retributions of your own karma. Yet, if the sitting is correct, then neither the shadows nor the traces will remain.

One day, during a retreat in Taiwan, I took the monks for a walk outside the temple grounds and into the town. After we had returned, one of the participants said to me that when he was outside, he felt that while he was walking, the cars were not moving. When he had returned, he had the feeling he had never left. He felt inside and outside to be just the same. Time had not moved, although he had moved. Such an experience is valuable. Without it the monk could never have known that nothing actually ever happens in this world. Such insight is rare. Yet to stay in such an experience might be disastrous. You could be run over by the cars very easily!

Worries of birth and distress of old age
Are products of your own thoughts.
If the mind's thinking is ended,
Birth and death are forever cut off.

One day, when I was a young monk, I met a very old and highly respected Dharma master. Whenever he said anything, everybody listened to him with great respect. I admired him so much that I even envied him a bit. I said to him, 'I wish I could get older more quickly so that people would listen to me like they listen to you.' The old Dharma master smiled and said, 'Well, yes, it is true that people listen to me nowadays, and it is about time they did so. I am about to die.'

In Buddhism there is a saying that monks should never be afraid of getting old, because when they are truly antique they will be treated like treasure. People think a monk has a deep practice because he has meditated for so many years, so they respect him and make him into a jewel. A wise old master might even receive a title 'National Treasure'! Naturally, once you are a National Treasure, you are very close to death. By the time everyone is listening to you, you will not have many days more in this life. To be afraid of death and to cling to life is actually useless. You have to appreciate that birth and death are not two separate things. The day you are born, you are already starting to get closer to death, moment by moment. With birth there is always death. Birth implies death. Only when there is no birth can there be no death.

The Chan practitioner must come to realise that wandering thoughts and illusory intellection are the very stuff of birth and death. Only when illusory thinking is cut off completely will there be no more birth-and-death. When all illusory thoughts of self-perpetuation and the vexation that such thoughts maintain are finally cut off, all that is left is wisdom.

Wisdom means the comprehension of emptiness. In emptiness, all comings and goings are seen to be aspects of the same process; the interdependent origination of all things. Coming and going, birth and death, are not separate. They are one. To be afraid of death is to

maintain illusion. The question is, can you, the practitioner, practise to the point where illusory thought and vexations are cut off?

We cling to life. We are afraid of death. This is normal, for we want to stay young; we do not want to grow old. Of course it is impossible. Even if you do not want to die, eventually you will do so. Thinking of these events in time attaches us to the products of time. It is the thought that generates the pain. In our practice we go beyond thought into the continuous present. As you enter that sphere, all fears of birth-and-death, of moment-to-moment, of one thought following another, are completely cut off.

Somebody once asked me, 'Shifu, supposing I were to listen to you and practise very hard but, before I managed to cut off all my illusions and vexations, a plane crashed on my house and killed me, what would happen to me?' I answered, 'In that case, you would probably become a practising ghost!'

My answer was not very serious. Indeed it was a Dharma joke. In the Buddhadharma there is a different view. If you have practised diligently all your life, you have established a direction for living. This direction becomes part of your karma. In your next life the tendency will continue. You will go on moving forward to the place where illusory thought disappears. It is like a young tree to which a rope has been attached, pulling it in a certain direction. Suppose the tree is being pulled towards the east. Then, season after season, when it puts forth new growth, it will continue to grow in an easterly direction. When eventually it is cut down, it also falls towards the east. It is important to set this kind of direction early in life. As I have already said, the practitioner needs to have confidence, yet without vows that is not enough. The vow that is the intention to practise gives a direction to your life and produces new and beneficial karma.

Not dying, not born,
Without form or name
The Dao is empty and tranquil.
The myriad phenomena are equal.

In the Chan perspective, to say no-birth and no-death does not mean that you are not born into a cycle of birth and death. The writer of this

verse has perceived that there is no objective reality to either birth or death. These events are not things, but merely moments in a great continuity. Centred within this mutual arising of causes and conditions, the ideas of birth and death no longer produce separations into beginnings and endings. These names and forms no longer make any difference. For such a Buddhist sage, even though he is within the cycle of birth and death, he is liberated from it.

In the Hinayana tradition, liberation means the transcending of life and death, the movement from samsara to nirvana. In Mahayana, and therefore in Chan, the meaning of liberation is different. Even though a practitioner or a bodhisattva is in samsara, he or she does not consider samsara as suffering. For such a person, liberation means that even in samsara he is liberated from samsara, he is free to come and go. To the bodhisattva, birth does not have to have the form of birth, nor death the form of death. Both are seen to be aspects of a greater whole; so what does it matter?

'*The Dao is empty and tranquil. The myriad phenomena are equal.*' The word 'Dao' refers here to the condition of continuity within which birth and death are one. To a practitioner who perceives that birth and death are one, whatever life and death may be is no longer a concern. Being without vexation and wanting nothing, to him or her everything appears equal within a vast tranquillity.

The bodhisattva is attached neither to staying within the cycle of birth and death nor to leaving it. Samsara and nirvana are all the same to him. He is no longer focused upon his personal needs. Indeed, if the bodhisattva still had a sense of self-concern he would not be truly liberated. With no self-concern, he views the world and sees the sufferings of the myriad of peoples. As the bodhisattva looks down, so great compassion is born. It is a compassion rooted in the total absence of self-concern.

A bodhisattva neither has anything specific to do, nor anything that he does not have to do. He or she does not aim at a particular target. Sentient beings manifest suffering within many causes and conditions. It is to these conditions that a bodhisattva responds. In this caring for sentient beings, the bodhisattva does not discriminate one from another, choosing to help one and not another.

Sometimes a practitioner may ask, ‘If the bodhisattvas have so much wisdom and so much compassion, how is it there are still so many suffering sentient beings? Do the bodhisattvas look after some and neglect others?’ In the scriptures there are two parables about this. In the first, compassion is likened to rain. It falls on everything and does not discriminate. Yet large trees get a lot of water and small trees in the shade of the larger get less. The rain is not selective, yet there are conditions in which it cannot be received. In the second, compassion is likened to sunlight. Just like the rain, sunlight is universally giving. It neither selects nor does it discriminate. Yet a blind person cannot see the sunshine. A prisoner in cellars cannot see the light. Karmic conditions from one’s own past determine whether one can receive the benediction of the buddhas. For this reason, training is necessary. We cannot depend on the compassion freely given by others. We have to do our own work. We have to find out what that work may be.

What is of value? What is cheap?
Where is there shame or glory?
What is excellent or inferior?
How can there be heavy and light?

When the meditator comes to understand that there need not be discrimination; that the whole process of discriminating is a matter of illusion; that, although things exist conventionally as they are, yet they need not be taken as fixed entities; then a fresh sort of vision becomes available.

When we describe things, we usually do so in dualities based upon our attachments; things are good or bad, tall or short, big or small. These are the words we use to manage our practical concerns in the world. When we deeply investigate these conventions, we see that we have allowed them to bind us into a prison of words. There are infinite opposites and comparisons. For one with Dharma insight, such discrimination appears as arbitrary. If there is no longer anything to gain or lose, then everything is experienced as equal within the endless arising of causes and conditions. This is simply the nature of being.

The clear sky puts purity to shame.
No brightness compares with the brilliant sun.
Stable as Mount T'ai;
Steady as a golden wall.

What else can be added? There is no need to say more.

Day Six Early Morning Talk

This is our last early morning meeting together, so I would like to leave you with two sets of principles; the first set is for your practice of meditation, and the second is for your everyday life. When you are meditating, the three principles to bear in mind are:

Regulate the body
Regulate the breath
Regulate the mind.

When you sit it is important to sustain the correct posture. This is most beneficial for the whole practice. Sitting correctly is good for health; it can even cure certain problems. The legs should be in either the full lotus or the half-lotus position. However, if these positions are too difficult for you, then there are other approved postures that you may use. Doing some yoga to make the legs flexible is much to be recommended, especially for beginners who find sitting uncomfortable. The back, neck and head should be vertical but not strained. The mouth should be closed with the tip of the tongue touching the upper palate. The hands should be held in the lap with the fingers joined in the proper way. Usually you should keep the eyes open and directed downwards at about forty-five degrees to the horizontal. Once you have adopted a correct sitting posture, you should make sure you are not sitting tensely with the muscles under strain. It is important not only to hold the correct posture but to do so in a relaxed manner.

The breath should be smooth and natural. It is not necessary to control it in unusual ways. Just notice the breath flowing in and out through the nostrils. After some time, move on to observing the breath as it reaches down to the abdomen, noticing also the slight

movement of the abdomen itself. Once you have focused for some time on these movements, let the centre of awareness simply come to rest in the region of your navel.

Once the body and breath are regulated, the mind will gradually settle into a calm state with few wandering thoughts. The mind follows the breathing into a natural relaxed state. When the breathing becomes naturally deep, long, fine and subtle, the mind becomes calm. Yet, you must remember not to seek to control the mind in order to reach this goal. The mind needs to be allowed to settle naturally. If you contort your mind with excessive efforts, you only produce vexation.

The three principles for everyday life are:

Be mindful of your words
Be mindful of your actions
Protect the quality of your mind.

We have spent a whole week examining a text on calming the mind and observing the importance of letting go of wandering thoughts. We need to control this mind of illusions through letting it become calm. It is this that allows us to understand non-attachment. In your daily life, it is important therefore to maintain the practice of meditation to protect the quality of your daily awareness. Too much talking without reflection can be harmful. It maintains a noisy mind; it releases our wandering thoughts in a mutual contamination so that we harm rather than help one another. Of course this does not mean we should always remain silent. It means we need to be mindful of what we are saying and not open the mouth and just let it all out. Mindfulness of what we say sustains clarity and makes our interactions with others pure also.

Similarly, we need to be mindful of our actions. It is natural to make all sorts of bodily movements with hands, legs, and feet. Like all animals we do so from morning to night. Yet we need to make these actions in a manner that is natural; that is in accord with the criteria of the society in which we live, and which respects things beneficial to the self. If we do not behave in these ways, we damage ourselves.

The practitioner who has freedom of body and mind through following natural principles will always behave in ways that are beneficial both to self and others. At the end of a Chan retreat in New York, we usually hold a simple ceremony in which we affirm our adherence to the Five Precepts.[18] If we hold these precepts, we naturally follow the three principles of meditation and the three principles of daily life. However, here you are not all of the same background and have not necessarily taken the Three Refuges of a Buddhist. Some of you may hold religious or non-religious principles that may seem to conflict with some aspect of the precepts. This would cause unnecessary difficulty and raise needless vexation. So this time we will not hold such a ceremony. Instead we should meditate upon the six principles I have just described to you. If you live according to these principles you will find out for yourselves the nature of the benefits that follow.

Day Six Breakfast Table Remarks

We are coming to the end of our retreat. For me coming to Wales has been a rare opportunity. I would like to leave behind everything I know about practice and to offer it to everyone here. Those few of you who have done a retreat with me in New York will know that I usually only give talks in the evenings. Here I have been speaking in the early morning, at breakfast time, at lunch, nearly every day! This is because I am unlikely to be able to come here again and I feel the need to convey as much as I can right now.

I am like some merchant who goes from market to market with a large bag. I set up my stall, tip everything out and put it on view. If there are buyers, well and good, if not, I stuffit all back into the bag at evening time and go on my way.

At this marketplace in the hills of Wales, you all went through a lot of trouble getting here and making preparations, and for a lot of that time you were not even sure that I would get here! Now we have done six days' hard work together and we are going home saying there is nothing to seek and nothing to gain!

Sit-at-home people may say that mountain climbers are really wasting their time. They have nothing better to do, so they try to climb mountains, tire themselves out and come back with nothing to

show for it. Yet the person who climbs a tall mountain sees a world and experiences nature in a very different way from one who never leaves his own front door. Genuine mountain climbers do not struggle up the Himalayas for the honour of it. It is others who bestow the honour. A true climber climbs simply for the sake of climbing, for the experience of climbing. And this is an experience no one can have without setting foot upon the path. This is true even if the mountain is a glass mountain covered with ice and you never get more than a little way nearer the sky.

If there is any purpose to Chan, we may say it is to discover the nature of the self and the world that appears to self. Those who make this effort discover something sublime. They do not do it for the honour, for praise from others. In investigating the nature of self they may go beyond it to some place that cannot be described.

Even so, these Chan climbers are of many sorts. Some try to climb the glass mountain for their health! Some prefer tall mountains, some like shorter ones. Some are not even concerned about reaching the top. They just like to go a certain distance every day, and if they find a small hill then that will do. Some like crossing passes into unknown valleys where the people speak languages they do not understand; perhaps they begin a new life there. Of course the higher one goes the further one sees, yet the quest for the longest view is not the only quest. Your quest is set by your karma. The true quest is the *gong'an* of one's personal life. Nobody's life is like that of another; we each have our own mountain, our own way on the mountain. Whether you are aiming for the top, or just need to go a little distance to the crest of the nearest rise; in either case the journeying brings benefits.

So, regardless of the reasons that brought you to this retreat, to have practised here is better than having not practised. To practise diligently, to put time, energy and concentration into it, to understand the meaning in the method, all these bring benefits that may be hidden from you now. For the remaining time here do not let go of your method. Maintain your focus.

When you go home, try to maintain a daily practice and, when you find the opportunity, come again to an intensive retreat. The more effort and time you put into practice, the more you will come to

realise. Even if right now, after nearly a week of patient sitting, you feel you have not ‘gotten’ anything, when you return home you may feel differently. When you are once more in your own house you may recognise the difference. You are not the same as you were six days ago. You must find this out for yourselves.

Closing Ceremony and Final Words

When you have received something, it is good to be aware of from where it has come. If you take a drink of water, it’s good to know the source of the water. Perhaps it comes from a lake or a river. Should you want to drink again, you will know where to find it. If you have not noticed where something comes from, you are like a man who crosses a bridge and knocks it down behind him. He can never return or make use of it again. When you know where something comes from, you can be grateful for the source. Gratitude is part of wisdom.

Of course the river flows spontaneously and without conditions. The water does not mind whether anybody is grateful for it. It doesn’t mind if no one remembers where the water came from. It is we who need the water, who would be wise to remember the source and to be grateful. If we fail to remember the source, then, when we need some urgently, we may be forced to dig a well, which may be too late.

During this week we have received the guidance of the Three Jewels – the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha – the guidance from the methods of practice, and the opportunity to practise. We should now express our gratitude for these things.

To whom are we grateful? First, we should express gratitude to the buddhas of all times and of all quarters. We should show gratitude to the patriarchs and the teachers of previous generations who, together with generations of practitioners, have enabled the Dharma to be transmitted. We should offer thanks to our parents and to all sentient beings to whom we are related, in one way or another, for their help. All these things have made up the conditions that enabled us to have this opportunity.

The ceremony is simple. I will express our gratitude and then after each line we will make a prostration. Please join your palms.

We express gratitude to all the buddhas of all times and all quarters.
We express gratitude to the Dharma of all times and all quarters.
We express gratitude to the Sangha of all times and all quarters.
We express gratitude to our own teacher and master Shakyamuni Buddha.
We express gratitude to all the great arhat disciples of Shakyamuni Buddha.
We express gratitude to all the patriarchs in each generation who have lived in India, Tibet, China, Japan and other countries.
We express gratitude to Bodhidharma, the first Chan patriarch in China, who brought Chan from India.
We express gratitude to Sixth Patriarch Huineng, who fulfilled the Chan teachings.
We express gratitude to the great contemporary Master Xuyun of whom Shifu is a lineage descendant, and also to Shift's personal teachers Master Lingyuan and Master Dongchu.
We express gratitude to our parents and all sentient beings who have helped us.
We express gratitude to this teacher who has guided us and been with us this week.

Finally, I would like to express my own gratitude to all of you who have helped each other complete this course and in bringing about the causal conditions that enabled me to bring this Buddhadharma and Chan teaching to Britain. A further step in the transmission of Dharma to the West has been made. For this I am infinitely grateful. Let us prostrate together.

There are now just a few final things to say. I myself do not have great practice. It is simply that I left home when I was thirteen years old, and now that I am sixty-one I have had fortyeight years collecting some experience of Buddhadharma. I have come to

realise how great and how good this Dharma is, and how very few people truly appreciate it. I am just an ordinary person exactly like everyone else here. I am not a buddha. All I am doing is trying to apply what I know in order to help others. It is not I who helps others; it is the Buddhadharma that is helping people.

Yesterday morning I said I felt like a travelling merchant who goes to far-off places carrying a bag of wares. In this distant place I would like to open my bag and leave everything behind. Then I can go home empty-handed, at ease and happy.

Whether the things I have brought here are useful to you people or not is for you to say. If it has been of use, naturally I shall feel grateful. But the bringing of the Dharma here is actually not for any purpose. It has not come for any reason at all. The Buddhadharma itself is the purpose. So, in bringing the Dharma here, I am not asking for anything in return. I would like to suggest that you adopt the same attitude. Each of us can bring the Dharma to him- or herself through training and then reveal the benefits to other people. Very often in the teachings we are asked to express gratitude to the Buddha and the Three Jewels. But Buddha is already complete, perfect. He does not need anything from anybody. The best way to express our gratitude is to reveal the benefits of the Dharma to everybody, to every sentient being.

When Shakyamuni Buddha was about to pass away, his disciples asked him, ‘Buddha, after you have passed away, upon whom can we rely?’ The Buddha replied, ‘The teachings that I have given you for some forty years, that is the Dharma upon which you should rely.’ You too should rely upon the Dharma, the precepts and your own efforts, and not upon the teacher. Of course, if there were a great Chan master who came to Britain that would be good, yet whether there is a Chan master in Britain or not is not the crucial matter. So long as people have a good understanding of the Dharma and practise accordingly, benefits will arise. Even if I were to come here every year until I was a hundred years old, it would only be at certain times that the Dharma was practised. The Buddhadharma is eternal and ever present. This person Shengyen is of no importance to you. The vital spark is the teaching that he leaves behind with you. And this Dharma is not my Dharma. It is the Buddhadharma of Chan.

[17] The incense stick (Jap. *kyosaku*) is a flat stick carried by the retreat master or monitor to strike the shoulders of a meditator to arouse him or her to greater effort. In some cases, the use of the stick can 'trigger' an experience of insight, or even enlightenment. In these retreats the *kyosaku is* only employed when requested.

[18] The Five Precepts are: not to kill, not to steal, not to lie, not to commit sexual misconduct, not to indulge in intoxicants.

Part II

Illuminating SILENCE

Introduction

During his 1989 visit Master Sheng-yen had told us he did not often recommend the method of meditation known as Silent Illumination (*mo chao* in Chinese) because it required a mind well settled in practice to bring its use to fruition. However, he soon began teaching Silent Illumination extensively not only in Wales in 1992, when he taught from Hongzhi's text *Mo chao ming*,[19] but again in 1995 in Wales as presented here, and subsequently in Warsaw, Zagreb and Berlin, as well as on his home territory in New York. My own preference for this method had encouraged him in Britain, and its reception by Western practitioners had appeared promising. Shifu has noted that there are few Chinese masters today who can teach this method in depth and in relation to its original sources. We have here, therefore, an important introduction to this practice. In this introduction I seek to place the discussion which follows in context, and to remove some possible sources of confusion for those new to the subject.

Shifu emphasises that experiential understanding of the Dharma is contingent upon conceptual insight: a wordless experience only becomes insightful if it confirms meaning in a personal realisation. Shifu acknowledges that mystical experiences involving a loss of the sense of self and feelings of transcendence are potentially common to all humanity and that they occur in all religious traditions from the most shamanic to the strictly clerical. Such an event is always interpreted within the terms of the belief system or ideology in which the experiencer anchors their faith. Experience is thus anchored in a folk belief through which being in the world is made meaningful and worthwhile.

By contrast, since the late nineteenth century, Japanese Zen, particularly as presented to the West, has emphasised a view that an enlightenment experience transcends all words and philosophies in a unique and direct encounter with the ineffable basis of mind and universe. This viewpoint is an extreme insistence on Bodhidharma's dictum that the enlightening experience went beyond all scripture (p.

5). It was presented particularly by D.T. Suzuki to a Western culture that was increasingly dubious about Christian verities under criticism from scientific and humanistic rationalism. It was received with romantic enthusiasm by Westerners hungry for some return to transcendence as a relief from empiricism and common sense. Aldous Huxley, indeed, put together a collection of writings from all religions to emphasise this perennially transcendent philosophy of experience apparently inherent in the root of all religion.[20] As Dale S. Wright and others have shown, much interpretation of Zen in the West has developed within this viewpoint.'[21]

One result of this view has been that some professing Christians, in the search for deeper spiritual understanding, have felt free to 'sit' with Japanese Zen masters and, in some cases, to receive transmission from them, enabling them to practise and act as Zen teachers. Some such teachers, while paying lip service to the context-free notion of Zen spirituality, in fact use Zen meditation methods in ways which are deeply wedded implicitly or explicitly to Christian belief. In such cases, Zen practice has become a vehicle for spiritual access to 'divinity' in direct contrast to the foundational teachings of the Buddha. Naturally, beginners interested in Zen tend to become confused.

Master Sheng-yen's insistence on the importance of concept is in line with contemporary postmodern thought, in which experience is viewed as inseparable from an ideational context, however implicit that may be at the time of its occurrence. In Chan practice the context remains the Buddhist philosophy of the Mahayana, based on the Buddha's original insights into the nature of the self, and the interdependence of causes and effects in the progressive origination of phenomena, 'co-dependent arising', the processes of which at no level reduce to any particulate 'thingness'. Buddhist thought is based on phenomenological explanations in terms of motion in process and not in terms of entities or agents in interaction. This is a very different insight from one conceiving of an experience as some personal identification or meeting with a universal substrate, be it God, Brahman or whatever. Realisation in Chan is the emergence of an 'understanding' based in ineffable experience demonstrating the 'emptiness' of all things, as beautifully expressed in the *Heart Sutra*,

which is read or chanted in Zen/Chan ceremonials. The essential contrast between Christian ‘Zen’ and its Buddhist original seems to be that, in the former, practitioners will experience insight as relationship, whereas the Buddhist experiences it essentially as pervasion. Naturally these contrasts imply different views of suffering, the nature of the self, theistic dependency and the project of compassion, none of which is made explicit to potential disciples.

