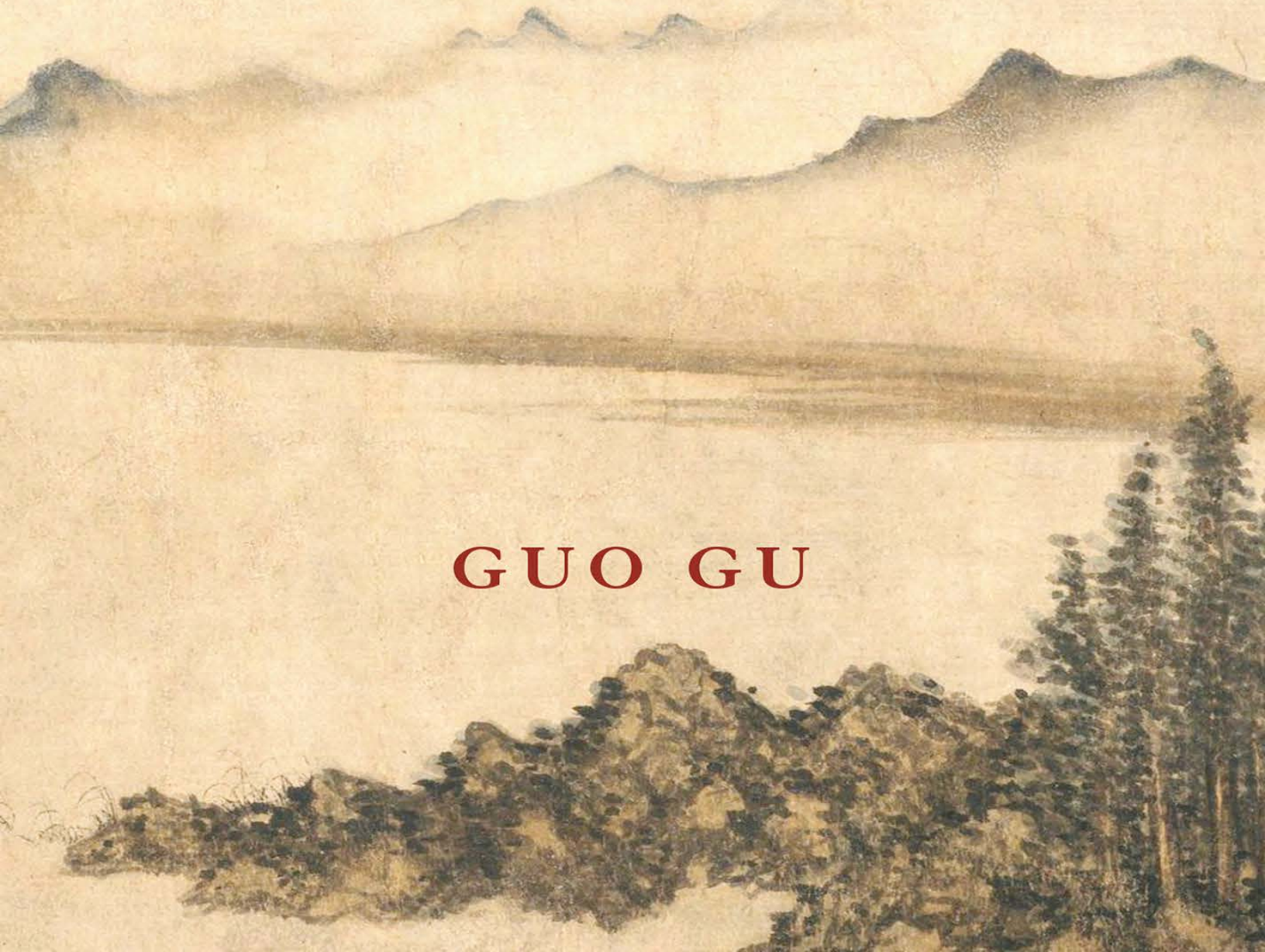
THE ESSENCE OF CHAN

A Guide to Life and Practice according to the Teachings of Bodhidharma



GUO GU

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To Chan Master Sheng Yen

(1931–2009)

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INTRODUCTION

Everything has a cause, and every cause arises because different conditions have come together. Nothing is haphazard or random; one thing leads to another in a chain of events, such as the sequence of events that caused you to select this book. In other words, the reason you are reading these words is due to the ripening of many conditions.

Sometimes the conditions that arise are favorable, sometimes not. These conditions are not inherently good or bad, and their meanings can change. When conditions change, your experience also changes. The working of causes and conditions, and cause and effect, is the core principle of the Chan (Zen) Buddhist teaching. It is also the heart of the dynamic teachings of Bodhidharma, the first lineage master in the Chan tradition, who came from India to China in the fifth century C.E.

Buddhism offers many different teachings. A wide variety of schools have evolved from these teachings; Chan Buddhism is only one of them. Some of you may be more familiar with the word Zen, which is the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese word *Chan*. Chan is usually understood to be a tradition of practice within Chinese Buddhism that emerged in the seventh and eighth centuries C.E., mainly as a reaction against Buddhist scholasticism.

The Indian sage Bodhidharma came to China at a time when Buddhism was beginning to flourish widely, and many Chinese clerics were writing extensive treatises about Buddhist theories of doctrine and practice. Bodhidharma's teachings cut through the theories. They aimed directly at the awakening that Buddha Shakyamuni (the historical Buddha) experienced under the Bodhi

tree: namely, that we are intrinsically free from the fetters of vexations and afflictions, and that our true nature is already perfect and undefiled. Similarly, when a cloud covers the sun, the sky's spaciousness is not affected by the cloud, nor by whether the sun is visible or not. Chan methods and teachings point to the realization that who we truly are can never be covered by the clouds of vexations and afflictions. The point is that we should not get bogged down by the clouds, but instead we should see the big picture—the sky. This is essentially the message of Bodhidharma.

A Short History of Buddhism

After the Buddha's passing in India in the fifth century B.C.E., Indian Buddhist monks traveled southward to many other South Asian countries and spread his religion during the following centuries. Buddhism also went west as far as Pakistan and farther northwest as well. But causes and conditions prevented Buddhism from taking root there, largely because of politics and competition with indigenous religious traditions. The Chinese were introduced to the Buddhism of central Asia and India sometime between the first century B.C.E. and the first century C.E.—five hundred years after the Buddha's time. Because China was such an influential nation, Buddhism spread from there to Korea, Japan, and the rest of East Asia. Later in the seventh and eighth centuries, Buddhism arrived in Tibet.

However, it took a good five hundred years, from the first to the sixth century C.E., for the Chinese to begin to understand Buddhism on its own terms. The main issue concerned the Buddhist texts that the Chinese had at their disposal. Buddhism is unique because it has thousands of scriptures, not just a single text. Buddhist missionaries who went to China belonged to different traditions of Buddhism in India and central Asia, and so they brought a great variety of scriptures and treatises with them, and these texts were then translated into Chinese. In modern terms, this would be as if

someone went to a new country and brought a random selection of textbooks from different languages, plus chose books that were designed for different levels of readers, from elementary school texts to college textbooks and graduate-level PhD theses. So not only did the Chinese have texts from different traditions of Buddhism, often with contradictory teachings, but these texts addressed Buddhism from a range of viewpoints, from extremely basic teachings to complex esoteric rituals. As a result, the Chinese were not offered a coherent system of Buddhism, and their confusion about this new religion remained for several centuries.