Those new to Buddhist thought are often puzzled by the idea of emptiness. The term denotes neither nothingness nor void nor some death-like existence: rather that, at root, everything is naturally present to awareness as a continuous, impermanent appearance not categorised into entities of any sort – hence ‘empty’ of any thing-like manifestation. In Buddhist thought there is sometimes a reference to the ‘emptiness of emptiness’. According to one view of the underlying nature of co-dependent arising, everything is empty apart from a basis that is irreducible. To others, the basis of phenomenal arising is considered to be unknown but, at least in principle, in some way still expressing an interdependence of processes responsible for universal appearance. We face here the fundamental mystery of existence, which baffles physicists and Buddhists alike.

Those enquiring into Chan will soon discover that the mind is said to have the *tathagatagarbha* as its basis. This term, as well as including a title of the Buddha, is a synonym for buddha-nature as emptiness seen in realisation. It appears to have a thing-like quality about it and some have seen its use as a compromise with Hindu thought. Yet, when it is broken down into its Sanskrit components this entity-ness disappears. The word *garbha* means ‘womb’ or ‘embryo’ and thus, at the root of mind, lies the embryo (womb) of buddhahood. Yet this term also divides into *tathata* (meaning suchness) and *gata* (meaning gone, going, come, coming: i.e. movement). Hence this title of the Buddha means one who exemplifies the coming and going of things as they are. Other synonyms are the ‘unborn’; i.e. nothing discriminated, or the ‘innate luminosity of mind’ wherein all apparent things appear.

A prime aim of Chan practice is ‘seeing the nature’; that is to say the suchness of the flowing aspect of everything coarising in existence. To see this directly is to go beyond the discriminating,

categorising mind which generates suffering as the product of its own process. Since the egoistic self is as insubstantial as all things, it too must lose its apparent particularity before emptiness can be realised non-dualistically. The logic here is straightforward; any desire for such an insight implies the presence of the egoistic self imputed as the entity that does the desiring. Clearly, a non-egoistic state cannot be reached through such a route. So what to do? It is to this question that the training methods of Silent Illumination are addressed.

In considering these methods, we shall again quickly come across terms the meaning of which is often unclear, due to ambiguities in their usage. A prime difficulty concerns the very term ‘enlightenment’ itself. This noun is commonly employed by teachers and is used in many texts without distinguishing between three alternative meanings. It may denote either an experience, or a state resulting from some achievement or fruition, or a developmental process linking these two. Failure to distinguish clearly between these usages leads to muddled comprehension and sometimes also to erroneous claims.

An enlightenment experience (*jianxin* in the Chinese; *kensho*, *satori* in the Japanese) is a discrete event in which all selfconcern falls away and the practitioner ‘sees the nature’ without any filtering by egoistic interests or dualistic conceptualisation. The event implies that there is an innate basis of mind, the ‘nature’, simply obscured by the ‘ignorance’ of self-concerned thought and feeling. It is often a supremely life-changing moment, opening the practitioner to a mysterious selfless world of great brilliance, vividness and depth. It gives rise to a direct insight both into ‘ignorance’ as a source of human suffering implicit in self-focused activity, and the existential fact of an alternative vision. It may also give rise to a profound compassion for all sentient beings. For those with a conceptual understanding of Dharma it is an experiential confirmation. However, such experiences are rare, usually of short duration, and followed by the re-mergence of self with a renewal of doubt and questioning, but based now in a mind that has ‘seen’ and which therefore continues training from an entirely fresh revelatory basis. Most records suggest

that even great masters only ‘see the nature’ a few times in their nonetheless transformed lives.

When ‘enlightenment’ is used to refer to a state or to a developmental process, it usually implies that an individual has surpassed some threshold to reach an irreversible condition (*kaiwu* in Chinese) in which wisdom and compassion are conjoined in a stance of benevolence towards all sentient beings. The schools of Buddhism differ in their emphasis on wisdom and compassion, and with respect to the time taken to reach such a state. Some schools believe that many lifetimes must pass before an enlightenment arising from repeated training can occur. Others believe enlightenment can arise within one lifetime, given an appropriate history of practice and good karma. Some schools seem to think bodhisattvas are enlightened, others restrict this label to buddhas. Shifu has said that in an enlightened person the functional ego is replaced by the skilful means arising from wisdom.

Many people are confused in thinking that enlightenment as a state implies some continuing ecstasy of bliss and awareness such as may be experienced in *kensho*. This does not appear to be a correct understanding. The fully enlightened practitioner may be said to be ‘one who lives from a perspective of a wisdomunderstanding which functions without ego concern under all circumstances’. Such a realised person lives normally in the world, simply lacking habitual self-concern. He or she will have a mirror-like quality in which others see themselves, rather than seeing the reactivity of ego in the one before them. A brief enlightenment experience may be the origin of such a condition but the majority of such experiences are not followed by the persistence of an enlightened state; rather selfish vexations return but with a reduced vigour. It may be that some individuals develop a capacity to generate the experience of selfless bliss, others may find themselves there more frequently, but for most the condition is a short-term blessing. Since the experience does not ensure the emergence of the state of being an enlightened person, further practice is the essential norm.

Yet there is another way of envisaging this condition, not so much as ‘an’ experience, but more as a form of knowledge. In the Caodong tradition, enlightenment is said to be no different from

practice. This view focuses on the meditative fading away of categorisations of all kinds, time, space, self, until a residual nothingness is discovered in which everything is nonetheless mirrored. Such an approach does not, therefore, emphasise the sudden experiential, revelatory aspect of enlightenment, but rather the discovery of an underlying condition of mind implicitly always present. To know this state is thus more a type of knowing than an experience of insight of limited duration. Some may argue that this Caodong approach is the more mature perspective and it is the deep view of Silent Illumination.

Anyone who has ‘seen the nature’ is unlikely to claim to be an enlightened person, even when a master has confirmed the experience; he or she simply knows what a glimpse of enlightenment entails. Indeed, anyone claiming to be enlightened is probably acting erroneously from an inflated ego, which a teacher has been unable to contain. Simple humility alone will normally prevent any such claim. People may consider another person to be ‘enlightened’ on observing an exceptional being who seems truly to have transcended the vexations of this world. It is doubtful whether there are more than a handful of such persons alive in any one generation. Some may become great lamas, masters, or teachers; others may remain entirely unknown, except perhaps to a few.

Shifu has remarked that any person who has experienced *kensho*, by whatever route, is a prime candidate for teaching others; yet even those without confirmation may teach while, in humility, understanding they will not be able to distinguish reliably the signs of experiential realisation in someone else. Such an individual should not, however, properly receive transmission as a Dharma heir of a master. There may indeed be whole generations in which a realised person is not present in a community and a lineage is sustained as best may be. The guestmaster at Yunmen Sse in China affirmed to me that he believed this to be the case in most of China after the ravages of the Cultural Revolution.[22]

Viewed in this way the practices of Chan are clearly intentional. It is a path going somewhere rather than a seat under an apple tree where the fruit may be savoured.[23] Some confusion may arise for beginners on reading that a great teacher such as Dogen identifies

sitting in meditation with enlightenment itself. A beginner should not think that on taking his seat in the Chan Hall he is at once enlightened! The proposition means that the capacity for enlightenment is present and the awareness of it only obscured by vexations. While a novice needs to develop appropriate motivation for practice, he or she should seek to create an attitude of non-seeking as a means to going beyond ego-based desire. Enlightenment is not a credential.

The practice of Silent Illumination derives from the twin Indian practices of *samatha* (calming the mind) and *vipassana* (insight into its nature) as proposed by the Buddha himself. In Silent Illumination the term ‘silence’ indicates calming, while ‘illumination’ refers initially to awareness of the clear presence of silence. The conjoined practice developed in China is thus one of insight into the calmed mind. We must ask what is it that is being calmed here? The word ‘mind’ is so general that a more precise look is needed. Indeed the Chinese term is often translated as ‘heart’, implying the presence of a rich emotional life. An examination of the difficulties in practice gives an answer. The main problem is wandering thoughts and a high percentage of these, maybe virtually all of them, are in one way or another bound up with selfreference and associated feelings. It is this self-referencing mind that is the prime target for calming. It follows that the practice of illuminating, meaning inspection and awareness of the process of meditation, is one of looking into a mind progressively relieved of thoughts of self.

In positing ‘total body awareness’ as the first target of this meditation, Master Sheng-yen makes a shrewd move (pp.102–3). The body itself is the prime home of the self and the locus in which it originates. By merging awareness of the body parts into one integral experience, so too are the processes of self brought to a somatic focus in which awareness of bodily horizons fade, leading to a sense of luminous spaciousness and timelessness. In clearly observing the arising of this condition, in which the concerns of self have lost their prominence, there comes a point at which a degree of stability is acknowledged. This is where illumination, a knowing of what one is at, begins. The deliberate, intentional practice of silence with illumination leads, therefore, to an experience of unification as

simple presence within a flow of universal being. Such unification, with self-concern laid aside, is blissful and may be accompanied by a variety of experiences. Seeing oneself as one basically is, allows an acceptance of being to arise that lacks anxiety. I guess that the self-oriented activities of the brain, which mostly restrict the pleasure centres to negative emotion, may be so modified that a basic, unconcerned joy may arise. Yet such experiences are not *kensho.* Although such experience is a sign of effective meditation, the self remains active as a calmed observer basically happy just to be who he or she is. It is sometimes said that one has attained the one mind of 'big self' as opposed to the little self of egotistic anxieties.

In Direct Contemplation, a valuable auxiliary method (pp.117–18), one simply regards an object near or far and holds the gaze or the hearing still and focused. A very clear awareness of situational presence arises, with experiences of spatial clarity predominant. This is illumination in a very precise form in which the extreme outward focus of attention eliminates the self-concern located in the body: awareness is so strongly focused on the object that no interference from self arises. There may be said to be illumination here, but no silence in the sense of a controlled calming of the self. We may call the resulting condition 'illumination with self invisible'. Self reappears on the termination of the practice.

In Berlin in 1999 Shifu suggested that Direct Contemplation would have to lead into Silent Illumination if enlightenment was to be found. What is important here is that illumination should once more turn to examining a calmed self through the inner movement called 'turning the light back'. Metaphorically, it is as if the eyes or ears were rotated away from the exterior to the interior view. Direct contemplation is a very lively practice and can act as a major contribution to Silent Illumination in which illumination precedes the development of silence.

It is only when self-reference drops away entirely that 'seeing the nature' in its wondrous clarity can arise. There is a distinctive sensation of awe and amazement and, depending on the context, sometimes a powerful feeling of release. These changes are quite apparent to the practitioner, although the absence of self-concern is not identified as such until the experience wanes. The gradual return

of self can often be sensed and becomes a feeling of loss. We may characterise this state as ‘illumination with self absent’ and the contrast with ‘illumination with self invisible’ is experientially distinguishable by the practitioner.

To an experienced meditator enlightened knowing is unique and not to be confused with bare illumination. However, a novice may easily make a false claim here. Indeed, even for a master taking interviews, these distinctions are not easy to detect and need careful testing. Shifu is very cautious about confirming *kensho.* He argues that many less cautious masters may lead disciples astray by mistaking states of high illumination for enlightenment. Since self has not gone absent at such times but is merely invisible, an error here may later occasion much confusion for a disciple.

It is important to emphasise yet again that any self-willed intention to become enlightened is doomed to failure. An ego-based activity simply precludes the movement in which self-concern is dropped. The practice of a meditation method is naturally motivated towards success and is ultimately self-defeating unless it can go beyond intentionality. Here lies the paradox of the Zen koan: the paradox that to go beyond the discriminating mind, the mind that distinguishes the question has itself to take leave. Since deliberation is not helpful, a form of giving up has to occur – abandonment of method, wanting and concern. This can only arise, as it were, accidentally and most descriptions of *kensho* suggest that a slight shock or sudden shift in attention can induce the change in a mind that is ready. Such a moment thus tends to arise arbitrarily, when a person is crossing a yard, drinking a cup of tea, suddenly seeing an unusual bird, or falling rocks. Although meditation work can deliberately induce the various forms of illumination in which the self is invisible due to strong outward attention, it cannot induce the self to make itself absent. Enlightenment, whether as an ‘experience’ or as ‘knowing’, is said always to arise suddenly, whereas training in meditation is gradual. It comes about in its own time. As Shifu says, ‘Let the universe do it!’

Again, it is never the case that the self as the reference point of individual cognition is ever destroyed. If it were, the person would not be capable of functioning in the world. What seems to happen is that

self-reference simply goes absent – gets switched off – and thereby reveals its extraordinarily obsessive presence almost all the time. With self-reference switched off, the heart-mind takes off in new and revelatory states of being, bliss, voidness of thought and love which, as it were, rotate according to their own rules that appear universal rather than personal. Although meditation work cannot induce enlightenment, there is every reason to suppose that it facilitates the possibility of an enlightenment happening. The vital thing here is to explore the meaning of no-intention.

As we have just seen, even an enlightenment experience does not mean the total and irrevocable elimination of the egoistic self or its vexations: a human being cannot function in the world without an operational ego. It is then not the self-function that finally disappears, but rather the attachment to personal identifications that subsequently re-emerge, when the experience has passed away. Yet these can now begin to diminish with the shocking discovery of their illusory and inessential nature. As self-concern is replaced by inner peace and contemplative compassion for sentient beings, so wisdom arises. As Shifu explained at the Berlin retreat in 1999, the egoistic functions are taken over by wisdom. When such a condition is well established others may consider such a person to be an enlightened being, although he or she would not be impressed by such an accolade. Compassion now being their prevalent concern and their natural basis, questions of attainment or rank no longer concern them. Such beings are rare treasures in the world.

We should note that the psychological dynamics we have discussed do not reveal a transcendence of the human condition as such, but rather postulate a transcending of the self-absorption that lies at the heart of suffering. Experience and conceptuality work together to reveal this insight, based in the universal law of interdependent origination, as the root of the emptiness of phenomena.

The sceptic may ask how this realisation differs from other religious interpretations of the spiritual life. Is it merely another example of cultural relativity or has it some more especial claim to truth? Clearly in the postmodern age the mere assertion of the truth value of one belief system over another will get us nowhere. There

are, however, a number of special features about Buddhist, and specifically Mahayanist realisation, that we may wish to consider.

Firstly, the Buddhist system is not merely a metaphysical, philosophical, or clerical ontology woven into dogma. It is subject to test, as indeed the Buddha himself insisted. Postulates about mind and awareness are always evaluated in personal experience. This 'subjective empiricism' has always been a prime characteristic of Buddhist phenomenology.[24] Methods of training are for the trainee always a personal experiment.

Secondly, the psycho-philosophy of Buddhism parallels in many ways the emerging science of the subjective which is arising in the West from the relating together of psychotherapeutic theory and practice, gestalt psychology, consciousness studies, phenomenological philosophy, and some aspects of humanist existentialism. It looks as if in the investigation of the mind, Buddhist and Western thinkers are converging on a position of common understanding; and this in spite of the immense contrasts in their purpose and in their intellectual culture.

Of course both Buddhism and the empiricism of the West remain bound by conceptuality and final 'truth' remains as mysterious as ever. In both cases enquiry remains the essence of the matter, whether it is through a meditational puzzle or a hypothesis to be tested. We may at least claim that Buddhist enquiry has taken its place within the spirit of the times.

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[19] Sheng-yen, Master. 1987. *The Poetry of Enlightenment.* New York. Dharma Drum. p. 81.

[20] Huxlev, A. 1954. *The Perennial Philosophy.* London. Chatto and Windus.

[21] See discussions in Wright, D.S. 1998. *Philosophical Meditations on Zen Buddhism.* Cambridge University Press; Faure, B. 1991. *The Rhetoric of Immediacy: A Cultural Critique of Chan/Zen Buddhism.* Princeton University Press; and, especially, Faure, B. 1993. *Chan Insights and Oversights. An Epistemological Critique of the Chan Tradition.* Princeton University Press. For a review of the unsuspected militarism of Japanese Zen masters responsible for

much of Zen's coming to the West, see Victoria, B. 1998. *Zen at War.* New York. Weatherhill.

[22] Crook, J.H. 1998. 'Chan revival in Mainland China'. *New Chan Forum* 16. pp. 33–45.

[23] Chan thus resembles Tibetan Mahamudra more closely than it does Dzogchen

[24] Crook, J.H. 1980. *The Evolution of Human Consciousness.* Oxford. Clarendon.

DHARMA DISCOURSES

The Method

Once again I am joining British practitioners on Chan retreat in Wales. Each time I come I have a different feeling; the only thing in common is the experience of a cold climate. Taiwan is a hot place so here I feel the cold, even when you British may tell me it is a warm day! Yet there is something else in common too. Each one of us is getting older. All of us are aging; even those of us who are actually young. Whether we are also getting wiser is another question!

The first time I came the only person I knew was John. It was he, indeed, who had persuaded me to come. The second time I knew a few more people including some who had joined me on retreat in New York. Now I see even more new faces. People differ through time and so does The Maenllwyd. Here, hidden in the hills of Wales, this little farmstead is looking more and more like a Chan monastery. It is really quite unexpected that in Britain one can find such a place.

During this visit I want to tell you more about Silent Illumination because many of you have found it helpful, and because John has a particular affinity with this practice. It seems that at The Maenllwyd there is a good karmic association with Silent Illumination. We need to move towards a deeper appreciation of Buddhadharma and this will be an excellent way of doing this. Hopefully, we can nourish the roots of Chan already growing in the rich soil of Britain.

Some of you have practised *shikantaza*, the serene reflection method of Soto Zen, at the Throssel Hole Abbey, founded in the north of England in 1972 by Jiyu Kennett Roshi of Shasta Abbey, California. The Japanese Soto tradition developed historically from the Caodong School in China, so it is not surprising that *shikantaza* and Silent Illumination have much in common. The practice of Silent Illumination was the basis of this Japanese method but I believe the latter, although an excellent practice, does not bring out clearly the conditions, method, and concept of Chinese Chan.

It was the great Japanese master, Dogen, who, having learned Silent Illumination from Master Ju-ching in China, and having received transmission from him, took the basic method to Japan. This method was descended from Master Hongzhi whose profound text we shall study together on this retreat. Hongzhi's writings may seem very advanced, for he speaks of Silent Illumination straight from his heart and from his immediate realisation. To truly comprehend him we have to be right with him in our practice of the method. Yet serious beginners may find illumination just by appreciating his words.

We must begin by clarifying the form of the practice, because it will only be by putting it into effect that we will come to understand fully the words of the master. We need to be clear both about the practice itself and about the concepts that lie behind it. My approach to teaching Silent Illumination may differ slightly from that of other teachers. I teach it from the viewpoint of three levels of difficulty. If I did not do this then the beginners here might find it too difficult. Yet I will also be careful not to bore the experts! I will present certain gradations of practice. Beginners can start at the simplest level but, if you happen already to be at a deep level, there will be nothing to stop you going right there. However, in deep water you need to be able to swim, so take care!

I can summarise the first level by saying, 'Pay attention only to yourself sitting!' You need to place your attention precisely within that very body that is now sitting on the cushion beneath you. It is important to have a feeling of the totality of that body's experiencing. We do not focus on particular parts – the hands, feet, face, nose, posture – as such, nor especially on the breathing, nor on the location of the breathing sensation, but on the total integrated awareness of bodily presence.

To do this you must be relaxed yet, at the same time, alert. Be sure that your posture is completely correct in one of the orthodox styles of sitting. Unless this is so, the body will not be well balanced and inequalities in muscle tension will develop in different parts of the body, gradually producing distortions and mental agitation.

When I tell people to relax there is always somebody who overdoes it and at once begins to feel drowsy. On the other hand,

when I tell people not to be lazy, there is always someone who tenses up his body and mind until he begins to wonder why he feels stressed. It is vital, therefore, to find a point of balance between relaxation and alertness. As I have said before, it is like catching a feather on a fan – it takes a certain alertness and discernment. Whenever you feel lazy and you need to bring up some energy, check your posture and make the mind bright. Whenever you feel stressed or fatigued, examine yourself to see whether you are putting too much tension into your body or holding the posture too rigidly. It is not only the body that needs to find the point of balance in a relaxed alertness, but the mind needs to do the same. The mind needs to be clear about what you are doing, neither drowsy, nor drifting in a vague haze, nor sitting in a blank stupor. You need to be alert, aware, and present, but neither tense, nor preoccupied by an intention to do well, nor by some regret.

The second level arises when one is ‘settled in’ or ‘at home’ in the meditation. When this stage appears there is no longer any particular feeling of bodily presence. You know very well that your body is there on the cushion, but you have no particular awareness of its presence. One could say that the body as such no longer troubles or concerns you. As this level of meditation becomes deeply established, even though you may be aware of local twinges of pain, it does not trouble you. Often they disappear entirely. In the same way that the body will cease to concern you, so too will the environment. Indeed the environment and your awareness cease to be represented as two different things. Their duality melts into one experience. You hear the sound of birdsong, the bleating of sheep and so on, but they do not concern you as such. Your awareness encompasses them without distinguishing between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’. The horizon of your awareness has gone far beyond such sounds so that you and they are not distinguishable. Although, at this point, body, environment, and the mind are all clearly there, they no longer react upon one another; there is no sense of interference. The practitioner is aware of simply observing all this with no bothersome feeling.

The third level might be described as ‘gone beyond’. There is no environment to be observed, no object of contemplation and no

subject of contemplation either. The experience is as if nothing exists. Although the meditator still knows that the body is on the cushion and that the room, the house, the countryside are all in place, she or he has ceased to be occupied in any observation of them. The mind is in a state of emptiness.

In fact, that is precisely what we may say is still there – the state of emptiness itself. This emptiness has become the topic or focus of contemplation. Even though the practitioner is not aware of doing it, his consciousness still has an object: emptiness itself. Unknown to himself, such a practitioner is still functioning with traces of dualism in mind. He thinks he has no existence, but he is still drawing on emptiness. Even though he thinks the self has disappeared, when he leaves the environment of sitting and returns to a daily life situation he may still discover himself subject to all his old difficulties. While he has practised well, he has still not developed fully the power of practice so as to enter enlightenment.