In addition, for many centuries Buddhism in China was really just an extension of the indigenous religions that already existed there. When Buddhism arrived in China in the first century, it had to compete with centuries-old Confucian and Daoist traditions, and therefore it had to reconcile with these teachings. Some elements of these indigenous traditions were absorbed into Buddhism, and some were modified. In the beginning, the Chinese translated key Buddhist terms by using their indigenous knowledge and existing practice traditions. For example, China already had various religious communities that practiced contemplative techniques such as macrobiotic and alchemical diet training. The elite, namely those educated in the classic Confucian tradition, also had their own eremitic traditions of self-cultivation, in which some practitioners lived in retirement in the mountains as hermits and practiced different kinds of meditation and contemplation. In the first phase of the Buddhist transmission in China, the Chinese basically appropriated Buddhist teachings to further their own understanding of themselves and the universe. Certain essential Buddhist teachings, such as the nature of emptiness and interdependence, were rendered imprecisely as the Dao, or "the Way," and the concept of the Buddha was understood as the "great immortal." This blending of Buddhism and indigenous Chinese religions further muddied the Chinese's understanding of this new religion for several hundred years.

Beginning in the fifth century C.E., Buddhism began to take root in China as a distinct tradition, separate from Chinese approaches to

self-cultivation. During this period, there was a great flourishing of Buddhist doctrine, as well as many theories about how to classify Buddhist teachings. As more missionaries came to China and more accurate translations began to appear, people gained a deeper appreciation of the Buddhist path. Buddhism in China then entered the phase of scholasticism. As people theorized and clarified the teachings, there emerged a particular Chinese Buddhist formulation called *panjiao,* or "doctrinal classification." In order to comprehend the whole of Buddhism, the Chinese began dividing translated Buddhist texts into a coherent hierarchal system according to levels of difficulty, from elementary to most advanced.

Based on these various teachings, many different Buddhist schools emerged. By the end of the sixth century, monastic institutions had grown in number from several thousand to some thirty thousand. Although influential clerics engaged in Buddhist practice, they were more interested in clarifying and classifying the teachings. While their efforts were genuine and necessary, Buddhism could truly take root in China only if people actually experienced the Buddhist truth beyond intellectualization.

It was against this background that Bodhidharma propagated the Chan teachings. By the seventh and eighth centuries Chan had become a distinct tradition that focused on practicing and actualizing the Buddhist path. Chan soon became one of the most powerful schools of Buddhism, spreading to the rest of East Asia and then to the West.

Chan and Its Fourfold Axiom

From the Chan perspective, the goal of life is to live fully as a human being, with one's inherent potential completely developed. This means to become a buddha. To become a buddha means to "wake up." The goal is not to be reborn in a blissful place such as a heavenly kingdom with Brahmin or other gods. The goal is to be awakened, to realize one's full capacity as a human being and one's inherent

potential for wisdom and compassion. To become a buddha is to be free from the bondage of suffering. We may say, therefore, that Buddhism is a very humanistic way to realize our full potential.

The fourfold axiom of Chan, which defines this tradition of awakening in wisdom and compassion, is:

1. A transmission outside of doctrine
2. Not dependent on words or language (nor on concepts, labels, or categories)
3. Which directly points to the mind by
4. Seeing one's nature in order to realize buddhahood.

These four lines are attributed to Bodhidharma. Analyzing different versions of Chan manuscripts through textual criticism, historians have come to the conclusion that Bodhidharma probably did not say this, but that he most likely said something similar. It is also possible that Chan practitioners in later generations pieced together these four essential axioms or core principles from Bodhidharma's tradition. For our purposes, the genesis of the fourfold axiom is less important than the message. These lines have become the trademark of Chan Buddhism, and together they serve as an important principle for practitioners.

The Chan tradition stems from the imposing figure of Bodhidharma, the alleged founder of the tradition who came to China as a Buddhist missionary in the fifth or sixth century C.E. Unlike other missionary monks who brought along stacks of texts, Bodhidharma brought only one: the *Lankavatara Sutra*. He derived his teachings from this scripture, which had an enormous impact on early Chan history. His message was simple: Buddhism must be practiced and realized, not theorized based on concepts—hence the axiom of "not dependent on words or language."

However, this message could exist only on the foundation of Buddhist doctrine. Chan, with its insistence on meditation, is built on the basic tenets and teachings of Buddhism. Without this foundation, Chan could not have established itself. We can compare

this with constructing a building: we cannot build the third floor before the first and second floors are built. The same is true for the course of Buddhist practice. It does not matter with what tradition we align ourselves; in order to live fully as a buddha, to be free from the suffering of vexations, we cannot ignore the basic tenets and teachings. We have to start by understanding the nature of suffering and its causes. Then we can try to remove these causes while simultaneously strengthening those aspects of ourselves that make us wise. The Buddhist path is a process of self-actualization, or spiritual maturation.

From a Buddhist perspective, we can be completely free from suffering and afflictions because we are originally free. In order to realize our original freedom, the foundation of our self must become stable, healthy, and grounded. Then we will be able to correctly understand what the Buddha taught. We can then take from his teachings what is useful, and leave behind those things that are not, or that we do not understand. Then, little by little, as we use the teachings and grasp the various concepts, words, and language, we can become free from concepts, words, and language.

This process can be compared to learning martial arts. Only after we have mastered the forms to the point where we don't even think about them can we aspire to high-level concepts such as "My enemy and I are one." In advanced practice, we perceive no enemy in the midst of combat; we do not think of "him" and "me" in opposition. If we are completely one with the opponent, it is like the left hand working with the right. We know exactly how to respond, and we don't have to think about it. But we cannot practice at this level without having first mastered the fundamental forms.

Another analogy is playing tennis. If we want to be good at tennis, we don't start playing against a world champion! We would never be able to return the shots. We have to practice hitting the ball against a wall first—working out our muscles, mastering our strokes—and then we can practice our technique with someone who plays well. As we progress, the better our opponent is, the better we will become.

So when we practice sitting meditation or mindfulness in daily life, we are building a foundation. It's like playing tennis against a wall: we have to apply the teachings in our daily life. By doing so, we can be happier and lead healthier lives, free from vexations and the causes of suffering. Thus we can bring forth our full potential as human beings.

The good news is that practicing Buddhism is easier than learning martial arts or tennis. We already have the full potential of a buddha, because a buddha is simply a fully developed human being. Just as an infant is bound to become an adult, so it is with buddhahood. We are born as humans, and with proper rearing, we're bound to become a buddha.

The potential within us for buddhahood is characterized by wisdom and compassion. True compassion and true wisdom do not happen as a result of becoming very smart or studying hard. In fact, it is not necessary to be smart; an illiterate person can be a wise person. Wisdom and compassion are our inherent nature, and the fourfold axiom of Chan is a way to help us realize this truth.

Threefold Study and Chan

The proper way to rear ourselves into buddhas is by cultivating the threefold study of precepts, meditation, and wisdom. All the different systems of Buddhist teaching contain these three categories. There is the traditional way to cultivate this threefold study, and then there is the Chan way.

According to the traditional way, the five core precepts are no killing, no stealing, no sexual misconduct, no false speech, and no indulging in intoxicants. Precepts are not commandments; they are aids to help us develop focus and clarity during meditation. Precepts discipline our attachments and craving. They help us to distinguish between what we need and what we want, and to rid ourselves of the source of our vexations and trouble.

In our daily life, we are easily bewildered by our greed, aversion, and ignorance toward objects in our environment. We lose sight of what is important in life; we see only things in a superficial way, and thus we are manipulated by the push and pull of our environment. When we find ourselves in favorable situations, we become happy; when we encounter difficulties, we become despondent. In other words, our happiness is completely at the mercy of the environment, and as a result we lose our inherent nature.

The nature of precepts is to ensure that the mind is reined in and that we develop self-mastery, independent from our mind's attraction, repulsion, and ignorance toward the objects in our environment. The precepts help us to maintain a life in harmony with ourselves and others. By upholding them, we live without regret, guilt, and distraction—all of which induces focus and clarity. As a result of cultivating precepts, our inner concentration and ability to meditate develop, and we become less attached to superficial sense objects in the external environment.