Once upon a time there was a monk who practised diligently with his master. One day he felt he was certainly enlightened. He felt there could be no doubt about it because what he experienced was fully in accord with the sayings of the sutras. When he read them he seemed to have a complete understanding. Yet his master refused him affirmation. The monk decided to leave him; off he went, paying his respects to other temple communities and other masters.

One day he was wading across a small stream and saw his reflection in the water. ‘Ah ha!’ he cried, ‘You are me but I am not you. It is only in seeing you today that I understand.’ In that instantaneous moment of awakening he was truly enlightened. Existence and emptiness had ceased to be opposites for him. In their experiential co-emergence he had come to realisation. The monk had seen a meaning in his reflection in the water. When we think about ourselves we generate images of ourselves. Such images are like reflections in water. ‘You are me!’ we might say. Yet we may also perceive that these images are empty of any substantiality, literally reflections. So, ‘I am not you!’ is also true. When such insights coincide what then remains?

Most practitioners are attached either to existence or emptiness. Attachment to existence is dualistic involvement with either object or

subject. Attachment to emptiness arises when you become attached to the feeling that this duality has disappeared. Here there is still a subtle dualism: attachment of self to its experience of emptiness. When existence and emptiness merge in a great laugh, their separate appearances cease to be, and there is no longer a contradiction within phenomenal reality.

A practitioner might ask me, ‘Shifu, what is the fourth level, enlightenment, really like?’ It is only possible to respond to such a question with analogies, metaphors or stories. Any attempt to fix such an insight in words would err in creating some sort of descriptive concreteness, lacking entirely the taste of co-emerging presence and emptiness. While the preceding levels can be described, the fourth level can only be indicated. A signless signpost points out over an ocean. Indeed, we should not occupy ourselves in attempts at fixing enlightenment in some concrete verbal expression. It is better to practise at the differing levels, to cease attachments to them and eventually to run offthe rails. The final destination is beyond the track; it is trackless.

So far as our practice together here is concerned, it is important that we all have in common some basic ideas concerning what we are attempting. The levels I have indicated will be helpful indicators for your sitting but, bearing in mind the prior practice of some of you, I maintain a flexible attitude rather than a fixed approach. If you are using another method in accordance with the Chan endeavour, then fruition of practice can still arise. However, if your practice is rooted in concepts at variance with those of Chan, then the results you get will reflect your alternative conceptualisations and cannot be considered as Chan experience. Concept determines the outcome of practice.

The words ‘silent’ and ‘illumination’ are both essential and bring out clearly the conditions of practice, the method and the concepts necessary for success. Silent Illumination practice itself developed from the old Indian practices of *shamata* and *vipassana.* These mean ‘calming the mind’ and ‘insightful contemplation’ respectively. Before the time of Hongzhi, Chinese masters commonly taught these as separate methods. Sometimes in Japan these methods are also used as supplementary practices to *shikantaza.* Calming the mind

commonly utilises watching or counting the breath, whereas insightful contemplation requires the practitioner to watch the practice with a questioning intent – asking what this experience actually is.

In Silent Illumination we use these two processes together. Not only does this improve the efficacy of meditation, but it also avoids the complexities of practising with successive systems. From the time of Hongzhi the integrated practice of Silent Illumination became the main method in the Caodong School. It is the simultaneous practice of calming the mind with questioning observation. When the mind does not move, that is silence. When you become insightfully aware of that very same stillness, then that is illumination. While watching moving thoughts is called *vipassana*, watching silence is the combination of calming and a questioning observation. That is Silent Illumination.

Why do we begin by contemplating total body awareness rather than partial awareness, say of the movement of breath at the nostrils, counting of breaths or observation of posture? The reason is that in focusing on the totality, there is less discrimination than when observing parts. Attention to the totality also reduces the arising of thoughts connected within the discrimination of parts. Even when the mind is distracted one can sustain total body awareness. Those of you here who are more used to watching the breath may now like to move beyond that to the more total awareness of the whole body condition.

Conditions for Practice

When practising on retreat it is vital that the conditions be appropriate. Once the external conditions are well arranged, we then have to ensure that we regulate our lives rightly. This means looking after our bodily nourishment through food and drink, our quality of awareness through the regulation of sleep, our practice through the regulation of breathing and our insight through the regulation of the mind.

We should neither eat too much nor too little. If too little, then we lack energy for meditation. If too much, the feeling becomes one of somnolent heaviness, if not indigestion. Food need not be luxurious

or refined; rather it can be quite basic but well chewed on ingestion. The intake of water should be adequate and it is important not to dehydrate through not taking enough, as may happen in a hot climate.

On retreat the practitioner may take five hours of sleep each night. Once you have settled into the retreat routine this is quite sufficient. Only on the first day or two should difficulty be experienced. In traditional Chinese monasteries monks slept for about four hours each night.

Regulation of the body when sitting on the cushion means being neither too tense nor too relaxed. The posture should be maintained correctly as this sustains the appropriate flow of chi and the energy balance of the body. It also prevents muscular distortions that may arise if one sits in a bad or lax posture. After sitting, we usually need to restore the circulation and ease the muscles of the back and legs. For these reasons we do various forms of exercise on retreat: slow and fast walking; physical exercises such as yoga, tai chi, chi-gung, and some more energetic movements to set the heart beating. After several days of retreat, experienced practitioners and even some beginners may find that the body becomes very comfortable while sitting, with the energy flow in the meridians – the energy channels – well balanced and smooth, thus helping the mind to relax. If that is the case for you, then, when others are exercising or walking, you may prefer to remain sitting in your place.

During practice, breathing should be natural. When there is some tension the breathing becomes distorted and may require regulation. Simply allow the breathing to become gentle while being aware of it either at the nostrils or in the lower abdomen. There are many methods of yogic breathing designed to aid meditation or to achieve various effects, but these are not utilised in the practice of Silent Illumination.

The essential feature of regulating the mind is to keep returning to the method of practice. It is important not to waste time by being carried away by wandering thoughts, yet it is equally no good developing an aversion to them. By constantly bringing the mind back to the method of practice we move from a scattered to a concentrated mind, and from a concentrated mind to one-pointed

mind. From this the no-thought condition may arise. Good practice leads from a noisy mind through a quiescent and more unified one to no-thought itself. Some people may think no-thought is enlightenment but this is by no means necessarily the case. It is usually a resting condition or a deep inwardness. What is then needed is to drop selfcentredness, for it is only when this happens that enlightenment arises. Various means of self-confrontation are usually required. Clearly, this is not easily done. Indeed, if you are even thinking about it, self-concern is obviously there!

Throughout the practice, the key principle is a single-minded focus on whichever of the retreat activities is currently in process. Whatever you are doing, do that and nothing else. Never think about sitting while eating or eating while sitting. It is bad for digestion and bad for the mind. If you think too much when you have retired to bed you cannot have a sound sleep.

Three Principles for Practical Use

In practising Chan there are three principles to bear in mind:

Contemplation
Illumination
Retrieval.

The first principle, contemplation, is to focus very clearly on the method; the second, illumination, is to develop a very precise awareness of the actual practice; and the third, retrieval, is to keep retrieving or bringing back the method whenever it is lost.

Although these principles may seem simple, they are not so easily applied in situations where the mind is severely scattered by powerful emotions, memories or by wandering, listless thoughts. Bringing back the practice may be quite difficult, because a scattered mind may not easily recognise its own condition. However, once we have realised how easily we become lost in practice, our mindfulness of what we are doing becomes more focused, and it becomes easier to recollect these principles. There is no point in regretting the previous moment, when the scattered mind has been lost in aimless mental rummaging among old-time hopes and fears.

It does no good to indulge in such regrets. Whenever we discover we have become distracted, the practitioner should not blame herself but simply bring back the method.

It is also important to apply these principles at times when we are engaged in other retreat activities besides sitting. All of these require us to sustain a one-pointed mind. For example, in slow walking the practitioner should sustain a quiet mind even though he is physically moving and the environment is passing by. At such a time the mind should be like a mirror simply reflecting what is moving past it. Like the mirror the mind should not move.

As with sitting, there are three levels of awareness in walking meditation. The first level of awareness is when you know very well that you are walking and you consciously direct your body in its movement. To this we may then apply the three principles. Here contemplation means directing the bodily movement, correctly placing the legs and feet and holding the posture ‘moving like a mountain’. Illumination here means being aware of doing this practice and feeling the total bodily awareness of so doing. Retrieval here means bringing your mind back to the experience of the moment whenever it has been distracted.

The second level of awareness arises when you are no longer consciously directing the movement. You simply contemplate and illuminate as you move, but you no longer need to adjust or direct movement consciously. The body simply flows forward in the mere awareness of flowing. There is no need to be doing anything about it. Yet, on this level too, the principles of contemplation, illumination, and retrieval need active use. Contemplation is the mere watching of the moving body; illumination is being fully aware of your awareness of movement; retrieval is relevant whenever you fall back to the first level.

The third level of awareness is when the body is no longer differentiated as apart from the environment. The body moves, but there is no longer a watching of the movement. Movement and stillness have become the same. Outside and inside are not different. The moving body flows: this is neither a dead body nor a dead person, all is very much alive, yet there is neither the thought of movement nor of no-movement. One could well say that, at this

level, it is not the practitioner but the universe that is moving. Although the practitioner knows that the body is moving through the environment, she has no feeling of such movement. This is Silent Illumination.

We always start from the first level for you cannot move to the second directly. You cannot wilfully or deliberately move from the first to the second; you have to work up to it. Anything done from the ego fails to work. No amount of contriving, fabrication, imagining will do it. If you try to imagine the second level, the practice simply gets lost in the imagination. These changes come about naturally in their own way and in their own time when you persist in practising correctly. There is nothing else you can do about it.

Chan and Buddha-nature

What is the basic concept of Chan? The key intention is to experience buddha-nature, everlasting and pervasive. What is this buddha-nature? It can be called the nature of emptiness. The nature of emptiness is neither an absence of phenomena nor is it nothingness. Rather, the key sense of this term is impermanence. There is no permanent person – me, you or anyone else; nobody is everlasting or unchanging. In addition there is no everlasting, unchanging environment. We say that because self and environment are both impermanent, they are empty of inherent existence. Putting it another way, we say that we cannot predicate existence as a constant property of anything, because nothing is ever still, ever the same. Existence is like a river, it seems to be there but the water we see is never the same. What is emptiness empty of? This is the key question. Something is empty when we see it as having no thingness; it is not an entity in itself separate from the rest of existence. It is always engaged in the flowing, changing whole that is the universe.

In the practice of Chan, the phrase ‘seeing the nature’ means experiencing the reality of the flowing aspect of everything. We see the reality of emptiness in the disappearance of the conception of one’s mind as a ‘thing’. We are not saying there is nothing there at all. It is simply that perceiving things as things is an error in attribution. Things are as they are – a mobile ‘thusness’ is their

nature. It is crucial to have some insight into these ideas, otherwise we cannot conceive of the meaning of enlightenment nor why we are practising with such a conceptual background. An enlightenment experience is a moment when ‘seeing the nature’ is directly apprehended, not as an idea, a hope, a trance state, a form of samadhi, but totally, immediately, in actuality, with no interference from a dualistic sense of self in play with otherness.

Without a personal realisation of the nature of emptiness, our worries, anxieties, fixations, projections and transference all appear as ‘true’ experiences or as entities that we cannot let go. Grief, jealousy, arrogance, and doubts continue as we go on believing the objects and events which gave rise to them are in some sense solid, historical, and real. Someone who has ‘seen the nature’ has let go of these vexations and, at least in that moment without vexation, has known enlightenment. When a practitioner experiences a deep enlightenment, self-centredness even as an illusion comes to an end. Do not fear that in such a state nothing exists. It is in fact a state pervaded by a life of happiness and bliss expressed in compassion and wisdom.

As beginning practitioners, we are of course still engaged in self-centred action and in self-consciousness: an awareness that still takes oneself as the most important thing in the world, and for which all events that affirm the value of one’s being, comprise the material of our attachments to objects and other persons. Since nothing holds together for long, these attachments are continuously producing vexations for us. A painful body is a vexation; psychological problems are vexations. When others do not affirm our opinion of ourselves that too is vexatious. Yet, while this self-conscious concern lies at the root of vexation, it is also the starting point for practice and for the letting go of those very attachments that are the roots of vexatious living. Our task is to use the ego to go beyond the ego. A strong ego provides a platform on which to begin determined practice. While on the one hand we seek to go beyond attachment, on the other hand we use this very existence as a basis for transcendence.

The basic concepts of Chan are also the root concepts of Buddhism. Essentially we have been speaking here of what

Gautama the Buddha himself realised sitting beneath the Bodhi Tree. Life is suffering, suffering is due to addictive attachment to a false conception of oneself and the things of this life that support or threaten that self. There is a way beyond this condition that transcends the fears of impermanence, and that way is the practice itself. It seems very simple does it not? The only problem is that it is indeed difficult to let go of our attachments. We need to use the methods of practice, and inform our lives with their meaning. Concept, practice and transcendence are all related.

I want to tell you, as I have done before, that I myself do not have any special wisdom. I am just an ordinary human being. A lot of people feel confused when I say this. Some may ask what kind of a person is Shifu? Some want me to be just like them, a mere ordinary mortal, so that they can feel on a level with me and at ease when we talk together. Others want me to be a being of very high attainment so that they can fulfil other expectations and place me on a high pedestal. How can Shifu help us, they may ask, if he is not exceptional?

Sometimes someone may ask me, 'Shifu, when you sleep do you dream?' I tell them, 'Sure – I have many dreams!' Sometimes I may be asked, 'Shifu, when you go to sleep do you stay in one position or do you roll about in bed?' I tell them, 'Actually I roll around quite a lot.' Another may ask, 'Shifu, when you eat do you find this delicious and that distasteful?' 'Sure,' I say. 'I find some things delicious and others distasteful.' Now just imagine what these people would think if I told them, 'No, I never dream, I lie still all night, and all foods are the same to me!' My questioners would think me really weird, and some of them might like it that way. Even more questions would follow, as they would try to find out what kind of a person I might be. So I just say I am the same as everyone else.

A Brief Look at the *Gong'an*

In this retreat I am primarily teaching Silent Illumination but, in interview, several practitioners have indicated that they had been using a *gong'an* (koan in Japanese) method. Therefore it may be helpful to outline briefly the Chan approach to the *gong'an* and the *huatou*, for these are indeed important methods in Chinese Zen.

The *gong'an,* literally 'public case', is an account of a particular incident that occurred between Chan masters, or a master and a disciple. Some are composed from ancient Indian stories of early Buddhism. Typically a *gong'an* does not make everyday sense. The participants in the story are not using ordinary logic. They are not talking common sense, yet between the two of them there is a very clear communication. The reader or meditator has the task of penetrating the meaning of that communication. A *huatou* is usually a phrase or sentence from such a story. Some *huatou*s are made up on the spur of the moment or can be blunt questions such as 'Who are you?'

In Song dynasty China *gong'an*s and *huatou*s became important means of training large bodies of monks in monasteries. Some teachers referred to this practice as 'using poison to extract poison'. Sometimes an insight into a *gong'an* or *huatou* may trigger an enlightenment experience and the method is therefore considered to be a key to enlightenment. There are many *gong'an*s that have been compiled into collections with a commentary. When teachers present a practitioner with a *huatou*, there is usually no talk of levels of use. The *huatou* is to be approached directly, immediately and should yield an instantaneous response. Yet many people, especially lay practitioners in the West, find this merely confusing. If a master says, 'Go and investigate the *huatou*!' a practitioner may well go offand try to do so, but actually she may have no idea what to do and waste a lot of time. I would like therefore to present this practice in terms of four levels of use.

1 Repeating the *huatou:* A master gives a student a *huatou* to practise on, but normally it remains pretty meaningless to the student. He cannot question it, so he just repeats it, much as he would if he were reciting a mantra. Such a practice is useful because it at least calms the mind and brings it from a scattered to a more focused state. Furthermore, such simple repetition may induce strange or wondrous experiences. This again, is like a person who evokes a powerful response through mantra practice, but one that must not be confused with enlightenment.

2 Questioning the *huatou*: When you repeat a *huatou*, a question may appear in your mind. It may occur to you to ask who is

repeating the *huatou*. Such a question amounts to a *huatou* in its own right. Once such a question comes into clear focus you should stay with it, not switching from one to another. You are still repeating the *huatou* but following it with an enquiring mind.

3 Great doubt: When a practitioner feels an urgent need to understand the *huatou* and to answer the question, the 'great doubt' arises. There is now more or less an obsession with the question. You continue asking and asking with great earnestness and resolve. The mind is so filled with the question that eventually the whole universe appears as one gigantic question. This is then called the 'great mass of doubt'. The universe itself is the *huatou*. This is the level to which the Chinese apply the term *t'san* meaning 'investigate!'

4 Watching the *huatou*: Actually, this level can be said to apply only to those who have already 'seen the nature'. When a person has had an enlightenment experience, this does not mean she or he is completely and permanently enlightened. Even for those with some experience of *kensho*, there remains the necessity for further cultivation, deepening one's practice. Watching the *huatou* ensures that the power of practice does not fade. The *huatou* is simply called to mind and allowed to evoke what it will. It may be that experiences get deeper and deeper, or it may be that they are just like bubbles that arise and disperse in a running brook. For some people, the basic *huatou* may become their fundamental practice for the rest of their lives.

Perhaps you are wondering about those who have reached ultimate enlightenment: do they still need to practise? Unless they have reached perfect buddhahood, practice will remain important even for them. It is like homework that you do even though you do not need to do it. Once upon a time there was an enlightened master who continued to prostrate regularly to the Buddha statue. When people asked him why he did this, he simply said that that was what he did. Another master continued to read sutras. When he was asked why he bothered to do so, he said he did it to shield his eyes. Even great masters continue their practice. When you are practising at the second level many questions may arise. Perhaps they come

from the books you have been reading or they are a guess you make. Maybe a question comes up from your unconscious.

No matter how it arises, whenever an answer takes the form of words or an idea, it is most assuredly wrong. Maybe you are delighted by your answer. 'That's it!' you may exclaim to yourself. But be careful. Very soon you will be like a deflated balloon or like someone who, under LSD, has written down an answer to the riddle of the universe and, on coming to, reads a load of rubbish! The *huatou* does not follow the logic of the reasoning mind. If you try to figure out an answer or seek a subtle phrase to contain some insight, you will be mistaken. Someone who comes up with such an answer is like someone awakening at night and mistaking a thief for his father. If you get into a bad habit of this kind you will invite many thieves into your house.

This is only a brief description of the *huatou* method. It really needs a retreat to itself. Perhaps, however, for those of you favouring this approach, this description may be of some use to you. Perhaps you can brag about it to others, saying you now know how to use koans! Take care. As for me, I have never in all my life eaten lamb, but now that I have been to Wales, I can at least say I know what a sheep looks like!

Direct Contemplation

I would like to introduce you to another method of practice. I think of this as an auxiliary method rather than as an alternative to those we have been discussing. You may use it at times when it seems especially conducive to do so. The essential idea is to regard whatever arises directly with no thought, interpretation, examination, or questioning whatever. Just look at it, or listen to it, exactly as it is in an immediate apperception of whatever appears before you.

In this activity there should be no self-reference or involvement of the self in judgement or intention. In a way we cannot call it either meditation or practice because there is no purposeful intention to go anywhere at all. The object of contemplation is simply allowed to be. 'Direct' means directly, immediately, right now and here. The word 'contemplation' means a method that 'allows one to go through a door'.

When one goes through a door there is both an exit and an entry. Here one exits the world of thought, judgement, evaluation, self, and time. One enters the immediate presence, a now-ness of the object, be it a landscape, the sky, a stone, or an image. It simply presents itself before one. You do nothing except regard it or hear it.

In this regard, however, there should be an alert attentiveness, something like a nonverbal expectancy without any thing in particular being expected. The mind needs to be very bright to reflect the object as a mirror does. Perhaps it is like looking straight at the moon rather than using a finger to point to it.

When you contemplate directly, whether in sitting, standing, or walking, simply choose something that attracts you in the immediate vicinity. It may be something you see or something you hear, but you should use only one of the sense faculties, not more. Focus brightly on the object and do not add any preconceived ideas, experiences, words or questions.

Although you should not let such ideas arise when practising, there are nonetheless four stages that you may be able to detect in retrospect afterwards. Firstly, allow yourself to settle down, to regulate the breath, and let go. Then, let the sense faculty focus on the chosen object while you forget what it is that you are regarding – its name, description, its likeable or unlikeable features. As the focus becomes stable, the mind will become still and spacious. One is entering illumination. This is why I call it an auxiliary method.

Of course the method is prone to the usual deviations – drowsiness, wandering thoughts, fear, illusions. If these cannot be set aside, it may be best to stop and renew the session later. Often you get a sense of when it is appropriate to do it and may then act upon it.

We can try it now. After walking in the field, each of us should go off separately; find a place that feels good for you; sit down and choose some aspect of the landscape and directly contemplate it. It could be some distant feature or something close up, a stone, a grass blade, or a flower, for example. If you choose a distant object do not let the eyes wander around. Allow the birds to fly across the screen of vision; do not follow them. Continue to hold the attention on your chosen object. See how long you can hold your attention in

this way and what results from that. When you lose it, rest a moment and then start again.