When the light of the mind is turned inward, awareness naturally develop, which prepares the ground for meditation. Developing focus and clarity allows us to regain our true nature, which is originally free from scatteredness and delusion. I often give this analogy: Scattered sunlight has limited power; you can get a tan only if you're exposed to it over a period of time. However, if you set a magnifying glass under the sun, you can really feel the sun's power because you've focused its energy. Once the sunlight is focused, it can be used to accomplish many tasks, such as igniting paper and generating electricity. The purpose of meditation is the same: to focus the mind when it is scattered.

When the mind is focused through meditation, its inherent clarity shines forth; we call this inherent clarity "wisdom." Once wisdom arises, insight is generated. Wisdom means the ability to see the world as it actually exists, interconnected and free, without being clouded by our own self-referential preferences of likes and dislikes, judgments and categories, words and language. Through our upbringing, emotional and psychological baggage, experience, and

knowledge, we color the world the way we want it to be. For example, as a rule, we befriend those who benefit us, and label "enemy" those who don't. This is not the way things actually are; these criteria are wrong. Things exist interdependently, apart from our labeling. A criminal has some good qualities, and even the humblest person may have a trait people don't like. Wisdom is the penetrative insight into how things actually are: dynamic, unfixed, interdependent, and inseparable.

We call this insight the wisdom of emptiness. Realizing this wisdom frees us from our own suffering and the causes of our anguish. It also unleashes our inherent compassion. That is the Buddhist task, the aim of all the traditions of Buddhism, whether in China, Korea, Japan, Tibet, or anywhere else in the world.

Chan is considered the mind teaching of Buddhism; it is called a "sudden path" because it aims directly at the realization of the nature of mind, or who we are. The Chan practice of the threefold study is distinct because it simplifies the extraneous teachings, rituals, and apparatus of traditional Buddhism. The Chan cultivation of the threefold study is not limited to specific acts; it is applicable to every moment of our life. Chan is also unique in that it emphasizes practicing the three aspects of threefold study simultaneously, instead of practicing them sequentially. To practice precepts is to be free from fixations of good and bad, craving and hate. To practice meditation is to be free from distractions. To practice wisdom is to not obstruct the nature of the mind. In Chan, this threefold study is practiced together as a way to realize the nature of mind.

When we meditate with penetrative insight, we come to understand directly, to realize the nature or essence of mind as intrinsically free. We realize that we're already buddhas. Thus, there is a direct relationship between our mind, enlightenment, and buddhahood. This is the method embodied in Bodhidharma's *Two Entries and Four Practices*.

In order to practice the threefold study simultaneously as it is practiced in Chan, it is necessary to deeply understand that all things are intrinsically without fixations, independence, and separateness.

That is to say, everything changes and everything is connected. So when we encounter difficulties in life, there's no need to fixate on the negative, because what appears to be negative may turn out to be a blessing or a learning experience. When life presents us with challenges—whether from our boss, colleagues, family members, or friends—if we can adapt to situations and recognize their connections to other aspects of our life, we will not give rise to vexations. In fact, solutions to our challenges will appear if we have no fixed ideas about how we want to solve them.

From this point of view, when we meditate, there is no need to get bogged down by our wandering thoughts. It's natural for the mind to think of this and that. When we're not attached to our thoughts and we return to our meditation method, the mind naturally settles down. Why? Because the mind is originally without wandering thoughts. Thoughts liberate themselves without our doing anything about them.

From the perspective of Chan, our minds are originally free. The transitory, shifting nature of our thoughts and delusions shows how the thoughts themselves are empty of permanent, independent, separate existence. There are many meditation practices and spiritual paths that teach how to turn off thoughts and vexations. But in Chan practice, there is no need to suppress thoughts, and there's also no need to follow them and be swayed by them.

The Chan approach teaches us to recognize the nature of mind so that we will no longer be troubled by all our thoughts and chattering. In doing so, the mind naturally regains its calm clarity. What prevents our mind from becoming clear and settled is our attachment and aversion to the thoughts and chattering, which are caused by a misunderstanding of the mind's true nature. When we understand the mind's true nature and practice accordingly, we regain the natural luminosity and stillness of the mind. All the teachings, including those in Bodhidharma's text, point to this nature of mind.

It is important to be clear about the use of *mind* in this context. Many translators use the term *mind-heart*. What is the mind-heart?

It is difficult to find the proper word in the English language because two words, *mind* and *heart,* are used to represent what the Chinese consider to be a single concept. In Chinese, the word *xin* or *hsin* signifies a combination of mind and heart, and also includes the physical organ called the heart. All these meanings are embedded in these single Chinese characters. Our modern sensibilities tell us that body and mind are different and that there are distinct functions of heart, brain, and mind. But all of these are related and inseparable. For the purpose of this book, I will use *mind* to cover all these associated meanings of heart, brain, and mind, and I will use it to refer to the workings of our whole being.

To explain the nature of the mind, I often give the analogy of "wetness" as the nature of water. Water appears in many forms: still or flowing; clear or muddy; cold, hot, or tepid; solid, liquid, or gas. But the nature of water does not change. Whether the water is muddy or frozen into a block of ice, its nature is still wetness. Whether the water is manifesting as waves that are big, turbid, and dangerous, or whether the water is collected in an autumn pond that is cool, clear, and still, there is absolutely no difference—the nature of water is the same. So the key to Chan practice, and the key to understanding its various concepts, is to see clearly that the teaching is pointing to the true nature of our mind.

What happens when we understand the nature of mind? We become free from all the chaos, vexations, and distractions that disturb our natural state of being. The point of sitting meditation is not to get rid of wandering thoughts or to deal with scatteredness. Instead, it is to let go of the grasping hand in the midst of scattered thoughts, in the midst of drowsiness or bliss, and to see these states for what they are, without attaching to them and identifying them as being you. We observe their coming and passing away, and we see that they are always changing and interdependent. Not trying to get rid of wandering thoughts or scatteredness is practicing the precept of being free from fixations of good and bad. Seeing thoughts for what they are, without attaching to them or being distracted by them, is practicing meditation. Recognizing the nature of thoughts as

always changing and interdependent is practicing the wisdom of not obstructing the nature of mind. If, however, we are affected by scattered thoughts and try to suppress them, we will have even more vexations because we are further agitating the mind and obstructing its true nature.

The fact is that our mind is originally free from the fixations, attachments, labels, and concepts that bind us. For example, when our mind is stable and free from scattered thoughts, the degree of pain or physical discomfort we experience is drastically reduced. We're able to sit through pain because the mind is relaxed, settled, and clear. In this state, our attachment to the body is also reduced and fewer conceptual thoughts occur. We no longer experience our pain under the label "pain." Usually when people feel pain, they label it as "pain." But when the mind is subtle, clear, and focused, we have no words or concepts; what we experience changes from moment to moment to moment. Where is the pain? It is just a word.

Of course, these changing experiences can be identified: we may feel as if someone is jabbing us with a knife; this is followed by throbbing, then numbness, which turns to soreness; and suddenly we feel coolness. The peak experience of pain—for example, when one is stabbed with a knife—is actually coolness. I don't mean for you to stab yourself, of course, but try sitting through the pain. If you identify pain using labels and words and you dwell on these concepts, your whole body will tense up and burn. But if you have no conceptual elaborations and attachments, the experience will change and you will be able to watch the changing sensations. Instead of your whole body becoming tense and then burning with discomfort, your pain will be localized to specific areas of the body, perhaps the ankle or the knee.

The degree of suffering and discomfort that we feel depends purely on how attached we are to concepts and ideas. When we attach to them, we become enslaved by them, and we obstruct the true nature of mind. For example, we'll experience a lot more pain if we do something that we don't want to do or something that we are forced to do. It is because we already have in mind what we want and what

we don't want. We suffer because we have these fixations. If we don't affix labels and fixed ideas to pain, then this "thing" we call pain will not solidify. If we give our feelings and sensations a label, the body becomes tense and we become subjected to this label.

Allow yourself to be open. The labels we use are just words, just descriptions of the many possibilities that we can experience. Similarly, when we stop labeling an experience—that is, when we stop identifying it as favorable or unfavorable, bad or good, based on our own preferences and opinions—then new perspectives will arise. We will be open to other possibilities and will experience different causes and conditions.

Most of the time, however, people are unable to free themselves from their perceptions. They identify themselves as being their experiences and words. Happy thoughts come, they become happy. Sad thoughts come, they become sad. They are not free from the habitual mechanism of their thought processes. This is attachment.

Buddhism—and Chan in particular—seeks to be free from this kind of attachment. The problem is not sadness or happiness; nor is the problem the object of the feeling or the emotion. Some people think that Buddhists, particularly Chan and Zen practitioners, have no emotions. This is not so. Joy and sadness naturally arise in relation to our experiences with others. The problem is that most people attach to these feelings and thereby cause themselves or others suffering. Some people misconstrue fleeting emotions and experiences as being who they are. It is this attachment to a fixed identity that binds us. For instance, if we always feel self-pity or have low self-esteem, our identification with these emotional states and our attachment to them will mold us into a certain kind of person. When we see the world, we will tend to see it only in this way. But if we free ourselves from these concepts, we will be able to have new experiences. We may even see that pain is actually quite rich, that it is dynamic and full of changing sensations.

Perhaps a better example would be eating food that we enjoy. People usually eat with the mind of preference and therefore cannot really taste their food. When the mind is quiet, however, our

experience becomes clarified, more open and acute. We can actually taste the food. This is a by-product of being free from the rigidity of our attachments to things, which causes us to experience them in one way only.

Because of these attachments, we see things only one-dimensionally; it is impossible to see them as they truly are.

In Chan, these fixations, preferences, and rigidities are referred to as "self." That's why Chan Buddhism talks about no-self. To see things clearly, we must keep our self out of the equation. The fewer fixations we have in our mind, the more clearly we perceive things "out there" and see them as new, fresh, connected, and inseparable from other experiences.

We will understand the true nature of things only when we can see them clearly. We begin Chan practice of the threefold study by relaxing our fixations and learning to be free from self-attachment. In this sense, Chan practice is very different from practices that cut off thoughts and turn off the mind—in other words, temporarily suppress something—or from practices that create a blissful state. These exercises have nothing to do with Chan nor with the nature of things as they truly are, which is without self-referentiality. From a Chan perspective we are neither subjective (interpreting things our own way) nor objective (looking at things in an unbiased manner). Rather, we are free from fixed views about experiences, knowledge, and concepts, whether looked at objectively or subjectively.

We can use the analogy of a mirror to help us understand this. A mirror does not have any particular view—it just reflects. When objects come in front of it, they are not superimposed with a fixed image. If a mirror had a view, a permanent image would be etched into it, and we would be unable to see what the mirror reflects. Similarly, the awakened mind has no attachments; its perception is not colored with fixed notions of self and others. However, just because we have no fixed attachments, this does not mean we cannot discern things around us. We do not become ignorant, just like the mirror does not lose its ability to reflect. The awakened mind responds selflessly to whatever appears. To respond without self-

reference means to respond with wisdom and compassion, because such a response is without discrimination.

The threefold study of precepts, meditation, and wisdom is the basic teaching of Buddhism. We must have this foundation before we receive the direct teaching of Chan. Without a foundation, we cannot realize wisdom nor truly cultivate compassion. We must first live an ethical and healthy life, develop concentration, and reflect on the teachings about the nature of reality. We first face the self, then we mature the self, and only then can we realize no-self, which is the heart of Chan and the core of Buddhist wisdom and compassion. This teaching is necessary because people are suffering from holding on to a strong sense of a permanent, independent, separate self. Those who have an unstable mind or a weak sense of self need to develop a stabler, more ethical identity that benefits themselves and others. On that foundation, one can realize Chan.

The Legend of Bodhidharma

Bodhidharma was either a Persian or South Indian monk. The several existing historical records about his life do not agree as to his origins. These records do concur, however, that around 527 C.E. there was a Western monk named Bodhidharma who taught meditation at Mount Song in Luoyang, China, and who passed away in China at the ripe age of 150. According to one record, he left behind several texts, one of which is *Two Entries and Four Practices*.

But Bodhidharma was no ordinary missionary. News of Bodhidharma's arrival in China soon reached Emperor Wu, a great patron of Buddhism. The emperor was very proud of his accomplishments, which included building monasteries and sponsoring translation projects. He wanted to meet this famous learned monk and summoned Bodhidharma to court. A spirited dialogue supposedly ensued.

Bodhidharma arrived at court looking rather tattered in a sashed robe, unkempt beard, and bare feet, as was the custom of Indian

Buddhist monks. The emperor told Bodhidharma that he had been working very hard to establish Buddhism in China. He asked him how much merit he had earned.

"None whatsoever!" Bodhidharma replied.

What a crude thing to say! This was no way to answer an emperor; Bodhidharma's head could have been chopped off for such a reply.

Emperor Wu was astonished. "None whatsoever?" he pressed. "Was it a total waste, then, to do all the good deeds that I did?" At that time, Buddhism was understood not only as a system of beliefs and practices, but also as an effective means of accumulating merit.

When Bodhidharma replied to the emperor "None whatsoever!" he gave us his first teaching: Our true nature does not increase or decrease, because all things are interdependent and interconnected. All deeds are empty—not because they are void of meaning, but because nothing is fixed and separate.

The *None* in "None whatsoever!" is *wu* in Chinese. In Japanese it is *mu*, which means "empty." Bodhidharma's reply is a play on words: "How much merit do I have?" "Empty!" But is it really nothing? No—in emptiness there is fullness because everything is connected. A person is able to generate merit because of the merit of everyone else. In the emperor's case, everyone in his kingdom, including his officials, his magistrates, and his workers, was involved in his projects; therefore all of them had also generated merit. The emperor thought that there was an independent "I" who could gain something; surely he had destroyed all of his religious merit. This is how we usually function, from the point of view of "me," "my," "you," and "other."

Chan Buddhism says that these three aspects of who we *think* we are—permanent, separate, and independent—are mere assumptions. This assumption of "I" or a permanent self is so deeply ingrained into our wiring that we think it is real. But our true nature and the true nature of all things is that we are not separate but interconnected, not independent but interdependent, not permanent but impermanent. Guo Gu is made up of non–Guo Gu. All my thoughts,

opinions, and experiences come from my interactions with everything else. My own views are just a collection of other views.

But views are not the problem. The problem is that we live our life on the basis of attachment to an ingrained assumption and identity, namely that we possess a permanent "I." When we have thoughts such as "my merit" and "your merit," there is something to be gained and lost; there is competition and resentment; there is success and failure. This is how we create suffering.

After Bodhidharma said, "None whatsoever," the emperor continued: "You are a Buddhist monk in Buddhist robes, yet you do not even know your own doctrine?! Who are you? Who is it that stands before me?"

Bodhidharma replied, "Don't know!"

To know suggests a "me" who knows, as well as an "it" to be known. It includes a label, a concept, a "self," an "other." Hence, "Don't know!"

The emperor was already irritated by Bodhidharma's first answer, but now he was just confused. He knew that Bodhidharma was a great monk, yet Bodhidharma's first reply seemed to show that he did not know his own doctrine, and his second answer showed that he did not even know who he was!