The Sharp Needle of Sitting Chan

The great master Hongzhi lived at a monastery on the mountain of Tiantong, near the coast of China south of Shanghai. During his lifetime he was known as Tiantong Zhenjue, the second name meaning ‘true awakening’. On his death the emperor gave him the name Hongzhi (Wade-Giles: Hung-chih), meaning ‘vast wisdom’ as a sign of respect for his understanding. Hongzhi had left home at the age of eighteen to study at a monastery in Honan with a Caodong Master, Kungfa Cheng, who used to sit so still that his name meant ‘dry wood complete Dharma’. He taught Hongzhi that the correct sitting posture was very important and this has been emphasised in this lineage ever since. Hongzhi studied with many masters and he became famous for his compilation of koans with matching verses known as *The Book of Serenity.*[25]

When Hongzhi came to Tiantong in Sichuan he revitalised and enlarged the monastery, until it could house around twelve thousand monks who were drawn there to hear his inspiring teaching. A learned man in all aspects of Chinese culture, Hongzhi applied his erudition to the teaching of Chan. His short essays on practice all come directly from his enlightened understanding, and may prove difficult for those with, as yet, little insight. Their rich immediacy may nonetheless be a profound source of inspiration. It is appropriate that on this retreat we attempt to excavate his treasure.

I have selected a sample of his writings for us to consider together. Please pay close attention to these profound words. I do not know when I may come to Wales again, nor do I know whether I shall ever return to these British Isles. There are few people today who can speak with some authority on Silent Illumination, so please listen carefully.

We will begin with a short piece known as the *Lancet of Sitting Chan.* The lancet is a kind of acupuncture needle and the text is intended to energise and alert you to the nature of sitting. It is sometimes called an ‘admonition’. The *Lancet* sets out the essential features of Silent Illumination and ends with an evocative poem.

Lancet of Sitting Chan

The essential point of all the buddhas;
the central pivot of each and every patriarch.

Without coming into contact with things – it knows;
without having objects oppose it, it illumines.

Without coming into contact with things, yet it knows;
its knowing is inherently subtle.

Not having objects oppose it, it illumines;
its illumining is naturally wondrous.

Its knowing is inherently subtle;
it does not involve discriminating thoughts.

Its illumining is naturally wondrous;
there are no signs whatsoever.

Without discriminating thoughts
it is free from ideas of odds and pairs.

Without any signs whatsoever,
it illumines without any grasping,
yet it still goes on knowing.

The water so clear – transparent to the bottom.
Late, late, fishes have yet to appear.
The sky so vast – without a horizon,
distant, out of sight, the birds left no trace.

The first four couplets come from the viewpoint of the buddhas and patriarchs. Although these lines are beyond the understanding of an ordinary non-practitioner, we can attempt to penetrate them here. Chan patriarchs often used the expression ‘illuminate the mind and see the nature’. The Linji sect uses this expression in teaching and a similar phrase with slightly different terminology occurs in the

Caodong tradition. In the opening lines, ‘the essential point’ and ‘the central pivot’ are intended to differ subtly, like two mirrors facing one another reflecting an image between them. Throughout this work we find matching phrases balancing one another in this way.

For all the buddhas of the three times and ten directions, that which is in common is the pure mind of nirvana – the ‘extinguished’ mind, mind without attachment. Patriarchs are masters who are not yet buddhas. They penetrate layer after layer of obscuration in their practice, moving forward with each enlightenment experience. Each time a new door opens for them, and they move further down the path. Such doors are like barriers each poised upon a pivot. Before the master can go through, he must push the door at just the right point so that it swings open. To pass each barrier, a pivotal point has to be touched. The door then moves of its own accord. What is this pivotal point? It is in fact a perception of the nature of nirvana, buddha-mind or pure mind, the unborn. ‘Seeing the nature’ opens the door each time; it is the full illumination of silence.

‘*Without coming into contact with things – it knows.*’ Things may be objects, thoughts, including the state of no-thought. As I have said earlier, attachment to thoughts and attachment to no-thought are both barriers. Without contacting either thought or no-thought there is still a knowing. The absence of contact with things is silence; the knowing is illumination.

‘*Not having objects oppose it, it illumines.*’ Objects held in the mind may originate externally as features of the environment, or they may be internally generated as feelings, presentiments, or ideas. In the state described, such objects are not seen in opposition to the experiencing subject, standing over against the perceiver, as it were. Instead they coalesce in a mutual relationship where illumination takes the place of opposition. Again, the metaphor of a mirror is useful. Anything that appears clearly in a mirror is reflected, yet the mirror has no intention to reflect anything. The mirror is not in itself in any relationship to the objects it reflects. There is no sense of some intention standing over against an object of intention. Mirrors just do what mirrors do: reflect. In the same way the mind is depicted in this couplet as not engaging any object in a subject-object duality, yet it shines just as a mirror does.

In the phrase '*Without coming into contact with things, it knows*' the emphasis is on silence. In the midst of silence there is illumination. The phrase '*Not having objects oppose it, it illumines*' emphasises illumination in the midst of which there is silence.

'*Its knowing is inherently subtle*' refers to the benefit of knowing without contacting things. If one has gone beyond attachment to both thought and no-thought, then one comes to know the inherently subtle which has been previously obscured. The inherently subtle is buddha-nature itself, which is normally imperceptible. Only when you are out of contact with things can you perceive buddha-nature.

Let us take an example. When we look at a landscape our eyes do not see everything. This is partly due to the limited sensitivity of our eyes. It is also because we are always discriminating, selecting some features for attention more than others. Birdwatchers will notice birds; botanists will see plants. Their interests bias their appreciation of the landscape. By contrast, a good camera picks up everything without differentiation. The implication of these lines is that when the mind is no longer discriminating and has ceased to operate in a dualistic mode, one can see in a highly refined, holistic way that allows buddha-nature to appear.

Here is another example. During this retreat Ros has been painting my portrait. She began by sketching my appearance. What is it that will appear on the paper? Will there be contact with things or no contact with things? Will it be me or not me? Perhaps Ros will eventually hand me a blank sheet of paper and we might think she was enlightened! Would this be a correct inference?

'*Not having objects oppose it, it illumines; its illumining is naturally wondrous.*' This couplet sums up the previous ones. There is a naturally wondrous sense of light or illumination that arises when the alert mind engages no objects at all.[26] When one perceives buddha-nature, at that time, there is clearly no discrimination, '*no signs whatsoever*'. Even though one has seen clearly, there is nothing to say, report or describe. Yet such emptiness is not apart from existence. Existence is precisely what it is.

'*It is free from ideas of odds and pairs*' is difficult to translate from the Chinese. It means the mind has no clear idea of either odd or even numbers. If one is seeing two cups, one is nonetheless not

counting them. Of course, the practitioner sees two cups rather than three but this is no concern of his. The idea of one, two or three simply does not arise. Even if there was only one cup, there is no comparison to some state in which there might be several. Seeing odds and evens implies discrimination. In this clarity, numbers are of no concern. Enumeration is an aspect of discrimination, which has no place here.

Indeed, coming to the last lines, there are no signs at all. Signs mean meanings. Here things are conceived just as they are perceived. They are not even named. If I look at a cup, I give it a Chinese name while you English call it ‘cup’. What a Welshman might say I do not know, but I am sure he could name it too! Actually, for all of us, the subject of these concepts simply sits here in total clarity on the table. We know what it is; we know its name. In Silent Illumination naming is of no concern.

To see things in this way in meditation is very valuable. Sitting together here we can discriminate men from women, Chinese from British, maybe even Welsh from English, older from younger. Such discriminations normally come along with some sort of judgement or valuation. Labels, names and so on are the roots of prejudice. Categorisation usually generates inequalities in values with preferences and aversions, however subtle, drifting across the mind. Whenever such inequalities have taken hold, buddha-nature becomes invisible. When truly realised, buddha-nature is indivisible.

Of course, this is no simple matter and, furthermore, to consider a thief to be one’s father might engender a lot of trouble in the everyday world. Nonetheless, in the perspective of Silent Illumination, the basis of mind is seen to lack duality; dualistic functioning is a secondary, not a fundamental condition. We need to contemplate the practical significance of this.

‘*Without any signs whatsoever, it illumines without any grasping, yet it still goes on knowing.*’ The practitioner in Silent Illumination is not concerned with meaning and therefore grasps at nothing. He may see a bird fly through the sky. He does not deny that the bird has flown from one tree to another, yet this is not a focus of his concern. As the Tibetans say, this is like ‘writing on water’. You move your finger across the water yet nothing remains. The thing has

happened; now it has passed by. In silence, the practitioner knows buddha-nature, but there is no trace of this in his mind, no grasping, no discarding. There is brightness, silence, illumination. Rising from the cushion, he drinks a cup of tea, nothing remarkable; he just gets on with whatever needs to be done.

The final verse is very beautiful in Chinese. I hope a little of that beauty comes over in English. It is a description of Silent Illumination. Are there any fish or birds in this poem? If you laugh at this, it is because you have caught the fish or seen the birds. We may restate the poem this way: ‘The water is very clear, so transparent that you can see the bottom. Fish are moving so slowly that, in waiting for them to come, they haven’t appeared yet. The sky is open and vast with no horizon. The birds must have flown away and disappeared.’

The clear water is silence. The transparency is illumination. Fish live in water so you are waiting for them to appear, but now they are moving so slowly you have not seen any yet. In fact, so clear is the water you are not even aware of water. In seeing to the bottom, there is just the illumination of silence. In speaking of sky we enter the horizontality of space rather than the verticality of water. The meditation is not only deep; it is also wide. Birds normally appear in the sky but none have appeared. They must have flown so far away you no longer see them.

In Silent Illumination the mind is without any subjectobject discrimination. Engage in any sort of dualism and water, fish, and birds appear. One is back in the double vision of everyday. In the poem, Hongzhi sees water, birds, and fish yet, since they do not register under any label at all, he can truly say no water, fish, or birds appear. Nothing has been predicated, so the mind is free, yet it knows. This is the witnessing of Silent Illumination.

Now we have to return to our own practice. At the first level, there are certainly plenty of fish and lots of birds; the water is muddv and the sky full of clouds. Nevertheless, this is where we begin. Let us start to clarify our experience of beginning.

Attitudes Conducive to Practice

Practice means cutting down on self-centredness, on the preoccupation with self-concern, which merely induces vexation. While we are told that one day we will definitely be enlightened, we do not know when that might happen. The important thing is to make an effort. We must seek to let compassion and wisdom grow. If we practise meditation more effectively, if in our lives we sustain attitudes appropriate to the Dharma and a wish for others' benefit, then we will have less self-centredness, fewer vexations, and generate benefit for both ourselves and for others.

Yet, how to do this? As a guide, let us consider some essential mental attitudes that we need to cultivate, both in order to benefit from meditation and in order to develop an ever deepening understanding of Chan Dharma.

These attitudes are four in number:

Faith
The aspiration to enlightenment – Bodhicitta
Humility
Gratitude.

These essential attitudes depend on a key factor – diligent persistence. Practitioners need to have an outlook that sustains continued practice both on and off the cushion, prevents laziness and does not countenance interruption through disappointment, depression, or failure. I have been teaching Westerners for some twenty years now, and I have to tell you that it is in this matter of diligent persistence that they most commonly fail.

A Western student is typically a consumer, for that is what a modern Western person is taught to be by the prevailing culture. The prevailing culture says to buy something because it looks good. If the novelty wears off, why, try something else! By changing the package, things can look different although they are exactly the same. If you buy, someone else can sell. 'What is good for General Motors is good for America.' What would you say in Britain? Do you still make cars here? In Japan, it might be Honda or Mitsubishi. Actually they are all just cars that take you from A to B. Unfortunately, if it is a Chinese jeep in Tibet it may not quite do that.

A Western student of Chan may practise like a purchaser of a fine car. He begins driving with great enthusiasm, working very hard and with dedication. Yet, as the novelty wears offand some difficulties appear without clear signs of progress, he may begin to be attracted by something else – a motorbike perhaps. People easily give up and start wandering down some other spiritual path or seeking some other teacher.

The cornucopia of postmodern spirituality is so vast that you can spend your whole lifetime going down spiritual paths and experimenting with the practices of all the world's religions, and getting nowhere fast. In any case, most of these paths go round in circles. Sometimes, such a person feels she is missing something and that she needs the heartfelt practice she used to find in Chan. So she returns to the meditation hall and sits a little more, till the same thing happens again. Perhaps a boyfriend is practising another path! Why not?

This lack of will power and discrimination, this absence of persistence, is often due to exaggerated expectations, perhaps a desire for a spiritual reputation, and confusion about what both teaching and practice actually comprise. To sit without study or to study without sitting, both lead quickly to mistakes and failures. This is very sad. It must be said that such a lack of persistence among Westerners is the reason why Chan has not yet become as rooted in the West as it could be.

Practice should be like a stream. Even when there is little water in it, the stream keeps flowing. Success is not necessarily quick in coming. For fruit to ripen many causes and conditions have to come together over time. Diligence simply means continuing to practise; practice means diligence without interruption, come what may. It is not important to get enlightened quickly. A practitioner needs to grow, to mature. Indeed, some people may have an enlightenment experience in a very short time, but may not be able to sustain the necessary practice that needs to follow from this. Such a result of practice is not the end, and should not be thought of as a termination. Results of practice just crop up along the way. Even for a person who does not get enlightened quickly, so long as he has the right concepts, a clear understanding and a sound practice he

will soon recognise the benefits for himself and for others. Such is the beginning of wisdom.

The Requisite of Faith

The root cause of faith is conceptual understanding. You have a feeling that something makes sense; there is something here you wish to explore. It may be an idea that, as yet, you do not comprehend, but you are willing to trust it and work along with it to see how it goes. The second cause of faith is experience. With a degree of practice some experience arises that confirms your initial intuition. Faith in the appropriateness of the way is thus confirmed, and the practitioner neither regresses nor does he look elsewhere.

Some people begin with good experience, but faith from such a source is commonly not enough. The practitioner still needs the guidance of concepts. Otherwise his understanding may be erroneous and lead into incorrect paths. An alignment with a beneficial direction is essential. Shallow experience may not be enough to sustain faith; indeed it may produce uncertainty and doubts. It is then that the guidance from concept is essential to make faith firmer and experience, thereby, increasingly profound.

Faith in what? Primarily it is a matter of faith in oneself – that the attainment of buddhahood is possible by one's own effort. Then there is faith in the Three Jewels – Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. Here faith means an understanding that buddha-nature lies within; that the teachings inform one and provide practices; that the teachers in the Sangha are reliable guides; that they themselves know what they are talking about. We may believe in teachers when we know they have received transmission, when their insight is confirmed in the lineage, and when a legitimate master recognises their success in practice.

A true teacher must have received transmission from his or her own teacher, who has affirmed the student's ability in the same way that the master's own ability was affirmed. Such teachers stand in a lineage going all the way back to the Buddha. Faith in such a teacher encourages you to practise under his or her direction and to receive teachings from that source from which they came. Without this personal element, mere book learning and purely intellectual

understanding only yield a faith with weak foundations. Yet a practitioner needs to evaluate a possible teacher with care, just as a teacher will evaluate him or her. Although this is traditional, it is perhaps especially important today when some so-called transmissions have been found to be questionable, and the institutions in which some teachers operate may have faulty Dharma foundations.

Someone with merely an intellectual assent to ideas in books, or to some institutionalised propaganda, usually has a defective practice. Another person may say that, although the traditions are sound for other people to practise, they are of no use to him. He can do without all these old ideas or may even substitute his own. Another may turn up on retreat when a famous guru arrives, but neglect his own local instructor. He can then say how great his guru is and go about doing spiritual name-dropping while criticising others. Such a person may talk as if he has faith, finds the Dharma acceptable, has ability in practice but in reality this is not faith at all. Rather, he is playing some spiritual game with himself as an object of pride. Have you met such people?

On this retreat we are hearing about methods of practice and the fundamental concepts of Buddhism that will make practice effective. We have to apply these practices and test the truth of Buddhadharma in experience before we can truly develop faith in the teachings.

The Bodhisattva's Aspiration

Everyone may want to be enlightened, but the methods of practice need to be thoroughly understood before one can set one's feet seriously on a path to such a goal. The Sanskrit word *bodhi* is used for the wisdom that came to Buddha under the Bodhi Tree. It resembled, indeed, the fruit of that tree in that it needed all the cultivation of Buddha's previous training and effort before it could ripen.

Before we can taste the fruits of practice there must be a flowering, and before that the sowing and cultivation of seeds. This sustained care is driven by a mind intent on uncovering bodhi-mind, or *bodhicitta.* The germination of the bodhi-mind comes from an

insight into the seed of buddhahood which is already present in our own nature. The intent to grow a bodhimind is the care with which we nourish this seed first into bloom and then into fruit.

A great aid in this task is the daily taking of the Four Great Vows. The first of these is to help innumerable sentient beings without discriminating between them. The second is to cut off endless vexations. We do this, as the third vow states, by mastering the limitless approaches to Dharma. The fourth vow is to reach buddhahood. Taken together, these vows generate the motivation towards enlightenment, which is *bodhicitta.*

Note that the first of these vows is not to attain buddhahood but to help sentient beings. Without this prior commitment, buddhahood is not possible. The second vow – to cut off innumerable vexations – is also vital, for without it, buddhahood is again not possible. Then again, unless one masters limitless approaches to the Dharma, buddhahood is not possible. Therefore, the first three vows comprise the resources or conditions whereby reaching buddhahood becomes possible.

Everyone should generate these four vows every day. Indeed it is not until a bodhisattva reaches the eighth level of development that the activity of these four vows is so engrained in his nature that he no longer has to take them daily. From that stage onwards, all his actions are the direct expression of the four vows. The flowers of practice have begun to bloom.

The twin principles behind these vows are compassion and wisdom, the two wings of practice without which the practitioner cannot fly. Cutting off vexations allows wisdom to grow. Compassion to others is meritorious. When compassion and wisdom are complete, we become buddhas.

Many practitioners, particularly those who have been reading too many books, think only about getting enlightened. They may give little consideration to the problem of uprooting the weeds of vexation or helping other sentient beings, even small animals, in distress. Such a practitioner is hoping for the fruits without being willing to make an effort. Such a limited approach cannot fulfil the causes and conditions essential to realisation. Such a practitioner is merely

dreaming. Enlightenment happens in its own time on the basis of right causes and conditions. It is not something to be anxious about.

From the time I was very young I felt strongly how beneficial the Dharma was. Even though I knew little about it, some small experiences had brought me benefits and I dedicated myself to help others so as to proceed further on the way. Whether I may be said to be enlightened or not is of no importance. The vital thing is the endeavour to help others benefit from the Dharma. However small my understanding, I want to ensure that as many people as possible come to know this Dharma and benefit from it. This is the practice of *bodhicitta.*

I have reached the age of retirement and my body has never been very strong. Nonetheless, I continue to teach, for to do otherwise is, for me, unthinkable. In any case, I have benefited greatly through the lessening of vexations and in a reduction in self-concern. These are realistic concrete benefits at the level of everyday experience. It is not desirable to keep on dreaming about what enlightenment may be and whether one can obtain it. In any case, the premises for such thoughts are mistaken.

The best attitude to adopt is that of the beginner, a new practitioner. If you consider yourself an old hand, a veteran, you can give yourself a lot of trouble. If you make little progress, you wonder why not. If you do make progress, you become happy and proud at your advancement. Others will soon notice this and wonder how veteran practitioners can cultivate such selfimportance.

Great Master Xuyun was still teaching and travelling at the age of one hundred years. People used to say to him, ‘Old Master! You must be a great practitioner to live to so great an age, yet be so healthy running around doing so many things. We must consider you to be the king of compassion.’ But Master Xuyun used to reply, ‘Buddha have pity on me! It is only because of my great karmic debt that I have to suffer so. I have so much to pay back. For other people, things are easy. They just die. I drag along with the days. As to practice, all I do is to eat two or three meals a day and go to sleep at night. What sort of practice is that? You must be mistaking me for someone else.’

Even so great a master expressed himself with utmost humility. To himself he was no great practitioner. Like him, we should consider practice as something we just do every day, like brushing the teeth, eating or sleeping. Treat practice as a necessary ingredient for daily living, a form of nutrition. With such an attitude you will not develop unrealistic expectations.

When you practise every day, you may not notice any improvement at all. But then certain friends, who may not have seen you for some time, may tell you how you have changed. You can take courage from that.

A Sense of Humility

The sense of humility is not simply regret, nor is it guilt, nor an uneasy feeling of shame. Humility is used in a skilful way in the Dharma. When true humility has been generated, one feels Dharma joy and has a disposition to work hard. Humility is simply a feeling that, although what you have done may have been satisfactory, it was nevertheless not done well enough. No matter how good I may appear as a teacher, I still always feel it is not yet good enough. Such feeling is the root of humility.

In humility, one is not being apologetic or asking for forgiveness. One may of course do things for which it is appropriate to seek forgiveness, but that is not humility. If you know you could still have done better, then there is no feeling of self-importance. Such a person does not take a little accomplishment as adequate. A person with humility also knows that the outcome of something he has done is often largely the result of other people's behaviour. A good teacher knows that a successful retreat depends just as much on the participants as it does on him or her.

Humility usually goes together with repentance. Again, this is not merely relieving guilt or sin as in the Christian tradition. In Buddhism repentance is admitting a mistake and accepting responsibility, thus lifting the burden of the error. It is like admitting a debt and being prepared to pay it back. Once you readily admit your responsibilities, there is no need to be entangled in guilt.

A woman on retreat told me she had been in a very painful state of mind after she had become a Buddhist. This was because she

had had two abortions and, whereas as a Christian she could ask for forgiveness, in Buddhism there was no way to do this and relieve her burden. I told her that in Buddhism repentance just means admitting she made a mistake. She need simply accept her responsibility for what she had done. Although, if she practised hard she might be able to help the spirits of the fetuses, the best plan would be to work hard simply for the benefit of others.

A mistake is necessarily followed by karmic retribution. One has to know and accept that fact. At some point in time retribution will come, as it did for the woman when she resolved to become a Buddhist and had to face up to her mistake without the chance of absolution from a deity outside her.

As sentient beings, we are always making mistakes. We are like babies who try to walk but repeatedly fall over. Every time, we simply have to get up and try again. If genuine repentance follows every mistake we can live our lives in a happier way. Generally, repentance sets aside a psychological burden with acceptance of responsibility for future actions of recompense in humility. There is a starting afresh full of hope, yet humbled by the past. We are always beginning again in this way. In such humility there can be happiness.

Gratitude

Some people ask the reason for our coming into this world. For Buddhists the answer is, to repay our karmic debt. We may say, indeed, that we are reborn because we have created karmic debt so that, inevitably, we are here to pay it off.

Our karmic debts are repaid in two ways: involuntarily and voluntarily. Involuntary repayment occurs when situations arise that inevitably impose retribution on us. We are then passive participants in the process and have no choice. We may, however, also voluntarily repay what we owe. This can be called action out of gratitude, for it is a form of expressing thankfulness. These ways of paying back karmic retribution refer to ordinary sentient beings. Bodhisattvas who have taken vows to help sentient beings may come back deliberately in successive generations to help others. This is the reason for their being in the world.

Some people feel that they have never done anything wrong all their lives and, even when they believe in past existences, they think they could not possibly have done anything wrong then either! Yet they may feel that, in this life, other people and circumstances are very unfair to them. They feel they do not deserve what is being dealt out to them and express this feeling with resentment. I would say to such a person, 'If you feel you have no debts to pay in this life, then just feel you have come into this world to be grateful to others. Since you do not have to pay off debts you can indeed be grateful whatever others may be doing to you.' But such persons are not easily convinced, so I would again say, 'Imagine yourself as a bodhisattva. You are here willingly to help others because of your great vows. Now select just one of these vows; it does not matter which, but then live according to that one. If you do that, you will feel more at peace with yourself.'

Of course such a person may then imagine herself to be actually a kind of bodhisattva and thereby generate arrogance! The best attitude to adopt is to consider yourself here simply to repay all the good things you have experienced in the past and so to do good from gratitude.

We Chinese sometimes say that it was other people in the past who planted trees while it is we now who enjoy the shade and the fruits. Other people built this very house, centuries ago perhaps, but now it is we who enjoy it. Likewise, in the world there are masters and servants, rich and poor, executioners, owners of businesses and employees. Is all this fair? Some might say all this is the will of God, but in Buddhism we see it differently. People are here either to repay their karmic debts or else to repay the benevolence that others have shown them. Chinese have special words for these things because we feel them strongly. Let me just say that we have come here either to repay bad debts or to express gratitude for the kindnesses we have received.

The world is full of people who are either pleased with themselves or miserable in life. Some of us are clever; some are not. Some may think they have beautiful bodies, some that they are ugliness personified. Some are content with their professional skills, which they attribute to their hard work and efficient brains. Some feel

they have never had a chance because their parents only endowed them with poor brains and no money. In general, whatever seems good we attribute to our own efforts; whatever is bad is due to the inadequacies of others!

In Chan we can see both these attitudes to be rooted in self-concern. If we adopt a quite different attitude, thinking that we are here to repay the kindnesses received from others, then, all the time, we may be happy to be of use to others, to have the occasion to pay back debt. This attitude leads to maturity in a life that constantly expresses gratitude. In any case we are lucky to be here at all! Maybe we could have ended up in a hell realm or turned up in Wales as a donkey in the rain. Instead, as human beings, we have this extraordinary universe before us evoking wonder, amazement and love.

Some of us find it easy to say thank you but for many it is difficult. Often thanks are said merely for form's sake as a social convention, there is no feeling from the heart. If we find it in ourselves to say a genuine heartfelt thank you, we can feel easier in the world of other people and willing to give more. Such small matters are in fact the way in which merit increases and wisdom arises. Meritorious action and the opening to wisdom are not always conspicuous. We are not saying thank you so that others can be grateful to us. We simply express ourselves in gratitude and with a wish for others' well-being. So it is that wisdom grows towards completion.

Some may ask whether all the injustices in the world are a result of karmic debt. The Buddhist viewpoint is not always easy to accept but it is a subtle one. On the one hand, even if we are blameless in this life, can we say that we were always blameless in our countless previous lives? On the other hand, even if we cannot say whether such a question is meaningful, the notion that our existence is a vehicle for the resolution of past evil is a deep one. If we look at the history of our nations we can see how the errors made by our ancestors have led to dreadful consequences that are still with us. Past errors become our responsibilities in this life whether we like it or not. We need deep motivation if we are to clear up the mess the world is in.

Maybe it is neither the kindnesses received in the past, nor the retribution we face from ancient error, that is important here, but rather the realisation that if we are to accumulate merit and wisdom in this life, we cannot do it in a world without other people. So long as we live with others, we all make mistakes and all receive kindnesses. To be willing to express humility and gratitude is a doorway opening on the life of a bodhisattva. If we have the intention of treading the bodhisattva's way, we need to reflect on our lives in this manner.

Many people in the modern world lack spiritual values, and if you asked them 'What is the purpose of life?' they would be unable to answer. Without a sense of purpose, there can be no motivation for the good, while lax or evil attitudes of resentment and hate are easily generated. Even if you are not sure what the purpose of life is, at least you can make the decision about what the purpose of your own life will be.

Dedication and Transfer of Merit

If we practise well and our attitudes express faith, the vows of a bodhisattva, humility, and gratitude, then it is said that we accumulate merit. Buddhists, however, are not people who store up stocks of goodies. We are taught that we should disperse such a stock for the benefit of others. This is called dedicating merit and transferring it to others. The original idea of accumulating merit was that it would ensure a beneficial rebirth. Of course to give it all away to others might be considered even more meritorious! There are three ways by which we may understand this important Buddhist idea.

In the first, it is said that merit is transferred from oneself to other people. In the second, we say that merit allows movement from a mind full of attachment to a mind without attachment. Another way of putting this is to say merit transfers from the realms of form to a formless realm. In the third way, we say there is transference from attitudes characterising the small vehicle (Hinayana) to those of the great vehicle (Mahayana). We will only discuss the first of these here.

How is it possible that merit arising from our practice can benefit others? In a simple case, this may mean no more than that, when we return home after retreat, our folks perceive that our attitude has changed so that family life benefits. Someone here indeed remarked yesterday that, after a retreat, there was usually a short period during which he did not quarrel with his wife!

Another way of thinking about this is to say that a period of practice, when we have shifted our attitudes towards expressions of faith, gratitude, humility and the taking of vows, necessarily leads to the accumulation of good intentions. It is as if we are increasing our credit in a bank account. If we wish we may allow others to also draw from this account. By sharing good intentions, others may also benefit.

Maybe I might arrive in Wales with no money. Even so, John could allow me to use his credit card! Of course, when we both understand what we are sharing, we can both benefit. If, however, I run off with his card and empty his account, then I would probably end up in jail. The bank of credit can only be used with a mutual understanding. Sadly, people with evil intentions sometimes exploit good-natured people, so we need to be mindful of personal realities.

But then this analogy is not really a good one. When we share our credit in this way, the bank account does not become more valuable. By contrast, wisdom and compassion increase through usage. Maybe the whole story is more like a candle. Suppose I light a candle. I can then light all your candles one by one. Each candle burns brightly and the light of my own candle has not been diminished. Transferring light from candle to candle actually increases the amount of light everywhere. This is the profound meaning of the transfer and dedication of merit.

A selfish person may not wish to transfer merit at all. She may have the idea that she will accumulate so much that she ends up as a saint. What a sad error that would be! If a practitioner is to have fewer vexations, to become compassionate and wise, it is essential to let go of self-centred attitudes. A selfish person is not necessarily a bad person who harms others, but he is not likely to help others or to show kindness when it is needed. To pass on merit to others without thought of how good one is, or of what a fine bodhisattva one

is becoming, is the best way to increase compassion. Of course, it is not enough merely to think of transferring merit. You must have some to transfer. The meaning of these ideas needs exploring in application to your own lives.

The Value of Liturgy

During the rituals of Chan retreat, the dedication of merit is a formal act. We close the ceremony with words that make such a dedication. Not everyone appreciates the value of ceremonies, of liturgical work. Why should I chant in Chinese or Tibetan, such a person may ask, when my own language is English or French?

In Chan, we consider liturgy to be important in a number of ways. Firstly, there is the power of sound itself. In chanting these ancient songs, we evoke certain states of mindful awareness. This is particularly true when one is chanting sonorous mantras or *dharanis* that resonate with certain states of mind. It is then of little importance what the language is or what the words may mean. Although the meanings of mantras have commonly been lost, their use remains quite valid as spiritually inspiring music.

Chanting can lead a scattered mind to a unified condition which is a great aid in meditation. Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva is said to have realised enlightenment through hearing sound. Alterations in consciousness are encouraged by the performance of ritual. Chanting, musical instruments and particular rhythms and tonalities induce useful meditational effects.

Ritual texts are usually affirmations of a practitioner's intentions. They normally include the Three Refuges, the Four Vows, the *Heart Sutra*, together with expressions of contrition or repentance and reminders of the great age of the lineage through evoking old patriarchs and ancient buddhas. Many Chinese people also believe that certain rituals establish connections with those who have died, the spirits of a locality or wandering lonely souls, and chants are designed to benefit these sad beings. A service on retreat should therefore be conducted with great seriousness as an expression honouring the lineage and tradition of practice to which the practitioners belong.

When I was a young monk we used to practise a lot of chanting. Usually we sang very badly and out of tune, so, before we began, we used to say a prayer asking the Dharma protectors and heavenly beings to stay away as our chanting was not meant seriously for them!

Liturgies are in the realm of form, part of the conventional world of religious practice. Unenlightened people need such practice to support their motivation and to share their common intention and spiritual heritage. Enlightened beings familiar with the world beyond appearances, with the meaning of emptiness, do not need such services. Nevertheless, enlightened beings will still choose to join others in celebration for the sake of those who still need to participate in such events.

The Boundless Field

Today we will begin investigating one of the short meditation instructions of Master Hongzhi. First, let us go through the complete text.

> *The field is vacant and wide open. It is something one has had from the very beginning. You must purify and correct it; clean it off; get rid of all deluded conditioning and illusory habits. You will naturally arrive at a place that is clean and pure, full and bright. Totally empty, without any image, solitary and independent, it does not rely on anything. Clear and vast, one illumines original reality and relinquishes external objects. Therefore, it is said, 'With perfect and pervasive clarity one sees that there is not a single thing [to be found].'*
>
> *This field is at a great depth where birth and death do not reach it; a deep wellspring purely illumines. Yet it can give off radiance and is able to put forth responsive functioning. Permeating through all [worlds as many as] motes of dust, transparentlike and without forming semblances, this wondrous [activity of] seeing and hearing leaps far beyond [those everyday] sounds and*

forms. Reaching everywhere, its function is without traces, its mirroring without obstruction. Naturally and spontaneously it issues forth evenly, flowing in response with thought after thought, object after object.

An ancient said, 'Having no-mind, one attains in himself the Dao of no-mind. Attaining no-mind in himself, the Dao as well ceases to be.' With clear awareness, one takes up the responsibility of helping other sentient beings as if one is sitting in perfect silence. As for the subtle wondrous activity of entering at leisure the world, it is something you must dig into and investigate in this fashion!

The field in this text has the same meaning as 'the essential point of buddha after buddha' in the *Sharp Needle of Sitting Chan.* This field is the 'nature' seen by anyone who is 'seeing the nature'. It is the mind illuminated in Silent Illumination. The word 'field' has the connotation of a territory in which something can be grown as long as the right fertiliser is available. It is a place where garbage transforms into the sublime. It takes discarded filth and turns it into rich and valuable manure wherein fine vegetables and flowers may grow.

Ordinary sentient beings often merely succeed in growing the useless weeds of vexation. Buddhist trainees plant the seeds of the precepts, the samadhi of meditation and insight, and thereby reap the fruits of compassion and wisdom, not only for themselves, but also for all sentient beings. When such seeds have been planted, a pure mind eventually reveals itself as buddha-nature. It is not that buddha-nature is created by these horticultural activities. Buddha-nature is itself the field on which the practitioner works; it is the fundamental ground of his being which has always been there. When the mind is filled with the undergrowth of vexation the buddha-nature cannot be seen. Without weeding, one is not aware of its presence, so thick may the undergrowth have become.

Only when sitting practice has developed to a certain point does this understanding begin to emerge. The field at last appears as

empty space with no boundaries; it just goes on and on, no horizon. Such is the experiential aspect of emptiness, the insight of buddha after buddha, the embryo of Suchness – *Tathagatagarbha.* To uncover this awareness needs dedication.

Someone might ask, 'If the buddha-nature of a sentient being is unlimited and if all sentient beings have one, do these many fields ever interfere with one another?' Certainly, if these separate but unbounded entities were like bodies, they would necessarily compete for space. But it is not like this. Although each buddha with his pure mind may be doing something different, the fundamental nature is pervasive; it is the ground of being that is common to all. The buddha-nature of each mind, whether pure at a given moment or obscured, lies within the same continuum, the continuum of emptiness, the flowing river of impermanence.

A buddha does not hold onto buddha-nature saying 'This belongs to me. You are not going to touch it!' Buddha-nature is the nature of emptiness. As whirlpools or ripples in a river cannot grasp one another so there is universal flow, swirling patterns but no grasping. Even if they wished, buddhas could not fight over it.

The instruction to '*purify and correct it*' does not imply you have some 'thing' to purify. It means you must simply get rid of vexations arising from your karma. When these states of illusion are no more, the pure undistorted buddha-nature, common to everyone, manifests.

Once upon a time there was an unrecognised Chan master. His teacher had not affirmed his attainment and he was told to wash rice in the river. Off he went and washed and washed. Somehow all the rice flowed away and disappeared. The cook shouted, 'Where's the rice? I want to cook it!' The monk said, 'Oh, you never told me it was for cooking. I just washed and washed and the river took it all away!'

Cleaning and purifying the buddha-nature does not mean there is a buddha-nature as an object to be cleaned, nor that you end up with a purified buddha-nature. All you need to do is wash away illusory states, clean off the stains on the cloth. Of course, if our cook now gives you some rice to wash in the stream, take care to know what you are doing! If you return without it he will say you are cheating because I have told you this story! Whatever you read or

hear from a teacher has to be made real for yourself. Copying Chan masters does not lead to enlightenment.

'*Clean and pure*' is silence. '*Full and bright*' is illumination. When vexations are gone, even if such a thing as buddha-nature remains, still there is no such thing as a buddha-nature to be found. There is a simple state of complete clarity.

'Totally empty, without any image, solitary and independent, it does not rely on anything!' '*Totally*' stresses the point that if the practitioner remains attached to emptiness, to an emptiness experience, that is not the conclusion. Being totally empty means being beyond attachment, even to emptiness, even to existence itself. Here there is no image, no trace, nothing left. You can find nothing specific within it; you are purely beyond any identification. The state is solitary and independent, for it relies on nothing else and you know there is nothing else upon which you could rely.

'*Clear and vast, one illumines original reality and relinquishes external objects.*' When silence has been established and the practitioner knows this clearly and without hindrance then that silence is illumined. The clarity shines. Any significance in external objects is relinquished now, for there is no object external to buddha-nature. When you see buddha-nature within yourself, external and internal have become one, merged. So it may be said, '*with perfect and pervasive clarity there is not a single thing to be found.*'

This *'wondrous activity*' permeates all worlds far beyond everyday experiences. Buddhas and bodhisattvas with experience of this practice can help beings in all kinds of different worlds, as numerous as motes of dust. In whatever state a sentient being may be, buddhas and bodhisattvas help them wherever they may be and without practising discrimination between who is who. Yet, even though they may help so many beings, it is as if they have not met anyone. They do not hold onto the idea that it is Mr So-and-so or Mrs So-and-so that they have helped. They do not differentiate between 'I am the helper' and 'She is the helped'. Buddhas and bodhisattvas do not operate in dualistic relationships. They do not rely simply on physical eyes, ears and other senses. Operating from Silent Illumination, they help, but this helping leaves no traces in their minds. Their activity of mirroring reflects what a sentient being needs

from them. The obstacles one has to face then become clear in the shining mirror of the bodhisattva. In this way do buddhas and bodhisattvas help.

Let me give you a mundane example to illustrate what I have been saying. One day a disciple of mine was teaching a class and I went down to see how he was getting on. I stood at the back of the hall and could sense that not only was he speaking so softly that few could hear him, but that his writing on the blackboard was too small to see. I went up and quietly mentioned this to him. 'But Shifu,' he said, 'no one has complained!' So I asked the class about it and they said they could not hear his words nor see his writing. So I scolded both teacher and class for neither using ears nor eyes nor mentioning the fact that there was a problem. Now I ask you. Was I just using my eyes and ears or was something else involved? Like bodhisattvas, I used my experience of teaching and I could detect at once what was happening. I gave them the reflection that had appeared in my mirror.

Similarly in Chan interviews, the master does not rely only on his eyes and ears while listening to a participant on retreat. He uses an intuitive understanding gained from his own deep practice to mirror for the other the state he is in. Sometimes this may be no more than a presentation of silence. After each interview the master does not necessarily keep a memory of the event in his mind. While he can remember what happened if need be, he does not worry about it. He does not distinguish between practitioners to whom he may feel close and those from whom he may feel a distance.

'*Naturally and spontaneously it issues forth evenly, flowing in response to thought after thought …*' Perhaps you find this statement paradoxical. We have just been saying that the mind is empty but now we speak of thought after thought! The essential point here is to know what the bodhisattva is empty of – he is empty of attachment. So thought may follow thought, interview follows interview, but all these activities are not occurring within a field of attachment. A bodhisattva may be working very hard indeed but, since his mind does not deal in attachments, he is free of discrimination. The whole process flows easily without vexation. This will be clear to those who

face him as they seek help. Such subtle indifference is the essence of the helping he provides.

Does this mean you should stop distinguishing between your spouse and other people? No need to worry. Your spouse is your spouse and another person is another person. Enlightenment does not mean divorce or the breakup of families. The flow of awareness without self-concerned discrimination eases the pressure of common vexation. Layman Pang was married but his wife was enlightened too, so perhaps he had an easy time. If his wife had not been enlightened he would probably not have thrown all his belongings in the river. No doubt, too, had I been there I would have said, 'Layman Pang, do you really want to dump everything? At least leave me the boat!'

'*An ancient said, "Having no mind, one attains in himself the Dao of no-mind. Attaining no-mind in himself, the Dao as well ceases to be."* ' Surely we can be clear about this now? The text returns us beautifully to our practice and to our responsibilities. While helping others and responding appropriately to the world, the practitioner of Silent Illumination sustains clarity of mind as if he had nothing to do. Such a person experiences effect but does not indulge in moods. In terms of everyday practice this is a vital distinction … '*it is something you must dig into and investigate in this fashion.*'

Stopping an Arrow with the Tip of a Sword

I want to discuss with you a second meditation instruction of Hongzhi. This one is more concerned with the correct way of practice than it is a statement expressing the clarity, wonder and vastness of arrival, the samadhi of Silent Illumination. Here it is.

> *The correct way of practice is to sit simply in stillness and silently investigate; deep down there is a state one reaches where externally he is no longer swirled about by causes and conditions. The mind, being empty, is all-embracing; its luminosity being wondrous, it is precisely appropriate and impartial. Internally there are no thoughts; vast and removed it stands alone in itself without falling into stupor. Bright and potent, it cuts off all*

dependence and remains self at ease. Self at ease has nothing to do with feelings; one must thoroughly not rely on anything. Being quite outstanding, it is full of life and spirit.

Only then will he cease following defiled appearance and find himself a resting place. Perfectly pure it is bright and clear. Being bright, it is penetrating and, therefore, he can accord with conditions, appropriately responding to phenomena, and all phenomena are unobstructed. Floating effortlessly, clouds come forth on the mountain peaks; shining boldly, the [reflection of the] moon flows along with the mountain streams. Everywhere the radiance illumines spiritual transformotions; clearly he sees, appearances are unobstructed, mutually responding, like a cover to a container or a shooting arrow's point stopped by the tip of a sword.

With further training and nourishing, it ripens and its essence becomes firm and stable; it freely penetrates every place, cutting off sharp corners. Don't speak of theories [of right or wrong]. Like a white ox or a tamed ferret that naturally [and willingly] responds to whatever command, he can be called a true man. Therefore it is said, 'Having the Dao of no-mind, one can be like this; not having yet gained no-mind, it is extremely difficult!'

Hongzhi begins with a very precise set of instructions: sit correctly in stillness and probe deeply into that very state until you are no longer whirled about by expectations, attachments or wandering thoughts. You will eventually discover a thoughtless emptiness embracing all experience which stands clear and bright without dependence on conditions and without dullness or drowsiness.

'*Bright and potent, it cuts off all dependence and remains self at ease.*' The term 'self' here has nothing to do with narrow self-concern or egoism. The person on the cushion is filled with ease, freedom and the spontaneity of simply seeing and hearing whatever

arises. '*Self at ease has nothing to do with feelings*' for or against, liking or disliking, preference or avoidance. Since one relies on nothing in particular, one is quite empty of any prejudice or dependency. It is an experience of joyful living.

Whenever feelings are present, they imply a mind in which opposition between contrasted polarities, values, or preferences provides the dominant mode of experience. Some emotions are based in reasoned preferences for certain persons over others, discriminations between those you like or love and those you may run a mile from, or even hate. In the world of samsara, such feelings may sometimes have a certain value, protecting us from possibly harmful interactions, and they may guide behaviour in relation to our needs with some accuracy. Other emotions, however, are based in the effects of past karma and often seem to be quite irrational and even stupid. A practitioner of Silent Illumination seeks to go beyond such preferences and the emotions they engender, but not without a realistic awareness of the conflicted world in which his life is embedded. In Silent Illumination, a practitioner finds himself without prejudice and can manifest wisdom and compassion. In so far as he may be able to sustain such an attitude, he will be able to relate with any person, move in any group of people and not suffer vexation. Such a one is learning how to ride the tiger.

In Taiwan a woman told me her husband was away on a business trip and that she was very much hoping he would not return for a very long time. 'I feel so free without him around me all the time,' she said. I asked her about her relationship with him. 'Oh what a mess!' she exclaimed. 'We quarrel every day. Maybe in our previous lives we owed each other so much that in this life we have to spend time repaying one another. We resent it deeply. I really wish he would die.' I said, 'No, it is not good entertaining such thoughts. Rather you should pray for him. Like you, he is another sentient being.' The woman was far from being convinced. 'Oh no,' she said, 'I won't do anything like that at all. I don't care if he fails to come back. Indeed, I hope he won't. I'm through with him.'