Actually, Bodhidharma gave us his second teaching with his reply "Don't know." Had he said, "I am Bodhidharma, the famous Indian monk," the emperor probably would have bowed to him. But Bodhidharma did not say that. Nor did he say, "I don't know." By saying simply "Don't know," Bodhidharma, like a sword, slashed through all conceptualizations; all oppositional assumptions of subject and object such as "you" and "I"; all ideas of time and space, of now and then, and here and there. In one fell swoop, he cleared the mind of all the unnecessary clutter that prevents us from seeing our true nature. But the emperor did not understand. When Bodhidharma eventually left, the emperor needed his adviser to explain it to him verbally and conceptually, the way I am doing here.

We may think we know ourselves and others, but really we do not. Because of our rigid assumptions, we categorize things in terms of good and bad—specifically, things that are good or bad for "me." Because of this discrimination and self-referentiality, we cannot really see the people in front of us, let alone our true nature. We have a fixed image in our mirror, and this fixed image always gets in the way of reflecting what's actually around us.

Bodhidharma was testing the understanding of the emperor, who failed miserably, unfortunately. Through Bodhidharma's answers —"None whatsoever" and "Don't know"—he was revealing the highest Buddhist truths, which are selflessness and not grasping after expedient teachings, such as doing good deeds in order to accrue merit and gain higher rebirths. To have merit assumes that there is someone performing the good deed, that there is someone else receiving the benefit, that there are sentient beings, and that there is an actual meritorious act. These four aspects—self, others, sentient beings, and the act itself—are what Buddhism refers to as the Four Emptinesses.

Bodhidharma was not crazy; he was just testing the emperor. In fact, he was speaking in perfect accord with Buddhist doctrine. But the emperor, not understanding, replied, "Since you do not know, please leave!" This was actually a very kind way of dismissing Bodhidharma. In those days, anyone speaking thus to the emperor would have been beheaded. It was therefore gracious and unusual for the emperor to give such a break to this strange-looking monk.

It is said that after Bodhidharma left, the emperor conveyed the exchange to his advisers. One of them was a learned Buddhist monk who, upon hearing the words "None whatsoever," joined his palms together and said, "Bodhidharma gave the true teachings." The emperor, of course, requested that Bodhidharma return to court immediately. He offered to build Bodhidharma a monastery where he could live and teach the emperor and everyone else at court. But it was too late. Nothing would bring Bodhidharma back.

Bodhidharma traveled to many different places in China and witnessed firsthand how people actually practiced Buddhism. He

came across a mix of Buddhist doctrines, translations, good deeds performed for religious merit, and intellectual debates about right and wrong—in other words, all the constructs people cling to that have nothing to do with ultimate truth. Bodhidharma eventually found a cave behind Mount Song in Luoyang and supposedly meditated there for nine years, waiting to transmit his teachings to the right person. That person turned out to be Huike (487–593), who later became the second patriarch of the Chan lineage.

Legend has it that when Huike first sought out Bodhidharma for his teachings, he waited outside Bodhidharma's cave on his knees in the snow. Days passed. Bodhidharma remained in his cave without receiving Huike. Finally, Huike showed his resolve by taking out his knife and amputating his arm. He declared, "Teacher, I am here to receive your teachings!"

At that moment, Bodhidharma acceded to his request. "What is it that you want?" he asked.

Huike replied, "I seek the Dharma."

Bodhidharma said: "Dharma? I have nothing to teach you. I have nothing to say."

Huike responded, "But my mind is not at ease. Please, pacify it for me." Before becoming a monk, Huike had been an army general who killed many people. No matter how hard he had tried to overcome his guilt by reciting sutras and practicing diligently, nothing helped. His mind was never at peace; dis-ease and guilt weighed heavily on him.

When Bodhidharma heard Huike's plea, he ordered, "Bring me your mind, and I will pacify it."

Upon hearing these words, Huike turned his awareness inward. He began to ask himself: Where is my mind? Who is it that is not at ease? Astonished, he replied, "I cannot find my mind!"

Bodhidharma said, "Then I have already pacified it!"

Hearing this, Huike became completely enlightened.

Huike had been holding on to something: "me" and "my" mind not being at ease. He thought he needed to find something outside of

himself in order to be cured, perhaps a meditation method or a particular teaching. He had hoped to hear some explanation of ultimate truth from Bodhidharma; he thought that surely Bodhidharma had something precious or special to give him. But Bodhidharma did not give him anything except the instruction: “If you want your mind at peace, then give me your mind.” Huike could not find his mind. Bodhidharma said: “No mind? Then you are at peace!”

Huike was ripe to receive this teaching. He had gone through the rigors of practice and had studied the precepts and scriptures. He must have encountered the teachings of no-self, emptiness, causes and conditions, karma, and so on. But all of a sudden the teaching was made alive in him. You want no-self? Give me your self and I will get rid of it! The world that we ourselves have constructed, with our values and categories, is what makes us suffer. Huike finally understood the fact that, intrinsically, he was free.

We can see this in our own practice. During our periods of sitting meditation, in the midst of your wandering thoughts, I sometimes say to you, “Relax, be natural and clear, and appreciate the breath.” These are labels and categories that I throw out, and you receive them. You may think, “Oh, yes, I am relaxed, appreciating that every breath is a new beginning.” These instructions may help, but they are really just expedient teachings.

During a retreat I may also say to you, “Let your thoughts liberate themselves.” But actually, thoughts naturally do liberate themselves, so there’s no need to think about the instruction. When wandering thoughts appear, there is nothing to be done about them; they free themselves of their own accord.

We also have a method where we use a “correct” thought to get rid of wandering thoughts. In this case, we label wandering thoughts “erroneous.” But then we are stuck with the correct thought, because although we have labeled this new thought “correct,” it is still a thought. We then need a third thought to get rid of the second thought!

This is the dilemma of expedient teachings. We use this to get rid of that; and we use that to get rid of this. Bodhidharma slashed away all these thoughts! Mind liberates itself instant by instant. When we sit, we are completely free in the act of sitting. All is perfect.

When you find yourself in the midst of anxiety or dis-ease, please bring it to me. But do not think, "Guo Gu, you want my anxiety? Here are my electric and phone bills and my schoolwork! Please take them!" Of course I do not mean that—you can take care of those things by yourself. But bring me something that you are holding in your mind, some trouble or angst. I often say, "If you have a problem and you can solve it, it is no longer a problem. If you cannot solve it, it is still not a problem because then, it is no longer *your* problem." So be free.

It is like the movie *The Matrix*: all of us are plugged into a constructed, collective world. In our society, we have a built-in consensus of what should or should not be, a consensus of what is good or bad. It is just consensus, an assumption based on collective judgment. Sometimes one judgment comes in contact with another, and this creates conflict. Then someone like Morpheus may come along and offer to unplug us from this world. Once we are unplugged, we become like Neo, who can move freely in and out of this consensus-based world because he realizes that it is merely a construction.

My advice to you is to be free, to be pacified. This is not freedom in the sense that you can do whatever you want. The freedom I'm talking about comes from recognizing how things truly exist, how opinions are actually formed, how troubles come to be. If we examine suffering in depth, we discover that its roots—namely, vexations and attachments—are ungrounded. They are the result of our constructs and fixations. We can continue to live by substituting this with that and by trying to get rid of that with this. But in Chan, the most efficient and direct way to end suffering is to realize the constructedness of the self and the world. The way to end suffering is to stop substituting and to begin recognizing.

Some people divide Buddhist practice into two methods: the gradual and the sudden. The gradual method is the path of purification, in which one transforms oneself from A to B. This is one way of understanding Buddhist practice. The sudden way is the path of recognition, where one realizes the intrinsic emptiness or purity of vexations and attachments. But actually, there is nothing gradual or sudden in Buddhist practice. What gives people the impression of gradual or sudden is only their own disposition, their own share of vexations. No matter what method we use, our true nature is the same.