A week later she returned. 'Shifu,' she said, 'I'm so lonely. My husband is not around. I have nobody to argue with. I cannot scold anybody because I'm all by myself. And nobody is scolding me

either. Indeed I spend my time worrying. He should have returned after a week and now two weeks have gone by. I have heard nothing from him. I am thinking that perhaps our quarrelling is not so bad after all.' I suggested she might come on retreat more often to discover what she really felt about her life and marriage. I asked her whether she thought that all relationships posed similar problems. Indulging in feelings exacts a price.

'*… one must thoroughly not rely on anything.*' In the Chinese text this idea is expressed in a vivid way. The character for 'relying' usually depicts a deep valley between steep mountains, valleys and mountains implying one another, but here the character shows a steep valley without mountains. The meaning refers to something that is quite independent of normal conditions, just as to find a steep valley without bordering mountains would be completely unusual. Emotions are usually dependent on causes and conditions. The meditator, having calmed the mind, sets these aside and is unobstructed, nondepending, full of life and spirit.

Indeed, '*only then will he cease following defiled appearances and find himself a resting place.*' Whenever the mind is limited or distracted by some external circumstance or internal feeling – perhaps some memory of a painful or difficult event – mental defilement arises. Such appearances are like filters that prevent the freedom, that is natural to the mind, from developing. Such filters tempt one into discriminations, prejudices, and either positive or negative evaluations. Once started, the process can go on and on, feeding on itself, creating complex patterns of attachment and avoidance. When the self is at ease, these impediments do not arise and the quality of experiencing is then quite different from any state involving preferential attachment or rejection. The resting place reached by such a practitioner is one in which discriminations no longer arise. Such a resting place is beyond samsara – it is enlightenment.

'*Perfectly pure, it is bright and clear. Being bright, it is penetrating and, therefore, he can accord with conditions, appropriately responding to phenomena …*' Perfectly pure means that even purity is not enough. Purity itself must be emptied, otherwise the idea is contrasted with impurity and therefore exhibits

preference. A sky may be cloudless but it remains blue. Even the blue of the sky must be left behind. After all, the blue colour is not itself the nature of sky, it is just the way we see it. Likewise, monks may shave their heads, but it is not enough to look holy. Monks need to abandon their heads altogether. Maybe they are naturally bald anyway!

'*Being bright, it is penetrating.*' Penetrating means nonobstruction. Nothing obstructs the practitioner nor does the practitioner obstruct anything. This is no supernatural matter but rather the result of abandoning attachment. No phenomenon has any particular significance because there is no rigid, preferential attachment.

The practitioner does not now need to do anything nor get anything particular done. If you insist on walking along a path worrying about the potholes and fallen rocks along the way, you will have to struggle with many vexations. If you are not concerned about the potholes or the rocks or indeed the path, then there can be no vexations, no obstacles. Should the path be open, well and good; if it is truly blocked, you will simply be unable to proceed. Whichever it is, allow it to crop up just as it is. If it becomes impossible to proceed with an endeavour, it is necessary to let things be. With such an attitude you do not experience obstructions as such because any condition is met by a form of acceptance. If you insist on reaching some particular goal, you may well encounter vexation. If you are flexible and accommodate to circumstances, things will flow. An insistence on some particular achievement implies an addiction to success. If success is not over-defined in such a way, vexations do not arise.

Yet I must be careful not to create misunderstanding here. Hongzhi is not saying that one should not care about what one does; that one should not have goals and purposes; that one should be indifferent about what happens in the world and careless of success or failure. Conventionally, it remains true that in order to achieve certain results, serious effort to overcome difficulties has indeed to be made. Yet, if, in spite of your best efforts, the outcome is not what you expected or hoped for, then a re-evaluation of your endeavour is required. Accepting an obstacle as it is, adapting to it skilfully, means

there will be no vexation, as some other activity becomes appropriate.

Two years ago we were planning to come to Wales to run a retreat and we ran into a seemingly unsolvable problem about our visas. I pressed my colleagues to solve the problem but one of them asked me, ‘Shifu, did you not say that if an obstacle arises then the endeavour should be abandoned? If you cannot go to Wales, there should be no vexation!’ I replied, ‘Since we have a contract with John to run this retreat at The Maenllwyd, we must press ahead with every endeavour to do so. If, however, at the very last minute we fail, then that is enough. We can get on with something else and drop any thought of vexation. But we have not reached that point yet. Get on with it!’

Adopting such an understanding of cause and effect is most helpful. We may float effortlessly like clouds that ‘*come forth on mountain peaks*’. Whatever the condition of the stream, the bright moon dances upon the water. The wisdom of Silent Illumination gives the understanding that no appearance is ever truly an obstacle. When one responds appropriately and with skilful means to whatever arises, radiant wisdom finds a way to be in accord with circumstance, just as a lid fits a box. Wisdom enables action to be so precisely appropriate that it is as if the tip of a sword stops the flight of a moving arrow.

The final sentences of our text tell the practitioner that even when he can stop an arrow with the tip of his sword, he needs to continue nourishing practice through further training. In this way he learns that, whatever obstacles arise, they are surmountable because none of them really exist. They are only misperceived as such. Whatsoever circumstance arises, it can be penetrated with the utter clarity of wisdom. There is no need to remain in some intellectual interpretation; immediate insight brings about right action straight away.

Some young monks, novices, came to see me in Taiwan. As recently left-home people they were disturbed by the fact that older monks rarely emphasised what was right or what was wrong. They told me that as householders they had had to be constantly concerned with issues of proper conduct, lest people might accuse

them of bad behaviour, or take some advantage. Now, they said, even though they had left home, they felt they had to worry about right or wrong lest senior monks judged them. I had to tell them that if they persisted with such an attitude it would be better for them to return to the life of a layperson. A monk who is generating wisdom does not argue with people using theories of right and wrong. He or she accepts people as they are, however difficult one may be. Using compassionate wisdom, a true monk takes his time and utilises opportunities to help that person transform himself. Take care not to misunderstand me!

In Chinese agriculture tamed buffaloes are very useful, if not essential, and ferrets can be taught to hunt skilfully. The analogy is that a true man or woman accords with principle. Others are seen not as hindrances, but only within the light of compassion and wisdom.

'*Having the Dao of no-mind one can be like this; not having yet gained no-mind, it is extremely difficult.*' We need to comprehend this saying in relation to the depth of understanding implied by the term 'no-mind'. As beginning practitioners, we may find that in meditation thought may sometimes cease to arise. Although this is an important discovery, it is not a sign of enlightenment. It is when attachments are dropped and when self-concern is abandoned that deeper levels of mind arise. It is then that three aspects of enlightenment become manifest: no thought, no characteristics, no abiding, and the Dao of no-mind is then realised. The practitioner has found the freedom to act in accordance with events as they occur and to express the wish for enlightenment in the manner of a bodhisattva living practically in the world. Without such a basis, trying to become a buddha is extremely difficult!

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[25] See: Cleary, T. 1990. *Book of Serenity: One Hundred Zen Dialogues.* New York. Lindisfarne.

[26] My friend Yiu Yan Nang has pointed out that *mo chao* may be translated not only as 'Silent Illumination' but also as 'Shining Silence' (ed).

Part III

WORKING
with a
MASTER

What is it like for a lay practitioner to work with a master over a period of time? A single retreat provides an introductory experience but what if one persists through a series of such events? This would indeed be a requirement if the aim was to train in Chan. Training takes time, but does it take one anywhere?

To assist those for whom this question may be relevant, I attempt to answer it through a series of excerpts from my retreat reports over several years training with Shifu.[27] Shifu is keen that participants should write a brief report on their retreat experiences. I have certainly found this to be a useful exercise. What changes may I have noticed over the years?

Of course everyone's experience on retreat differs, and the training with different masters doubtless also varies. Furthermore, training in occasional retreats is very different from day-to-day practice with a master in a monastery. However, I believe different Zen retreats have much in common wherever they may be and whoever directs them: one person's description can therefore give a rough guide to what you may yourself experience, should you set out upon this path.

I first attended Chan retreat in New York in 1986, but I had had previous retreat experience from working in meditation privately several times at Samye Ling Tibetan Centre in Scotland; and from several retreats in Soto Zen at Throssel Hole Priory in Northumberland – one of which had been directed by Roshi Jiyu Kennett. Furthermore, I had spent time in the Himalayas with Tibetan yogins. My original encounter with Chan had been while serving as a national service officer in the British army in Hong Kong 1953–54, when I had been introduced to a noted lay disciple of Master Xuyun and taken some teaching.[28] I was not therefore exactly a beginner, but I knew that work with Shifu could well provoke a Dharma struggle through self-confrontation of an order I had not encountered before. I was not disappointed.

CONDUCTOR WITH A MOTIONLESS BATON

New York, May 1986

I knew that the Chan meditation centre in downtown Queens in New York was in an urban area yet, as a country-living person from Somerset in the South-west of England, I was not well prepared to find myself in a converted shop with a factory on one side and the cacophonous main street of a commercial area on the other. Furthermore, a major street junction with traffic lights was just down the road and there was a fire station up the way. Every hour or so a fire engine would roar through the traffic, klaxon sounding, come to a reluctant halt at the lights and blare away at them in fury. 'Of course Zen is everywhere!' I reassured myself, as I sat through my first vibrating hours of passing trucks, car horns, full-volume radios and the chatter in at least five languages of exceedingly lively passers-by. As my back began to ache and my legs to hurt I made a vow that I would at least survive this thing, and that that alone would count as a sort of success. The first two days demanded naked will, as sweat caused by the local heatwave ran down my face and I sat, damp from perspiration, in my minimal clothing.

I struggled to apply the method I had learned at Throssel Hole – *shikantaza,* the just-sitting, wall gazing approach of Soto Zen. I was searching to understand what the great Japanese master Dogen meant by 'without thinking'. My head was full of scattered bits of television serials; painful memories; bits of old dreams; an endless random collection of pictorial sequences without focus and seemingly without meaning. The scattered mind merged with the traffic noise into a hellish bedlam punctuated by growing physical pain.

Shifu's talks were always helpful, starting me offagain with a touch of hope. He suggested allowing thought to subside on an out-breath, and leaving it alone on the in-breath to create a silent space. I found this practice beginning to produce gaps in my scattered mind

which slowly increased in length, deepening into moments of profound silence. After some hours I felt a swirling energy rising from my belly which changed into a glow of gratitude and release.

The following morning I awoke refreshed and, in the silence of the dawn, the simple song of the American robin in the little garden sounded in a deep and sustained stillness. In a now rare dream sequence, I found myself seated beside a dark tranquil pool in a deep cavern in the earth. There was a full orchestra seated on chairs there, ready to play. I was the conductor with baton raised – but motionless! No sound.

Shifu gave a talk about ‘no-mind’. My head started up again in a chatter of argument. This was no picture show but a vigorous debate. Did I know what ‘no-mind’ was? Certainly some past experiences suggested so. But were these ‘no-mind’ or merely some form of illusion? I puzzled on about this, working myself up into fuss and worry about how far along the Zen path I might be.

Some hours went by with me locked in this foolishness but, suddenly, I realised that what I was into was a quest for credentials and approval. As an academic I have a list of alphabetical combinations after my name signifying my attainments. I wanted to add *mu-shin* to the end of the list! The absurdity of this destructive endeavour got to me and, as I began smiling to myself and accepting that part of me that wanted to strut about exhibiting attainments, a new release arrived. I had an interview with Shifu and shared all this nonsense with him. Clearly, I could not tell whether past experiences were ‘no-mind’ or not, and nor indeed could Shifu. He was not me and anyway it was all in the past. Nor, of course, could Shifu tell me whether I would experience ‘no-mind’ in the future. I could, however, be grateful for those past moments and press on anew with my method. The whole experience had been a barrier constructed out of my own karma. As it collapsed, I noted the deep truth of Dogen’s phrase, ‘Whenever the opposites arise, the buddha mind is lost.’

Yet my body was now troubling me sorely. Backache, due to a small knotted muscle close to the spine below the shoulders, was generating a widening area of pain. I had travelled uncomfortably in the ill-designed seat of the aircraft flying me across the Atlantic. Sitting was soon so awful that I had to exercise sheer will to get

through each half-hour, expecting it to end in an ignominious collapse. Periodic yoga exercises, rolling on my back in the breaks, back-walking from a fellow participant and applications of one-handed massage formed a desperate work programme to keep me going. The difficulty was not, however, overcome in this way.

At some point during the penultimate day, during a period of slow walking or *kinhin*, it suddenly struck me that my discomfort with the heat, my suppressed annoyance at the street noise and my anger at my back pain were all one thing – a burning rejection of being there at all, combined with irritation at not 'doing better'. I saw myself as simply grumbling, as if in some way it would get me out of the hole I was in. Yet grumbling at a self-imposed task was such a ridiculous activity that once again I was amused by this paradoxical and uncomfortable state of mind. I accepted as a blunt and obvious fact that I was just a fool seeing things the wrong way.

After all, were any of these conditions bad? Neither the heat nor the sound of traffic was actually doing me any harm. Indeed, I was already aware that, in spite of them, an increasing clarity of mind was emerging. As I began to think in this way, a sudden turnabout in my feelings occurred. Everything that had been horrible a moment before not only became tolerable but acceptable – even inspiring.

As I sat down to face the wall after a break I found my world transformed. With my mind in stillness, I experienced the spaciousness of the room and the presence of others in it reflected there as if in a mirror. For a while there was the exhilaration of sheer joy. With some further hints from Shifu about body relaxation, I found it possible at last to let go of all these accumulated concerns, as if they were all one thing – 'me' in fact. In the letting go of 'me', the world simply appeared as it was – all of the 'same taste', nothing special to praise or to blame. The experience seemed to reach from horizon to horizon without boundaries so that all the sounds and happenings were simply going on within it like the continuous flow of water in a river. The water was gently wearing away the stone and there was no need for hurry.

After the retreat was over, I spent a final hour meditating near the window of an upstairs room. It was open – and by now a road digger was excavating a ditch in the pavement immediately below.

All the sounds were at full volume yet not for one moment was the inner stillness disturbed – in transparency the interdependence of everything flowed along. The hour seemed like a mere few minutes.

That evening I flew to Amsterdam. In the early morning I sat with my son and daughter eating pancakes for breakfast beside a canal. As we walked around, I found my breathing quietly centred in my belly and the stillness ever present in my mind. After every burst of conversation, it simply returned of its own accord. When at last I went to bed, I found I had been alert and active for twenty-seven hours, had crossed the Atlantic without jet lag and was continuing to feel a clarity of unusual perception. Only three days after my re-entry to my normal work schedule did recurrent worries begin to dim this way of seeing. I had truly learnt that 'to know all the buddhas of the past, present and future only perceive that Dharmadhatu nature is all created by the mind.'

DOGEN OFFERING TO DOGEN

New York, May 1981

I had come to the retreat bringing many tensions of my world with me; mental distress from a difficult domestic situation; remorse and shame at a seeming inability to solve such problems; a slightly frozen shoulder producing referred pain oddly in my upper left arm. Perhaps the physical pain was merely an emblem of pain in the mind?

As session succeeded session an increasing fatigue enveloped me, a deadly drowsiness with aches, pains and fidgety movement. My method of *shikantaza* was difficult to focus and punctuated by wandering thought, intense feelings of loss, grief and family distress. Whenever this faded away there were haphazard bursts of hypnagogic imagery in fragmentary visual 'clips' without apparent meaning. Even so, each session was different and gradually some moments of calm emerged.

I began repeating the name of Amitabha, now and again stopping the repetition to gaze into the silence so created. This

practice resembled the breathing technique I had used previously, but the results were very erratic. Again I found myself pondering Dogen's insistence that meditation is neither thought nor no-thought but a state of being without thought.

In one of my more silent periods the words of the *huatou* 'What is *wu*?'[29] arose spontaneously and it occurred to me that whenever 'without thinking' became established *wu* was present. Just before Shifu called me to my first interview, the phrase 'Dogen is offering to Dogen' arose, apparently meaning that out of Dogen's method a question had been given.

I told Shifu of this and he remarked that a *huatou* or a koan could indeed arise spontaneously while practising *shikantaza.* He seemed to like the phrase about Dogen, for his eyes shone. It had come from my subconscious, he said. As to my practice – 'No problem!'

I returned to my cushion; the work was gruelling; sometimes I felt bored stiff and wondered why on earth I was doing all this. Could there be any benefit in so masochistic an exercise? I remembered a statement made to me by a yogin in Ladakh. 'You must sit still within the boredom itself and wait for an energy to arise.' I sat.

Silent patches continued to emerge and I felt grateful for them. Sometimes a hint of bliss appeared. 'Ah,' I said to myself, 'I am making progress!' and I considered asking Shifu for another interview. Yet, realising I had a strong wish to please Shifu, like a schoolboy facing a powerful schoolmaster and wishing to impress, I desisted, waiting for this feeling, which felt rather silly, to subside.

Shifu's evening talk was based on the *Song of Mind*, just two lines of it:

> *Do not seek an experience of emptiness.*
> *Full comprehension emerges naturally.*

This made striking sense and, in response to the charm and open friendliness of his presentation – smiling, playful even, so much the opposite of his stern inquisitorial face in interview – I let go of my Oedipal reaction and felt released from error.

On the third evening Shifu commented on the faintheartedness he had encountered in interviews with participants. Mockingly, he imitated the manners of the young Chinese women present who, like the rest of us, were complaining of leg ache, backache, headache, everything ache. ‘What is this?’ he demanded. ‘It’s not a retreat at all – more like a day care centre!’

I was stung by his remark. Whatever others might be doing I was determined that for me the retreat was a serious matter. However much it differed from the old monastic retreats, the horrors of which Shifu had alarmingly described, nonetheless I would do something. An angry determination arose as I contemplated my incompetence and faint heartedness. So, immediately after the talk, as I sat on my cushion once again, I punched my right fist into my left palm making a loud crack and, powered by anger, plunged into meditation.

The first target was my fidgety body. I stared again and again into the various aches and pains, fully allowing myself to experience them and then commanding their departure. To my surprise, one by one they cooled down, giving way to a quiet sensation that was not uncomfortable. I went to bed feeling that mastery of the body was not impossible and that aches and pains were largely the product of an uneasy mind.

I also became focused on two further lines from the *Song of Mind:*

> *When birth and death are cut off*
> *the principle is seen.*

Shifu told us that this meant the cutting-off of the moment-tond ‘I returned to myself’. This was amoment arousal and decay of thought. I could see deep sense in this.

I had a dream in which I had to cross a green landscape, wild open land, in which savage dogs roamed in packs and singletons. I had been given a sharp sword with which to cut them down so I set off with confidence. The dogs came close but none approached to molest me. In the morning session I felt that this dream referred to

my wandering thoughts, and that the sword was Shifu's teaching. I sat with confidence.

It was a holiday morning; traffic was absent; the American robin sang its evocative early morning song; to my surprise the pain in my body failed to appear and my body itself seemed to disappear. I was aware of its presence merely as a bag of guts, plopped like a cushion upon the floor, supporting a meditating mind. A strange image arose within me. It seemed as if a great grey mass like a tumour was filling out my stomach and gradually protruding from my body, almost as if I were a dividing cell. The experience was quite physical and alarming, a gross wrenching apart of something horrible in me that needed exorcism. As it separated from me as a big round ball about a yard in diameter, it seemed to be made of grey paper. It was a wasp's nest. I poked it with a stick and thousands of wasps poured forth and disappeared into distant air. A feeling of great relief filled me and my mind became tranquil like a mirror, simply reflecting all phenomena. I sat through two complete sessions without a movement.

After breakfast the same feeling continued, but now the mirror felt rather tightly bound by its frame. Quite suddenly the frame dissolved and, with a vivid sensation of opening out, of a loosening of constraint, a wide spaciousness appeared. The silent mirror now had no limit, there was no movement within it, no thought, no movement of mind at all, a sheer vastness which had not come in from outside but which had arisen with the disappearance of the mirror's frame. Words fail here for what words can stand for the wordless? I felt open to the entire universe and, although the sights and sounds around me were all quite as usual, in the world where I had been I was not. There was no-one there. No wanting, nothing holding me for I was not there to be held. Happiness without attachment, for nothing arose to which attachment could exist. Gratitude, a continuing state.

I remembered Shifu's instruction to 'Let the universe do the work – not you!' and I felt at once that, where I had once been, there was now just this universal energy flowing of itself without constriction, time moving. I was time not in time. *Wu* was both the void of

experience and the continuum of a flowing stream, both empty, both wide open.

At interview the experience was still with me for I was second in line and the experience had begun only fifteen minutes before. I described it to Shifu and added, '*Wu* is universal energy endlessly flowing – it is also love.' Shifu said, 'Good. Very good. Now you can start practising!' I returned to my seat and almost at once the doubting, self-accusatory mind attacked me with every manner of demonic, self-persecuting thought and, for several sittings, I quite lost a hold on *wu*.

I took up the second phrase again and could perceive how *wu* was obscured not only by thoughts but also by their barely conscious bases that were generating diverse intentionalities and preoccupations not clear enough to take the form of thought.

In the afternoon, after a long series of prostrations, *wu* returned. There was complete stillness and openness within a silent, sack-like corpse, in and out of whose mouth flies flew as it breathed. I was this fresh corpse and a fear of such deathly emptiness arose together with so grim an image, a terror of losing all I held dear in the world, my pride, my intellect. Somehow, the image of the little blue iris growing in the garden came to mind and 'They toil not, neither do they spin but who among you is arrayed like one of these?' I felt better, in touch with life once more.

Gradually, as session followed session, I became able to track these movements of minding. The openness became lost not so much when thought arose, but rather when attachments, old emotional needs, wants or fears were present. The presence of need, want or fear unrepresented by thought was especially subtle and signalled by bodily tensions, finger scratching, nail biting, fidgeting, the mind speaking as it were non-verbally. At these times there was a sensation of mental closure, as if being surrounded, hedged in. Yet, by allowing this state to develop fully, it began to lose strength, dissolving in the same way as bodily pain had done.

It was never possible to force an opening to occur, for this in itself represented an ego state. Yet, from time to time, a sort of letting go occurred, a putting down not only of ego states but of the entire self as felt in attachments. The putting away felt like something

falling away – like sticking plaster being pulled from the skin but with no puller doing the pulling. With that the openness emerged again bringing a powerful sense of relief, ‘Ah, here it is again. How fortunate!’

This is a condition of total not-wanting. Death would be OK, entirely so, being neither good nor bad in itself. Only when this not-wanting has arisen does this openness flow. To say then ‘I don’t know. I don’t need to explain. I have nothing to discover, nothing to resolve and nothing to do, absolutely nowhere else to go at all’ was somehow totally complete.

Whatever arises in the mind
gives rise to its own sphere.

Liberation lasts only so long as one is absent, saying of oneself ‘Who is here? Not me. Sometimes we raise the eyebrows of old Shakyamuni – sometimes we do not.’ (Dogen)

OH! LOOK AT THAT!

The Maenllwyd, April 1989

This was a busy retreat for me. I was guestmaster and responsible for the welfare not only of the participants but also of Shifu and the ‘team’ from New York on their first visit to Wales, comprising interpreter Ming Yee and assistant Guo Yuan Shi. I was of course concerned that all would be well.

In many ways my experiences of sitting resembled those of previous retreats. At first I was delighted to sit and blissful moments appeared, but then fatigue and scattered thoughts arose and the usual struggle was on. I wrestled with my karmic problems, my unsatisfactory relationships, domestic disturbances and my neurotic desire to please everyone. Yet the calming effect of meditation soon released me and at such times, while fully aware of the concrete realities of my surroundings, I also felt myself as if floating on a platform above the valley: as if the wall before me was insubstantial

and my awareness was reaching out over the rolling spaces of the hills and valleys into some limitless beyond.

At my first interview I told Shifu how my mind was for ever seeking explanations, especially since, as a scientist, seeking in this way had been my mind's chief means of learning. Shifu remarked that for me the most useful path would be silence, especially since my practice of *shikantaza* had given me some grip on the stillnesses that can arise in the mind. He felt that learning Silent Illumination would deepen this practice further. I returned to my cushion fortified with this thought which gradually yielded a feeling of stability and stillness, only occasionally broken by mind wandering and dreamlike images. With a quietened mind I felt free to review my life in the Dharma and I resolved to tell Shifu of those rare experiences which had appeared as if by grace several times in my life since boyhood, and which I have always been reluctant to share with anyone because of their incomprehensible nature.

I gave him a straightforward account of one event that had followed a retreat at The Maenllwyd. I had been down the lane on the point of departure and had returned from the car on foot to a gate which I had forgotten to close behind me. As I swung the gate, I saw two red kites wheeling overhead in the frost-clear air of the sunny, winter day. I had never seen red kites near The Maenllwyd before so I exclaimed to myself with joy, 'Oh! look at that!' As I gazed at the circling birds my mind suddenly fell empty, I was no longer present within 'my' experiencing. There was only the landscape and the circling birds, a sense of wonder and amazement. I stood gazing for about twenty minutes as the birds gradually withdrew, and I felt the experience slowly fading as thought reappeared and 'I returned to myself'. This was a re-awakening, a joy to have found 'it' again, for such an experience has only rarely appeared, often with years between.

I also told Shifu of another occasion when I was visiting Naropa's cave at Dzongkhul Gompa. We had spent three days in July 1977 crossing the immense ice fields of the Umasi-la pass, rising to 18,000 feet through the Himalayas into the Zanskar valley of Ladakh. As we were being given tea in the upper hall of the little monastery I had glanced out of the window. The mountain side

opposite was falling away as icy water rushed down in a massive waterfall from the glacier above. Again emptiness of self came over me and the great space of the mountains seemed to fill me with itself. I wandered alone for half an hour up and down the flat monastery roof until I felt myself again gradually returning, as thought once more created self-concern.[30]

I asked Shifu what, from the point of view of Chan, was the meaning of these experiences. Without hesitation he told me that this was 'seeing the nature' or *kensho.* I was overjoyed to receive his confirmation of what I had suspected but never been able to test in a direct meeting with a Zen master. Shifu also said that, from what he knew of me, he had already understood that I had had such experiences. He then said 'Congratulations' and told me to make three prostrations before him, which I did with profound feelings of awe, joy and liberation. He also said that from now on he wanted me to run Chan retreats with his blessing and, as it were, as his representative.

While I experienced a great freedom, I also perceived immediately the responsibilities that this recognition implied for me. I also felt bewildered, for what did congratulations have to do with simply experiencing the most basic nature of myself? I felt an odd shyness too for, while I was happy at Shifu's recognition, I did not want anyone else to know. In sharing with others, minefields of potential miscommunication loomed before me.

After this interview the sitting sessions ran smoothly and clearly with a stillness of a mirror-like quality. One afternoon we did prostrations carefully explained by Shifu. I experienced profound repentance, not only for immediate things but for the long perspective of inadequacies in my life. As the tears poured down my face, it seemed as if repentance must be endless. Oceans of karma from past generations seemed to sweep through me. It was as if this repentance was a beginning of atonement for previous lifetimes as well as for this one. The depth of feeling gradually changed to relief and gratitude towards the Dharma.

THE NATURALNESS OF HOW THINGS ARE

New York, November 1989

On the first day I was happy, rediscovering old friends. The atmosphere of the premises of the new centre, a few houses down the road from the old one, reminded me of the good things of past retreats. There was a large and attractive image on the altar so I went up to pay my respects and to look at the Buddha – and the Buddha looked at me! As I gazed into that peaceful, if curiously distant, face it was as if a blissful harmony was transferred to me, a sweet peacefulness that seemed to permeate the room.

On this retreat I wanted to gain a deeper understanding of the Chinese word *t'san* meaning 'investigate, enter or go into'. How was one to do this in meditation?

Soon the usual troubles began, past and present vexations, dissatisfaction and despair emerged one after another like a host of waiting demons. My body stiffened and my back ached. There were subtle motifs working their way below the surface, subverting whole hours of sitting. Two devils in particular were distressing me. The first was telling me that my endless tendency to try to placate significant others could not be satisfied here. It seemed to me that, without feeling that I was pleasing somebody else, I could not feel happy about my own being. Here of course there were no others to please – unless it were Shifu, and to try and placate Shifu was so obviously absurd that I could not even begin. Sitting before the wall there was only myself and I had to learn to value my own way of being. The second devil was a saboteur. In the middle of a peaceful *kinhin* a voice suddenly said, 'You don't believe any of this!' I was shocked by so traitorous a thought. My discomfort was taking its revenge on the ego's fortitude, in enduring the process, by denying the very belief that led me to value the work.

Furthermore, Shifu was presenting me with a very distanced appearance, checking my work in cleaning the bathroom on a work

period, and ticking me off for crossing my legs in relaxation during an interview. Afterwards he remarked that he understood that different cultures had different ways of sitting. It was just that in China to sit in that way seemed somewhat disrespectful. I was mortified by all this for it contrasted so strongly with his attitude towards my work on the previous retreat in Wales. I began to suspect that this was all a training procedure to test my resolution. Perhaps he would ask me to do some impossible task, just as Marpa trained Milarepa and Shifu's own teacher had likewise drilled him into selfrecognition! I resolved that whatever he did or said would make no difference to my training. I would carry on regardless. With this I felt easier – even amused to try and spot what device he might throw at me next!

Shifu's talks on Master Xuyun's instructions on Chan meditation helped me greatly with my main quest. I had previously discovered that it was sometimes possible to detach from a painful thought and allow my awareness to expand to embrace the experiential moment, the nowness of the room, sounds and atmosphere, without the interpolation of thought. I began to practise bringing myself into the immediate presence of the place. As I did this, it seemed that the monstrous pervasiveness of ego concern began withdrawing into its lair, leaving the stage clear and unobstructed. It was strange how quickly this shift could occur. One moment my head would be in a fog of self-concern, the next there I was in the room, clean, clear and present.

It seemed as if I was in a cage inhabited by troublesome monkeys. If I asked myself the question 'What is troubling me now?' I could do one of two things. I could either perceive and name a basic problem, one of the monkeys, and worry about that, or I could look at it from the standpoint of the cage itself. This moves the locus of attention from the agitating monkey to the environment that surrounds it. The cage is not the monkey, it is uninvolved. However noisy the monkey may be, the cage is unaffected. Repeating this shift of attention many times led to an expanding and relatively enduring stillness. When I glanced at the Buddha now, there was just a reflex of silence.

One morning the chanting of the ritual moved me to tears. All the tragedy and sorrow of the world seemed matched against the

beauty of the passing scenes of life. Soon this sorrow changed into a growing feeling of bliss, deep, inward and physical in manifestation. At interview I asked Shifu the meaning of blissful experiences within the Chan perspective. Shifu said that such a feeling arises out of gratitude when there has been an insight into emptiness. Emptiness, gratitude and bliss are related, tending to arise one after the other in unpredictable sequences and with varying durations and intensities, so long as the mind is one-pointed. Here was the invisible door out of the cage.

On the last night I sat till midnight. In the stillness of the meditation hall, questions from Shifu's talks slowly circled. What was my original face before I was born? Before time what was I? If there was no time before time began, then there could only be space. But no – without time, no space. Simply the naturalness of the way things are. *Wu* is the inconceivable. Nothing to be said or done about it. Just the great NO of Joshu which seemed to be turning into my great YES. Did I say 'my' yes?

CREATING A FUSS: SEEING THE STUPIDITY

New York, November 1990

I arrived from England bringing a relatively calm mind, gentler of late due to some lessening of vexations and months of improving practice. This was to be Shifu's fiftieth retreat in the USA and, on the Tuesday, I was to celebrate my sixtieth birthday. It bode well to be an auspicious time.

Yet I had also brought with me something else of which I was not at first aware. I had spent much of the year away from home with visits to Taiwan and Hong Kong, and in two long expeditions to high altitude in the Himalayas, one of them in the deep cold of the winter months. I really did not want to go abroad again: rather I wanted to consolidate at home and write. Yet I had a programme of retreats to

lead in Britain in the coming year, and I knew I needed further training with Shifu, both for myself and for others.

Although the first day was peaceful, I had a growing sense of unease. I was unexpectedly bothered by the rules, by the changed diet, by the feeling that I might make some mistake. I reacted negatively to the powerful authority of Shifu himself and became puzzled because, since I had attended retreats before, I had not expected to feel so resistant. Finally I recognised that I did not actually want to be in New York at all – at least not just then. I felt a certain resentment, a feeling of duress, that I had had to come at that time when I did not feel ready.

The realisation helped. Since I was undoubtedly on the Western side of the 'pond', the only thing to do was to work hard and enter into the retreat as fully as possible. Yet, even if my head was telling me this, my heart refused to obey. It began creating a dreadful fuss. My discomfort grew and grew and, rationalise with myself as I might, it went on and on.

I was horrified to find myself repeatedly judging my companions, even though I knew nothing about them and I was trying to follow the isolation rule of deliberately treating the retreat as if I was the only one on it. I soon recognised that these judgements were actually attempts to bolster my superiority because I feared exactly the opposite. To myself I was exhibiting privately a crude arrogance based in my own insecurity, exactly as Shifu, to my added shame, was to discuss in one of his highly pertinent talks. At times I felt as if I was the only victim of the strict rules. I did not want to be bound by all these strictures and I felt as if I was being subjected to the imposition of unnecessary authority. Yet, after all, I reasoned, I had deliberately come on the retreat of my own free will, knowing full well what retreats were like. I realised that my feelings were nothing other than a paranoid reaction.

I began to develop an acute sensitivity to Shifu's presence. It was as if I were constantly worrying about what he thought of me. I went through seemingly endless and ridiculous mental posturings designed to seek his approval, hoping, for example, that he would notice how well I was sitting and relaxing as soon as he left the room! Of course I knew all the time how totally absurd this was. I

knew that Shifu's relation to me was entirely straightforward yet I kept reading into his facial expressions the implication that he disapproved of me. It took me rather longer to realise that this was because I disapproved of myself!

Of course I knew all about such Oedipal feelings, not only from my own experience of them with previous father figures, but also because, as a research supervisor for university doctoral degrees, I had considerable experience of receiving and managing such feelings in young men working under my guidance. None of this knowledge helped in the least, nor did the fact that being sixty to the day put me in the same generation as Shifu himself!

I had a disturbed and self-conscious feeling that I was not doing the retreat well, that I was a most inferior participant. The silence and isolation meant that I had no means of checking this out, and no means of playing my usual game whereby I get others to like me by subtly pleasing them, a game at which I recognise my unfortunate skill. I became increasingly anxious about everything, the possibility of being late perhaps at meals or wondering when I should go to the toilet.

Then there was the fatigue. The relentless effort of sitting facing a wall with all this in my head exhausted me. The best things were the breaks in the programme for exercises and meals and, of course, the relaxing Dharma talks in the evenings. Yet I did have one great cause for rejoicing. I had very little discomfort from sitting itself. This was so wonderful a change from previous retreats that I reflected upon the possibility that it was the absence of physical pain that had set all this mental strife going. From time to time all these anxieties peaked in something close to a panic attack. I was losing control, I thought, feeling desperate and seeking every inner means of steadying myself.

It was then that I remembered my mantra. Years ago I had received a mantra as the sound of my protective *yidam* in Tibetan Tantra. It had helped me cross passes in the Himalayas and to get me along precipitous tracks where I would have otherwise suffered from vertigo. Abandoning all methods, I plunged into reciting it. Wonder upon wonders, my mind, in the space of one sitting session,

began to quieten and experience some peace. Something like the bliss of gratitude arose.

Shifu's talks were tracking my inner process with wonderful accuracy. He spoke of the lack of Dharma confidence, of the inner insecurity that gave rise either to fearful anxiety on the one hand or aggressive arrogance on the other. I followed his advice, classifying each bout of discomfort under a heading. I soon saw that all these headings stemmed from one single source. The common root was indeed an insecurity, a shaky self-confidence, that stemmed from childhood. Everything I had been experiencing came from this one source – me. I had brought it all through the door on arrival. If I was to know the buddhas of the past, present and future, I certainly had to perceive that all worlds of experience were created In the mind.

After each meal I prostrated repeatedly before the statue of Kuan Yin in an upstairs room. I did these prostrations slowly, staying on the floor for minutes at a time. I understood clearly that what I had been experiencing was nothing other than a process of self-cherishing expressed in several ways. My ignorance of this was shameful, arrogant even, painful and depressing. What hypocrisy to think I could ever help others in the Dharma. I wept. I remembered those I had hurt, ancient sadnesses, failed relationships, the lack of love that feeds on fear. How could Shifu have authorised me to lead retreats in Britain when all this constituted so overwhelming a vexation?

But was it? I had an interview with Shifu. We talked of method. As to vexations, 'Just tell yourself how stupid they are and put them down,' he said. 'Stick to your method, simple, brief, no analysis.'

During a period of group prostrations I relaxed into a minute attentiveness to every movement of the body. Hearing others weeping brought my own tears of sadness, regret and repentance to my eyes. Relief came. In silence there was only the movement of hands, knees and forehead. Gradually the rest of the body faded away. Hands flowed, knees bent, forehead touched the floor. It was like swimming bodilessly in cool water. Afterwards I sat on my cushion. There was nothing on my cushion. My body had quite disappeared. Above the cushion there was only an awareness in space; the thoughts that watchfully observed had no location; they

were neither here nor there but hovering somewhere unlocatable. The thoughts were saying, ‘So, here you are. All of this is me. This is where you start from – right now.’ In the now there was nothing but a vivid presence in which was peace.

If this was *wu*, what was *wu*? I knew how to *t’san* a koan so I launched into it, gazing and gazing into that bright presence. What is it? What is it? Where is it? On and on to a central point locked on to an absent target. Sound in the room. What is the *wu* of that? Music from a ghetto blaster going down the street. Where the *wu* in that? Stillness now in the early morning. Where the *wu* in that?

It was the sixth day. The mind settled, and hour after hour sped by. I did exercises to ease the tired body but I did not strictly need to do so. I sat on and on in focused peace. Sometimes chi rose in the head so high that I refocused the questioning in the navel. It steadied there. On the last day there were hours of silence often suffused by blissful joy. The dreadful traffic noise registered hardly at all and, when it did, it entertained.

I understood Dharma joy. It had returned with a new confidence. I became aware of my companions in a new way, feeling love and respect for the great efforts that were being made all around me, for the heroism, if I may call it that, of these determined people. I saw Shifu once more clearly as the great teacher that he is. In interview I told him of my calmed mind. ‘That’s good!’ he said. ‘Continue.’ And indeed I guess that’s it. Continue. Learn again and again to accept but not before there has been re-cognition.

I start from here. Always from here. At such a moment, looking in, there is the world beckoning.

LILACS IN THE CRUELLEST MONTH

The Maenllwyd, April 1992

‘April is the cruellest month, breeding Lilacs out of the dead land.’ Eliot’s words were with me as Shifu arrived the day before the retreat

began. The weather was cold and light snow showers were dusting the hills, drifting past on the north-easterly wind. Yet daffodils were out and, down in the valleys, the lilacs were indeed coming into bloom. Once again I was the guestmaster for Shifu's second retreat in Wales.

Everyone was helpful, some sleeping in tents or in the big barn where the cold wind blew through the holes in the roof. My normal room was allotted to Shifu as the Master and, on the first morning, I awoke to frozen snow on the roof of my tent. People got colds yet the retreat began to unfold like a musical performance or the setting sail of a ship.

Shifu began talking of Silent Illumination, illustrating his theme from Hongzhi Zhenjue's poem. The opening words always inspire me, startling the mind into a kind of expectancy, re-awakening memories of 'it'.

> *Silently and serenely one forgets all words*
> *Clearly and vividly it appears before you*
> *When one realises it time has no limits*
> *When experienced your surroundings come to light.*

As I practised, the sense of the poem became clearer and more present. 'Full of wonder is the pure illumination, like the dreaming of a crane flying in empty space, the still waters of an autumn pool.' The feel of the valley beyond the walls of the Chan Hall came into the room. The room was wall-less.

Where does the wonder exist? The words woke me up, the question becoming a *huatou.* Was the wonder inside my mind? Not exactly. Was it outside my mind? Not exactly. Between the two? Instead of a bounded experience, there again appeared that boundless space in which the observer has no specific location. Sounds came and went, merging in a present continuum outside any measurement of time. Only a not-ness was apparent that no words could fit; a not-ness of the usual; no habitual mental movement; *wu* in fact? A wonder was simply here, now and wordless, a suspended note of music or a beam of sunlight falling through a window.

In interview I told Shifu of this, but an interval of time had come between my vivid experience and my meeting with him. Something had happened, for I was suddenly overcome by sadness at the passing of time, impermanence and the frailty of things. Nostalgia has been with me throughout my life. Shifu remarked that, while my first experience was clear and correct, my mind had 'gone down' after it. Sadness is a product of attachment. There is nothing wrong with such a feeling, but it is not wisdom. The task is to see wisdom again and again and to understand the nature of emotion.

During the Menshang liturgy Shifu would go to the door of the Chan Hall and scatter the offering outside. I felt as if time stopped, centuries disappeared and ancient China was with us. My respect for the Dharma deepened and my gratitude to Shifu sometimes welled up in tears. Watching participants returning to their cushions I felt deep compassion for each and every one, and a profound respect for the confrontation with self that each was making. In the Dharma love blooms like lilacs in the cruellest month.

A GAME OF CHESS WITH 'ME' AT STAKE

New York, November 1994

Retreats are like games of chess that one plays against oneself. There is the beginning game, the middle game and the endgame. In the first, one settles in, endeavours to overcome the trepidation at facing another period of quite severe physical and mental hardship, and to set aside both positive and negative expectations. In the second phase the struggle with self emerges, karmic predispositions appear in florid form, the body aches, there may be drowsiness and depression, all of which must be gone through as gates that are gateless. Finally, in the endgame, if one is fortunate and has worked well, you come home.

Soon I was caught by the memory of a *huatou*: 'There is no time. What is memory?', which I had first encountered years before

in Hong Kong.[31] My mind became engaged in an intense investigation, trying to penetrate the logic of this question. This was thought alright, but not wandering thought, it was a racing mind intellectually engaged.

If there was no time then all that has happened is literally no more. The past is dead; yet so often it seems that history determines the present moment as if all those dead persons were still with us determining our fate. False: the past is totally gone and, since the future is not yet here, there can only be this existing moment. All the shaping and conditioning of this moment spring from the recreation of the past. But if memory is only thought, what happens if thought, that colourful cognitive representation, that neurotic working out of unfinished business, is dropped? There is just the silent moment of existence, life but no-mind. What is that?

At that moment, I thought, there is only the unfolding of the universe which, like a bubbling spring of ever fresh water, never stops arising and changing at the very moment of its appearance. Time becomes momentariness when we freeze it into solid memories. I am no more than a fragment of this vast unfolding which keeps reinventing itself in the virtual reality of memory. When I stop there is just the flowing. I bowed to the Buddha. ‘No path!’ I said and the Buddha seemed to wink.

In my racing mind there was a focused excitement of exploration. Chi was running high and as each inference fell into place there was a real shift in experience, a thrill of discovery and an opening to whatever might come next. Finally, with nowhere else to go, the wholeness, the gestalt, of reaching an end gave a sense of realisation and joy. Yet, I suspected, all this was no more than ‘namtok’ as the Tibetans call it, illusory intellection in which the ‘I’ was preening its golden feathers.

In interview I tried to speak of this with Shifu. He was not impressed. Metaphysical speculation, however exciting and revealing, was not enlightenment. Was I experiencing doubts about my method? I returned somewhat deflated to my cushion. I was clearly not using my *huatou* properly. I shifted to ‘What is NOW?’ using the directions helpfully given by Shifu.