In the course of practice, to perceive our true nature, we need to first calm and purify our mind by reducing our vexations. If we come across a big wave of muddy water, we want the water to calm down or we will not see its clear nature. However, once we get to a certain stage of calmness, we can become stagnant if we remain there; we must therefore reorient our practice toward recognizing the nature of the water. Bodhidharma's reply to the emperor was meant to help him recognize the nature of merit and mind.

In Bodhidharma's principal teaching, recognition is purification. Instead of eliminating wandering thoughts or vexations either by thinking something positive or by looking at them from a different perspective, we can simply recognize the empty nature of these thoughts. All things are interconnected; they have no fixed identity. All things change; they are empty of independent, separate, permanent existence. Bad people exist because of good people; good people exist because of bad people. The rich exist because of the poor, and the poor exist because of the rich. Merit is contingent on no-merit. Self exists because of no-self. The good things that come in life will disappear when causes and conditions fade away. Negativities may change into something positive. When causes and conditions are ripe, things appear; when causes and conditions fade away, things disappear. This is emptiness. We recognize wandering thoughts and vexations for what they are. We don't fuel them by following them or becoming agitated by them.

Chan is inseparable from Buddhism. Like the top of a pyramid, it is the pinnacle of the Buddhist teaching. In this sense, the path of purification is not denied but is instead part of the process of Chan practice. Some people misunderstand Chan and Zen: they wrongly assume that since everything is "empty," they can do whatever they want and practice is unnecessary. Bodhidharma's text never says that there is no need to practice. In fact, as we will read later, Bodhidharma's text recognizes karmic retribution and causes and conditions, and strongly emphasizes practice. Practice is the heart of Chan. I cannot emphasize enough its importance. However, practice must be guided by correct view. All Chan teachings point to the correct view; without it, Chan becomes a mere philosophy. Worse, it becomes misguided and amoral.

The Text

This book is a commentary on Bodhidharma's text called *Two Entries and Four Practices*. There are several other texts attributed to Bodhidharma, which can be categorized into three genres: biographies, short reply letters, and lengthy dialogues with Q&As. Several of these texts were created after Bodhidharma's death and are considered apocryphal. I did not choose them as topics for commentary as they did not leave a lasting impact on the subsequent Chan tradition.

I chose *Two Entries and Four Practices,* first, because it has been repeatedly included in Chan anthologies; this demonstrates its popularity and suggests that it is one of the most representative teachings of Bodhidharma. Second, the text is short and terse, and its language accessible to everyone. Third, because I wish to redress some common Western misconceptions of Chan and its counterpart, Zen. In our time, the popular image that we have of Zen practice is actually a caricature that portrays Zen practice as spontaneous, iconoclastic, nondoctrinal, and anti-intellectual. But these images of Chan and Zen are superficial. If one thinks that Zen is only about

spontaneity, and one therefore rejects the rich textual heritage of the Buddhist path, claiming that practice is unnecessary, then one is gravely mistaken. On the contrary, Chan, as the precursor to Zen, is squarely rooted in the larger Buddhist tradition. This is evident in the *Two Entries and Four Practices*.

The early foundations of Chan have defined the unique approach to practice within the Mahayana Buddhist tradition. They are embodied in texts such as the *Two Entries*. This text has continued to be a favorite Chan classic, studied by practitioners in all subsequent periods of Chan up to the modern time. Most practitioners are well versed in foundational teachings such as causes and conditions and the workings of karma. These have been so integrated into later developments of Chan that they have become invisible—like the air we breathe and the water we drink. These teachings are also integral to *Two Entries*.

But just because we take water and air for granted does not mean they aren't necessary for our survival. To avoid them is a grave mistake; a house built without a good foundation will crumble when shaken. For several decades, we have witnessed the rise and fall of a number of Zen and other Buddhist centers and teachers in America, due to severe institutional, social, and personal problems. I attribute these aberrations, which have harmed many American practitioners, to a lack of solid foundation in the basic teachings.

The blossoming of Chan during the tenth through the thirteenth centuries was built on a solid foundation. During this time, new genres of texts emerged that valued *gong'an* (Jp. *koan*), which are public cases that depict enigmatic enlightenment stories and extemporaneous dialogues. In the West, it is precisely this later iconoclastic period of Chan that is being promoted, at the expense of building a good foundation in practice. These stories and methods of practice have unfortunately overshadowed foundational Chan teachings. This process of promotion has more to do with romanticism about the transmission of Japanese Zen to the West in the mid-twentieth century than with the reality of how Chan was practiced in earlier times.

To understand Chan, we must get to the heart of its teachings. What better place to start than Bodhidharma's essential teachings on how to enter the path of realization?

With all this said, I now turn to Bodhidharma's text.

TWO ENTRIES AND FOUR PRACTICES

by Bodhidharma

Translated from the Chinese by Guo Gu

THERE ARE MANY ways to enter the Path. In summary, there are two: The first is entry through principle, and the second is entry through practice. Entering through principle means that one awakens to the essence by means of the teaching; one has the profound conviction that all beings are identical in their true nature. It is only due to the covering of adventitious dust and deluded thinking that this true nature is not revealed. If one relinquishes delusion and returns to the true—abides in stillness and engages in wall-like contemplation, where the self and other are absent and the ordinary and the holy are equal—then, without any wavering whatsoever and without chasing after the written teachings, one is in sublime accordance with the principle. This is the state free from discrimination, in utter quiescence and without any effort. This is called entrance by principle.

Entry through practice refers to the four practices. All other practices are subsumed under these. What are the four? The first is the practice of embracing retribution; the second is the practice of adapting to conditions; the third is the practice of nonseeking; and the fourth is the practice of according with the Dharma.

Embracing retribution means that when a practitioner of the path encounters suffering, the practitioner thinks, “For innumerable eons,

I have forsaken the root to follow the branches, wandering through various existences, giving rise to countless instances of ill will and hatred against others. Although today I do no wrong, I am reaping the fruit of my past actions. Neither gods nor people can foresee when the ripening of [karmic] fruit may occur. I accept this with an open heart and without ill will or complaint." The sutra says, "Face suffering without distress." How is this possible? It is because your understanding is thorough. When you give rise to this understanding, you are in accordance with the principle. Experiencing injustice can cause you to advance on the path—this is called the practice of embracing retribution.

The second is the practice of adapting to conditions. Sentient beings are without self and are whirled around by their attachment to karma. Their experience of suffering and joy arises from various conditions. Favorable rewards, such as honor and fortune, are results of causes from past lives. Even though rewards are gained in the present, they will be void when the conditions cease. What is there to be joyful about? Gaining and losing stem from conditions, but the mind does not increase nor decrease. Unmoved by the winds of joy, one is in sublime accordance with the Path. Therefore, it is called the practice of adapting to conditions.

The third is the practice of nonseeking. People of this world are often deluded. To covet after this and that is what is meant by seeking. The wise awaken to the truth. They adhere to the principle and transpose [the negative effects of] conventional reality, pacifying their minds effortlessly. Although they physically transmigrate in the turning [of samsara], they recognize that the ten thousand existences are empty. They wish for nothing and delight in neither merit nor darkness, which always follow one another. To dwell in the three realms is to dwell in a burning house. To have a body is to inevitably suffer. Who can acquire peace? If one reaches this understanding, then one will relinquish attachment to existences, [false] concepts will cease, and all seeking will be quenched. The sutra says, "To seek is to suffer; to not seek is bliss." Understand that nonseeking is truly practicing the Path. Therefore, it is called the practice of nonseeking.