On the last afternoon Shifu told us the story of the monk who, lest he be beheaded, had to carry a bowl of oil over a set distance without spilling a drop, even though startled by various threats and surprises. Shifu bade us do likewise with our meditation so I focused my *huatou* and worked hard. Silence descended in a profound samadhi, within which thought sometimes moved softly. Holding my *huatou* I seemed to be a helmsman of a small ship bid to steer towards the peak of a distant mountain. Waves and wind constantly moved the bowsprit off the marker and, as I adjusted the wheel, the bows swung past the marker in the other direction. Steering is a constant flow of minor adjustment to the lively movement of ship and sea. I had a vision that the ship was my body, steering was my mind and that the two were linked in a flowing process in which the 'I' need not be present at all. There was simply the flowing expression of cause and effect in the endless selfless flow of a sea-borne dance.

As I emerged from this samadhi I felt the room around me, the cars roaring and honking in the streets outside, the voices in many languages of the passers-by. All this was the sea on which I steer the ship under the guidance of the *huatou.* But no-one was steering the ship, no-one was sitting on the cushion, there was just a cushion-sitting under an open sky. Instead of being locked in meditation, everything opened out in joyous freedom as I sat there, beyond meditation, marvelling at the view. As the last moments of the retreat passed, it was as if the ship came home to an island harbour. Unobserved, I bowed quietly to the Buddha, to Shifu and the assembly.

Nothing matters and everything must go,
yet love is having the heart touched
in the valleys of suffering.[32]

FINAL REFLECTIONS: A PERSONAL CRITIQUE

What lessons can I learn from these reports that may be useful for a beginning practitioner? Firstly, on retreat one may indeed discover that one is not in control of one's own mind (p. 8). Gradually, under the caring eye of the master, you learn to practise with a method that calms the mind and establishes an awareness that includes refreshing and novel states of consciousness. Liturgical chant and prostration provide opportunities for deep feeling which is likely to include repentance and a renewal of forgiveness and hope. The whole process provides an often startling insight into the operations of one's mind.

It is also clear, moreover, that this process is not accomplished without a struggle with your own concerns; about who you may be; how you are regarded; what is comfortable or comforting to you and what stress may be supportable by you. Indeed, you may soon realise that the retreat is set up deliberately to provoke the self-referring mind by providing circumstances that challenge all its wants and desires for stability, security and a sense of permanence. The challenges are tough and increase or lessen at the apparent caprice of the master. You submit to his authority willingly, yet at the same time inevitably resist his power and influence. Who is he to order me about?

The participant is being challenged to recognise the validity of the Four Noble Truths. Life is suffering because desire is endless. Only when addictive desire is challenged at its source is there a hope of going beyond desire and finding freedom from habitual attachments. On retreat, desire is subtle. We are not speaking of major lusts after sex or chocolate, but discreet underground movements: hurrying to a preferred place at table; wondering whether one needs another cup of tea and whether it should be Earl Grey, English Breakfast or camomile; preoccupations with whether the master approves of you; how near you might be to an experience of enlightenment; and all this against a background of physical discomfort which you would dearly like to avoid. All these take over the mind and become barriers to insight. This is no easy ride, it is, rather, a Dharma struggle, trying to see the truth of the Dharma in its experiential reality, rather than reviewed, perhaps sleepily, in a late evening armchair. Only when the difficulties, errors, stupidities and

need to repent have been passed through in acceptance can they be laid aside. Indeed the putting aside begins to occur quite naturally as the acknowledgement of one's foolish egoistic self becomes unavoidable and accepted. That is when meditation starts.

These retreat reports also show that similar patterns crop up repeatedly in successive retreats. There is no question of a sudden immediate enlightenment just because you have elected to sit facing a wall for a few hours. This is long-term work requiring dedication over a period of years, even a lifetime. Yet there is a kind of spiralling progression. As one spirals onwards, there is a change in each returning spin. The anguished dreams and pointless madness of the mind's career begin to centre clearly in the problems that are the result of a personal past, a personal karma, the very nucleus from which self-concern springs. Again and again, one brings this karmic complex through the door of the Chan Hall. Again and again, it goes through its destructive paces, but gradually a clearer insight into its nature emerges. The sense of self-importance and protection diminishes. What does it matter where I sit, which tea I drink or whether Shifu is watching me? The body too gets trained, so that sitting is no longer a trouble, and aches and pains become rare events. When you see yourself clearly, maybe you begin to find that rueful grin that is the start of acceptance. Yes, I am a joke, sometimes pathetic, almost always foolish, but, hey, this is where I start from.

Wilful dedication is needed on retreat and, with persistence, the mind indeed calms down. The way the mind works and leads you astray becomes clearer, depression gives way to confidence. Yes, after all I'm alright. A thrilling sense of freedom emerges. One returns to everyday life open and joyous. Working through karma to acceptance allows an integration of the fragmented and often rejected parts of one's mentality, recreating a unified sense of being in the world. Yet this is not completion.

One of the problems that began to manifest clearly as I progressed through several retreats was that my mind easily began to race under the influence of high chi. These were exciting times when the enthusiastic mind spun webs of intellectual insight, created poetry and imagery and became quite delighted in its manifestations.

Shifu had indeed warned us that when there is too much ‘illumination’, silence gets drowned out and the meditation becomes unbalanced. After such times I reflected that fun it certainly had been, but nonetheless I seemed to be losing my way. Freedom did not lie in this direction: the dangers of an increasing self-satisfaction and an addiction to high intellectual energy were becoming clear. Furthermore, I had the impression that, as retreats became easier for me through familiarity, this difficulty was increasingly present. All that stuff about the ship coming into harbour with no-one at the tiller. Highly suspicious!

I began to do some short solitary retreats in the Welsh hills to watch my mind games more closely. I began to be able to relax without excited elaborations in the silence of the Total Body Awareness (pp. 102–3) and the spaciousness that followed its emergence. In those silences there was little thought, perhaps a movement or two on the back-burner but nothing up and running. In that space lay a new sort of freedom: nothing special; just an open presence; just ‘being time’ as Dogen might say; a freedom from the need to do anything; abiding in not knowing; a bare awareness that simply let the world go on turning, a sense of vivid enquiry. Perhaps in that lay the secret of the Buddha’s smile.

At least I feel now that this is the clear path. With practice such freedom begins to arise at any time; thoughts just drop out and there it is; nothing in particular; nothing to talk about; a private intimacy that feels complete.

Enlightenment? What’s that?

One is told again and again that to know enlightenment the self has to be forgotten. How can you do this when it is clear that when you want such an experience the ego is unavoidably present? Enlightenment cannot be a product of thought and intention. It arises out of its own nature when it wills: it comes over one in its own time, often in a moment of amazement. Unplanned, unexpected, nothing to do with ‘me’.

A simple conclusion follows from this. As Roshi Reb Andersen once put it, ‘You can’t do it!’ If you, that is your ego, is present, *kensho* cannot happen. If you want it, even a teeny bit, its possibility

is entirely precluded. Training can achieve a one-pointed mind and that which follows from that, but does not necessarily predict a self-transcending insight. One may indeed return to the marketplace from one's mountain cottage as an unfragmented person, well capable of practising the bodhisattva's way and helping others, but without having had an enlightenment experience. 'Seeing the nature' cannot be won, you can only be open to a possibility. Maybe you become enlightenment prone, maybe not.

It is for this reason that the wisest of Chan masters have always insisted that training should continue after realisation. Indeed, after a brief experience of *kensho*, training is even more important, lest illusions of grandeur and a return of selfimportance corrupt the path. As Shifu so wisely says, 'Continue, continue!'

After one retreat I discussed with him the fact that experiences of self-transcendence occur not only in all religions but also among nature mystics and poets. It seems a universal property of the human mind, however rarely seen. What then was special about the Zen enlightenment experience? What is the especial insight that gives Chan its peculiar claim to truth? Indeed, what is truth apart from opinion?

I had asked Shifu whether it could be said that *kensho* resulted from training. If you say 'yes' then it is possible to say that *kensho* is a goal of the training but, if you say 'no', then the function of training is put in question. In response Shifu remarked that, rather than as the result of some technique, it was training broadly in the Dharma as a whole way of being, that facilitated the emergence of *kensho.* A transcendent experience within the Dharma is rooted in an understanding of impermanence that allows detachment, and it is this that constitutes the especial claim to truth of Chan. Other similar religious experiences may be attributed to God or some outside agent, and are therefore aspects of an 'outer path' with a dependency projected beyond human life. In Buddhism, Chan, life, the universe are all experienced as one pervasively interpenetrating, always moving, whole. There is no other. In *kensho* this is nature seen, yet what it is that is seen remains beyond any certainty of description, of any closure. There is only amazement within enquiry.

A Dead Mind?

On another occasion, Shifu had remarked that one of the reasons why the koan system had been created was that monks in monasteries had become no longer able to 'maintain the dead mind' and hence masters had had to invent new ways of focusing. I said to Shifu that the thought that Chan requires the development of an extraordinary mind is a problem many people have. They think that there is an everyday mind and an enlightened mind, with training purporting to create one from the other. Yet, in his talks, Shifu had been insisting that there was only one mind, the ordinary mind of awareness. What then was this 'dead mind'?

Shifu said that the dead mind was one that had become dead to attachments or, better put, a mind in which attachments had died. One should not differentiate this mind from ordinary mind, for it is simply free from the dependencies that bind it to wants based in ignorance. Once freed, the mind becomes an awareness of clarity with unobscured insight into its own nature.

Did this mean it had no thoughts, I asked. No, thought remains. Indeed there is always thought, however quiet it may have become. The difference lies in what thought concerns. Attached thoughts express themselves in wanting or not wanting and they move about quickly. There is division and divisiveness. In a calmed mind thought remains, but there is less conflict and it moves slowly. It may even become so slow as to be undetectable, but it is there nonetheless, latent. Even under the Bodhi Tree thought was present. The sutras show clearly that the Buddha was aware of his experiences in a way that could be expressed in thought. The essence of the contrast does not lie in the presence or absence of thought but in something else.

I said, 'What happens then in the moment of "seeing the nature"? Something has gone absent at this time. If it is not thought, what is it?'

Shifu replied that it was the self, or rather the sense of self, that had gone absent. There is then no self to which experience can be referred nor any self as a subject of experience. There is no self-concern whatsoever. Absolutely no wanting therefore. There is a

pristine clarity of an awareness without any sort of desire, for there is no cognisable basis for one who could want.

Shifu went on, ‘The “me” is a sort of symbol, a script the thinking state invents to account for itself. It is just one, although a very major one, among many such scripts that appear to perception and thus to consciousness. When the mind puts it down, experience changes its quality, not so much its nature. It sees its own nature directly without a secondary activity of imputation and explanation.’

I remarked that when self-reference is present the mind appears in split form, self as subject, self as object. Understanding can then only be a form of explanation. Direct seeing means the end of dualism.

‘The “dead mind”’, Shifu continued, ‘is a mind without attachment and, in seeing its own nature, it has no self. The enlightened mind is nevertheless the ordinary mind of awareness: thought, perception and all other attributes remain in place. The beginner’s mind can be an enlightened mind as soon as attachments drop away. The presence of a self-cherishing mind is the hallmark of samsara while its absence is nirvana.’

I said, ‘This then has nothing to do with samadhi or trance states of any kind. Dogen was right to insist on no fundamental difference between sitting and enlightenment.’

Shifu said, ‘Only when a self-cherishing mentality dissolves of its own accord naturally and without willed effort can the insight occur. In a sense nothing special has happened – and that is why it is special. All one can do is the practice. Let the rest alone.’

I said, ‘Shifu, you make it all so easy!’ One of the monks present remarked, ‘That is the sign of a true master.’ Shifu just smiled, remarking that in our conversation he had had the strange experience of understanding what I was saying even though he did not really know the English words. There was, he said, direct communication.

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[27] Some of these reports have already been published anonymously in the Chan Magazine of the Chung Hwa Institute of Buddhist Culture, New York.

[28] See Crook, J.H. 1997. *Hilltops of the Hong Kong Moon.* London. Minerva. Chapter 14.
[29] *Wu* is the Chinese for the better-known Japanese word *mu.*
[30] For a fuller description see Crook, J.H. and J. Low. 1997. *The Yogins of Ladakh.* Delhi. Motilal Banarsidass. pp. 37–40.
[31] See Crook, J.H. 1997. *Hilltops of the Hong Kong Moon.* London. Minerva, p. 139.

[32] Author's verse from the liturgy of the Western Zen Retreat, Western Chan Fellowship.

POSTSCRIPT:
MASTER SHENG-YEN IN LONDON

On the Road to Town

We left Oxford and headed east on the main road to the big city. As I drove, I remarked to Shifu that I was not entirely sure of the route. London was full of one-way streets, traffic jams, post-rushhour congestion, and roadworks. I was afraid we might get off the streets I knew, and take a long time to get to our destination, which was my children's flat in Great Russell Street.

Shifu said, 'Have you driven the route before?' I told him that I had driven most of it previously, but could not say that I was familiar with it.

'Well then,' said Shifu, 'just drive it and see what happens.' At this I relaxed and just drove. Each roundabout and intersection posed no problem. Finding the correct lane came about without any mistakes. It became obvious which way I had to go. I drew up outside the flat at precisely the time I had predicted when we left Oxford barring any delays. The imagined delays had simply disappeared.

The Taxi Driver

It was a glorious sunny morning, a cloudless sky and flowers everywhere; one of those extraordinary city days when London appears like a bride dressed for a wedding. We came out into the street and hailed a taxi. We were off to the Embankment to see the River Thames. As I gave the instruction to the driver, I remarked, 'On a day like this it must be a joy to cruise around town'. He looked angrily at me as if I was a kind of idiot. 'You must be joking,' he said, 'heat, fumes, traffic too much for the road system. I'm sick of it and the weather makes it worse. Just think, I might be lying on a beach somewhere.' He looked so glum, I said no more. In the back of the taxi Shifu, Guo Yuan Shi and Lai Shun Yuan were talking animatedly

as we went along; theatres, Trafalgar Square with Nelson's Column, people, clothes. When we drew up beside the shining river with its elegant bridges I remembered Wordsworth's lines from 'Upon Westminster Bridge':

This City now doth like a garment wear
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.

I was paying the driver when he said to me, 'We must have met before. About a month ago I took some Chinese around the city and you must have been their host, as you are today. I like the Chinese. They have a friendly quality. It's been good driving you. And regarding what I said before, no, it's not a pleasure driving around town. It's just my job. But I am grateful to be able to do it. It might be otherwise.'

He was smiling. I didn't tell him I was sure we had never met.

The Buddhist Centre

Shifu wanted to buy some books for the library at the Chan Center in New York, so we went to a well-known Buddhist centre in the city where there is an excellent bookshop. As soon as I had introduced Shifu formally, the young receptionist seemed to undergo some psychological transformation. His rather off hand and preoccupied manner suddenly became one of ardent deference as he rushed to get us tea and biscuits, sit us in the best chairs and provide us with all the comforts of an honorific occasion. He showed us around the premises and, when we came to the staircase, he said to me confidentially, 'With a Zen master present should I stand aside and let him go upstairs first or should I show the way?' He was terribly anxious to get it right. I said, 'Since it is you who know the way, why not lead on?' With great relief he did so.

After we had left, I asked Shifu whether he had noticed the stir his presence had caused in the centre and the great anxiety to please that the younger staff had shown. I remarked how polite this

was in some sense, but how peculiar it felt after having just experienced a retreat. Shifu said, ‘The difficulty in such a place is that people are often selling the Dharma, not offering it.’

Horse Shit

We were walking in Parliament Square admiring the Palace of Westminster and the looming complex of the abbey buildings. A great swirl of traffic was thundering around the square, which is a main city thoroughfare. Huge lorries, delivery vans, taxis, government limousines, elegant cars of the yuppie generation and the scruffy ones of the lesser orders all poured around and around in an endless procession. Suddenly, in amongst the turning wheels, I noticed a pile of horse dung quite undisturbed by all the movement. It seemed incredible that a living horse should have passed that way so recently in such traffic and left so clear a testimony to its presence. I experienced the glimmering of a Zen paradox.

Turning to Shifu, I drew his attention to the unlikely pile saying, ‘Shifu. Look! Here’s a pile of horse shit, but where’s the horse?’

Shifu looked at it and said, ‘What need have we of the horse?’

Glossary

Bodhicitta Literally ‘awakened mind’; a term used in Mahayana Buddhism to indicate the arousal of the intent to achieve enlightenment. See **bodhisattva**.

Bodhidharma The 28th patriarch of Indian Buddhism and the first patriarch of Chinese Chan Buddhism. He arrived in China c. 470–543 ce and, after some wandering, settled in north China in the Shaolin Monastery, where he is said to have meditated for nine years before a wall. He is widely regarded as the founder of Chan, and hence Zen, Buddhism.

Bodhisattva Literally ‘awakened being,’ a practitioner of the Mahayana tradition who has vowed to postpone the attainment of nirvana for the sake of helping sentient beings.

Caodong (Wade-Giles: T’sao-tung, Jap. Soto) Along with the Linji (Jap. Rinzai) one of the two major existing schools of Chan (Jap. Zen) Buddhism. The school was named after its two founders, Master Caoshan (Wade-Giles: T’sao-shan) and Master Dongshan (Wade-Giles: Tung-shan), hence ‘Caodong’. One of the distinguishing marks of the Caodong School is its emphasis on the practice of Silent Illumination, although practices such as *gong’an* and *huatou* were also common.

Chan (Wade-Giles: Ch’an, Jap. Zen) The practice of meditative absorption, transliterated from the Sanskrit ‘dhyana’. Over centuries of gradual adaptation in China, the doctrines and practices of Indian Buddhism evolved into the Chan tradition. By the time of the Tang dynasty (618–907), Chan was a separate school claiming to be ‘outside the scriptures’. During the Song dynasty (960–1279) Chan transmitted to Japan, where it is called Zen. In Korea it is called Son. Being in the Mahayana tradition, Chan emphasises meditation while embracing bodhisattva conduct as the ideal of Buddhist practice. Chan emphasises the

direct experience of prajna, or insight into the nature of reality as empty – devoid of selfnature. Experientially, Chan (sometimes rendered as chan, with lower case 'c', to distinguish from the 'school') is the realisation of wisdom, where one leaves discrimination behind and experiences the ineffable true emptiness of everything (emptiness as form, form as emptiness).

Gong'an (Ch.) (Wade-Giles: kung-an, Jap. koan) Literally 'public case'; a saying or anecdote from the records of the Chan masters that is used as a means of investigating the nature of enlightened mind (*t'san chan*). The purpose of the exercise is to focus the mind and create a 'mass of doubt' in the meditator, to the point that all attachments and dualistic thinking are dropped, and the practitioner experiences a breakthrough – the direct perception of Buddhist 'emptiness'.

Heart Sutra The *Prajnaparamita-hrdaya Sutra*, or *Heart Sutra*, one of the most important sutras of Mahayana Buddhism, which expounds the principle of emptiness as the fundamental nature of all phenomena, including the self.

Hinayana Literally 'small vehicle', the epithet given by Mahayana to the earlier schools of Buddhism, in which the main emphasis of practice was to achieve personal liberation in nirvana, i.e., the ideal of the arhat. This is in contrast to the Mahayana School, which espouses the bodhisattva ideal. See **Mahayana**.

Huatou (Ch.) Literally 'head of a thought'; often a simple phrase, or even a single word, often a brief question, that is used as a method of meditation, the purpose being to focus the mind of the practitioner and to arouse the 'mass of doubt' that can be a precursor to an experience of awakening or enlightenment. A *huatou* is similar to a *gong'an* and the two terms are sometimes used interchangeably. See **gong'an** and **koan**.

Inka (Jap.) Term used in Japanese Zen to denote the 'seal' of approval bestowed by a master (roshi) to a disciple to confirm the disciple's experience(s) of awakening or enlightenment. *Inka* also connotes that the master has approved the recipient as someone who is qualified to teach the Dharma.

Karma Literally 'action', the Buddhist teaching that all our actions have a potential for creating consequences that may manifest as

effects in the future, or future lifetimes; and also that our current experiences are the effects of karma created in the past, or past lifetimes.

Kensho (Jap.) (Ch. jianxin) An experience of 'emptiness' as buddha-nature; an insight comprising enlightenment, a state of awareness without self-reference or dualistic thought and therefore ineffable. Differs from **kaiwu** (Ch.) or **satori** (Jap.) which terms refer to a deeper or more sustained condition.

Koan See **gong'an**

Linji (Ch.) (Jap. Rinzai) One of the two major schools of Chan Buddhism, founded by Master Linji Yixuan (d. 866–7) along with the Caodong School. The school is most widely identified with the teaching of 'sudden enlightenment' and the use of **koans**.

Mahayana Literally 'great vehicle', the name for the later school of Buddhism, which espoused the way of the bodhisattva, as contrasted with the way of the arhat, espoused by the socalled Hinayana tradition. See **Hinayana**.

Rinzai The Japanese Zen reference to the Linji School of Chinese Chan. See **Linji**.

Satori (Jap.) Insight into 'emptiness' or buddha-nature. Satori is often used in Western writing as synonymous with *kensho.* However, it seems that a practitioner's first experience of 'awakening' is referred to as *kensho* whereas satori suggests a deeper, or full enlightenment. See **kensho**.

Shamata Meditative method of calming the mind in order to gain meditative insight, most frequently using methods of observing one's breath during meditation.

Shikantaza (Jap.) See **Silent Illumination**

Silent Illumination (Ch. mo chao) Method of meditation in which the practitioner places full awareness on the act of 'just sitting', in order to bring the mind to a state of supreme calmness (silence), and deep insight into its own nature (illumination). In Japanese Zen, a related practice is called *shikantaza. Mo chao* may also be translated as 'shining silence'.

Soto See **Caodong**

Tathagatagarbha Literally 'germ or womb of buddhahood'; synonymous with 'buddha-nature' as the inherent potential of all

sentient beings for enlightenment.

T'san Chan Activity of investigating the nature of mind through a meditation method, especially that of *gong'an* or *huatou.* See **gong'an** and **huatou**.

Vipassana A form of meditative practice to gain insight into the three distinguishing marks (seals) of all Dharmas (phenomena); i.e. impermanence, suffering, and no-self (emptiness).

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