The fourth is the practice of conforming to the Dharma. Dharma here means to perceive the principle that our nature is intrinsically pure. By this principle, all appearances are empty, without defilement or [anything to be] attached to, without this or that. The sutra says, “In Dharma there is no sentient being because it is free from the impurities of a sentient being. In Dharma there is also no self, since it is free of the impurities of a self.” If a wise person is able to believe in and understand this principle, then the Dharma should be practiced accordingly. The essence of Dharma is without possessiveness. Thus one can give up life and wealth, and practice generosity. Since one’s mind is free of miserliness, one will comprehend the three emptinesses. One depends on nothing and attaches to nothing. For the sake of removing one’s own impurities, one conforms and transforms sentient beings without clinging to appearances. This is benefiting oneself, which can also benefit others and adorn the Path of Bodhi. When you give in this spirit, the other five [*paramitas*] follow suit. In order to eliminate delusion, practice the six paramitas, and yet nothing is practiced. This is the practice of conforming to the Dharma.

COMMENTARY

ENTERING THE PATH THROUGH PRINCIPLE

The First Entry

THE TWO ENTRIES to the Path are through principle and through practice. Generally, entry through the principle refers to the direct realization of Chan enlightenment. There are four main dimensions to this teaching. I will number them below so it is clear. The text reads:

> **There are many ways to enter the Path. In summary, there are two: The first is entry through principle, and the second is entry through practice. Entering through principle means that [1] one awakens to the essence by means of the teaching; [2] one has the profound conviction that all beings are identical in their true nature. [3] It is only due to the covering of adventitious dust and deluded thinking that this true nature is not revealed. [4] If one relinquishes delusion and returns to the true—abides in stillness and engages in wall-like contemplation, where the self and other are absent and the ordinary and the holy are equal—then, without any wavering whatsoever and without chasing after the written teachings, one is in sublime accordance with the principle. This is the state free from discrimination, in utter quiescence and without any effort. This is called entrance by principle.**

1. One Awakens to the Essence by Means of the Teachings

Bodhidharma tells us that one awakens to the essence by means of the teachings. This indicates that the teachings are important insofar as they point us in the right direction toward enlightenment. We can understand "essence" as the principle of things, as true reality, as how things actually are. In the Chan teachings, essence refers to no-self.

To "awaken to the essence by means of the teaching" is dependent on, first, whether or not one can truly integrate the teaching into one's own being and one's own life. Second, one must not even attach to the teachings; they are provisional, temporary, expedient means, which is like seeing the moon by following the finger that points to the moon. The teachings themselves—or the finger—are not the ultimate truth. We must practice without chasing after enlightenment. If we genuinely devote our life to being free from the trappings of vexations, and at the same time devote ourselves to helping others, then it is possible for us to become enlightened.

It is important to truly integrate Chan into one's life. However, this is not a process of "spiritual substitution." Generally people read many books about Buddhism or Chan before they start practicing. In the process of reading and reflecting, their outlook on life changes and becomes replaced by their ideas of what they've read. For example, they read in Buddhist texts that everything is impermanent. This is useful because the next time they give rise to vexations or are insulted by someone, they can remind themselves that everything is impermanent, and thus not get caught up with the vexations or take the insults so seriously. When they read about causes and conditions, they can start seeing things in relational terms; they might see that things happen because of different conditions coming together and that those things disappear because these conditions come apart. They might even consider the points of view of those who do them harm: perhaps something negative happened to this person that day, or he or she woke up on the wrong

side of the bed. Using the teaching to free oneself from potential vexations is good.

However, without genuine practice, most people become attached even to the teaching, as if it were ultimate truth itself. They use the teaching to measure other practitioners and to discriminate against teachings that do not accord with what they've learned. This is a problem, as the teaching has become another thing they attach to.

The key to the above passage is the word "awaken." It means that one directly realizes reality without being caught up in words and language—in other words, the finger that points to the moon. Practice is not a matter of substitution: before practicing one is concerned with material things, and so one collects material things; now one is concerned with Buddhism, and so one starts collecting spiritual things. Practice is about learning to live one's life in accordance with the Dharma, which serves as a principle and a guide. It is not meant to be used as a measurement to judge others.

When I was a monk in the monastery, I had a Dharma brother who practiced really hard, studying the scriptures and meditating every day, even in his free time. He became irritated whenever he observed that others were chatting and joking around, not practicing as hard as he was. One may have a romantic notion that monks live rather solemnly, always practicing and having no fun, but this is not so. In their free time, monks know how to have fun!

One day, when my Dharma brothers and I were joking around, this serious monk came by and said, "You should be practicing, don't you know that!" He talked on and on about emptiness and impermanence and told us that we should not be wasting our precious time. We looked at him as if to say, "You can't be serious!" We went back to our joking, and he went back to studying the scriptures.

The point of this story is that when we think something is right or true, we often see, at the same time, everyone else's faults. This is also true of practice. The sixth lineage master, Dajian Huineng (Jp. Daikan Eno, 638–713), said in the *Platform Scripture*: "If we see others at fault, we ourselves are wronged." When we practice really

hard and get annoyed at others for not doing what we're doing, we already have a fixed construct of what practice *should be*. If we try to impose our idea of practice on others—whether we think that practice is "meditation" or studying the scriptures, or that practice precludes having fun—then we are merely engaging in some kind of substitution, using Dharma things to replace material things. This is spiritual materialism.

One must awaken to the essence by means of teachings, but at the same time one must realize that teachings are only expedient means. Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha, said at the end of his life that although he had taught for forty years, wandering throughout the Indian subcontinent, he had not given a single teaching! Our immediate reaction to this may well be, "Of course the Buddha taught! I have memorized all his teachings." But truly he has not. The essence or truth cannot be taught; it must be realized personally. In practice, the most essential thing is to have earnestness and a deep sense of yearning to resolve one's own problems.

This brings to mind the story of Chan master Linji Yixuan (Jp. Rinzai Gigen, d. 866 C.E.), one of the greatest masters in the Chan tradition, from whom evolved the Linji (Jp. Rinzai) lineage of Chan. His enlightenment is very interesting. He practiced very hard and studied everything, especially the *vinaya,* or monastic regulations and decorum. In every sense of the word, Linji was the perfect monk. But although he was straightforward and sincere, he had no yearning, being satisfied with how things were going. Even while staying at the monastery of Chan master Huangbo Xiyun (Jp. Ōbaku Kiun, d. 850 C.E.) for three years, he felt no need to seek out instructions from him.

One day, Muzhou Daoming (Jp. Bokushu Domyo, 780–877), the head monk, who was himself enlightened, asked Linji, "Why don't you go ask Master Huangbo a question?"

Linji replied, "I have no questions!"

Muzhou said, "Don't worry about it, just make up a question. Ask Master Huangbo what the essence of Buddhadharma is."

Linji hesitated. Perhaps he thought he already knew that.

“Go ask him,” insisted the head monk.

So Linji went into Master Huangbo’s quarters and bowed, saying, “Master, I have a question.”

Huangbo answered, “Go ahead!”

Linji asked, “What is the essence of Buddhadharma?”

Wham! No sooner had Linji finished the question than Huangbo whacked him. Linji must have been puzzled: “This crazy old man, what is he doing?”

When Linji came out of the room, Muzhou, who knew all along that Linji would get hit, asked him what happened. Linji, rather upset, replied, “He hit me right after I finished the question!”

The head monk replied, “That’s OK, go back and ask again.”

So Linji went back. He asked, “Master, what is the essence…”

Whack! Dejected, Linji left the room, thinking, “This old man is crazy. Is this the true essence of Buddhadharma? If it is, I’m too dumb to understand it.”

Muzhou was waiting right outside; he asked, “So, what happened?”

Linji replied, “I didn’t even finish my question and he hit me again.”

The Record of Linji does not say what happens next, but we can imagine what Muzhou did to encourage Linji to go back again the next day for a third time. By now, Linji was full of doubt. “Did I do something wrong? What is the meaning? Was it something I said, something I did? I have studied and learned all the Buddhist behavioral codes and I always act accordingly. So why did he do that? What did I do? Why did he hit me when I asked about the essence of Buddhadharma?”

All these questions were actually doing Linji a lot of good. Huangbo, colluding with Muzhou, was able to spark in him a sense of yearning, questioning, and doubt. We can see now that the question was driving him home! The *Record* does not give details as to exactly what happened, but we can be sure that Linji could not sleep the night before his next encounter with Huangbo. All these irresolvable

questions were spinning in his head: “What’s the essence of Buddhadharma? Why did he hit me?”

The next day Linji went back to see the master, and before Linji even opened his mouth, Huangbo whacked him. Linji was now in a dark pit of great doubt, unable to resolve the essence of Buddhadharma and to understand why Huangbo reacted that way. He was left with his questions: “What is the essence of Buddhadharma? What is it?”

The questioning drove Linji to want to leave the monastery. But before he had a chance to leave, Muzhou advised him to bid farewell to Huangbo. Muzhou had gone to the master beforehand and said, “Linji is coming back to see you again today. This time he’s leaving. Take it easy on him. He is almost there. Please give him an expedient teaching. In the future, he will be a great tree that provides shade for countless people.”

When Linji came to bid farewell to the master, Huangbo saw something precious in him—his earnestness and doubt, and how shaken he was by the irresolvable question. From the Chan perspective, this is a good state of mind to be in. Master Huangbo spoke, “There’s no need for you to go elsewhere. Just go see my Dharma brother Gaoan Dayu (Jp. Ko’an Daigu, 770–850), who lives on the other side of the mountain. He will help you solve this matter.”

Imagine if Huangbo had answered, “You want to know about the essence of Buddhadharma? Let me explain to you exactly what Buddhadharma is: first you need to learn about the Four Noble Truths and the threefold study of precepts, meditation, and the wisdom of selflessness…” Had Huangbo done that, he would have killed the wisdom life of Linji, who needed to discover the answer for himself. Had Huangbo handled his question in such a conceptual way, Linji’s momentum of doubt, which had been accumulating through these encounters, would have quickly dissipated.

Chan masters are wonderful at helping students generate the great question of life and death. A Chan master will help you see what is important to *you*—whether it is the essence of Buddhadharma, your

existential dilemma, or the question of who it is that's listening to Dharma talks. And if you have no problem, the Chan master will create one for you. The point is, it is extremely important to have a real sense of earnestness and wonderment about your life. In Chan there is a saying: "Small doubt, small enlightenment; medium doubt, medium enlightenment; great doubt, great enlightenment; no doubt, no enlightenment." Linji had no problem, until the day when Master Huangbo gave him one.

We can well imagine what Linji went through to see Master Dayu on the other side of the mountain. We can just picture his long, solitary journey from one mountainside to the other, walking alone, constantly absorbed in his dilemma. He walked for miles for many days, his mind continually focused on these thoughts: "What is the meaning of Buddhadharma? Why did Huangbo hit me? Where is my fault?" We know that this was on his mind, because as soon as Dayu saw him and asked, "Where do you come from?" Linji replied, "I come from Huangbo."

"Ah, Huangbo! What is this old man up to these days?"

Linji exclaimed, "I asked him three times what the meaning of Buddhadharma is, and he hit me three times!"

Recognizing the opportunity, Dayu laughed, clapped, and exclaimed, "Huangbo, with that old grandmotherly heart, liberating you like this! And you ask where your fault is?!"

As I said, Chan masters are great at creating a problem where there is none, and then solving it, their sword of wisdom slashing through all our attachments. But first, before the sword can cut, momentum has to be generated. Huangbo had not only generated the question in Linji when he had none, but he also had implanted the great ball of doubt inside him. The doubt was not about the "essence of Buddhadharma," but about Linji's own ability to understand it. Grandparents are softies; when children don't get spending money from their parents, they often go to their grandparents: "Grandma, Grandpa, I need to buy this and that!" Dayu was actually saying that Huangbo was much too kind to Linji;

he had exposed the secret of Chan right in front of Linji's face, but he had not understood.

However, Linji was extraordinary; he had the potential for greatness and was ripe in his years of practice.

As soon as he heard Dayu's response, Linji experienced full enlightenment! Huangbo had been so kind, like an old grandmother. He had given the teachings to Linji, just as Bodhidharma gave them to the emperor: "Did I get merit?" "None whatsoever!" "Who the hell are you who stands before me?" "Don't know!" Bodhidharma cut off every conceptualization, every attachment. What is Buddhadharma? As if there were an ultimate thing "out there" called Dharma or the Buddhist teaching! *Whack! Whack!* The point is not whether there is Dharma or not; the point is to generate the great doubt.

Linji was so happy that he exclaimed, "So there's not much to Huangbo's teaching after all!"

Hearing this, Dayu sensed something had happened. He grabbed Linji and asked, "You idiot! Just now you asked why you were at fault, and now you say this? What the hell did you realize?! Speak now!"

Without any hesitation, Linji gave Dayu three jabs to his ribs and laughed, "Ha, ha, ha, ha!"

Dayu said, "OK, OK, enough! I am not your teacher. Go hit Huangbo!" Dayu was indeed satisfied and joyful.

Linji reverently bid farewell to Dayu and rushed back to Huangbo's monastery. As soon as Master Huangbo saw him, he realized that the countenance and the whole manner of this monk had completely transformed. Master Huangbo said, "This fellow, coming and going, when the hell will this end?"

Linji said, "It already has ended."

"Where did you go?" Huangbo asked.

After Linji told him what happened at Dayu's place, Huangbo said, "That fellow talked too much. Next time I see him, I will give him a good beating."

"Why wait?" Linji said, and started to slap Huangbo around.

Huangbo pushed him away, saying, “This little cub is trying to pull the whiskers off the tiger!” Huangbo did not say, “You damn fool!” He said “Little cub.” By this he meant: we are now the same nature, the same species. You and I have tasted the Dharma. A cub is bound to grow up to be a tiger, just as a baby will certainly grow up to be an adult human. Huangbo did not denigrate Linji but was happy, like a tiger satisfied with his playful cub.

For this reason, Huangbo said to his attendant, “Take this lunatic to the Chan hall,” meaning that they could receive Linji back to the monastery, and that he was now fit to reside in the Chan hall. This was meaningful because in previous eras, residents in the Chan hall were selected from the regular ranks of monks in the monastery. Not everyone had the privilege to practice in the Chan hall, which used to be called “The Hall Where Buddhas Are Chosen.”

Linji went to the hall where all the monks were meditating. He lay down on a meditation platform, fell asleep, and began to snore. No one remonstrated, not even Muzhou, the head monk. Huangbo, who was fully aware of Linji’s great awakening, came into the hall and saw him snoring on the platform. The monk meditating next to Linji was completely still and in perfect posture. Huangbo looked at that monk and then whacked him with his stick, shouting: “Don’t you see Linji here, how hard he is practicing? What the hell are *you* doing?”

The point of the story is about practice. We must guard against our ideas of how practice should be because practice takes no particular form. This is contrary to my fellow monk’s idea that only “meditation” is practice, and that anyone who has fun needs to be reprimanded. Practice is one’s own business; awakening is one’s own business. The teaching is for us to use, not for us to measure someone else. After awakening, practice takes no form: one could be sleeping, meditating, joking, or doing anything else.

2. All Beings Are Identical in Their True Nature

Up to this point, I have been discussing the nature of mind as originally free. But what is this "nature"? If we are to use words and concepts, we can call it the buddha-nature, which is our original nature. This is the nature of awakening, the nature of emptiness or selflessness. Emptiness means relationships, connectedness. Because all things are connected, nothing is fixed, and everything is free.

The problem is that we do not believe in our true nature. We are so wired into thinking that our own views, our acquired knowledge and experience, and our autonomy are the only things that matter. Because of this, we are not free. We are bound by our views, our knowledge, and our experiences.

In the introduction, I used the analogy that our true nature is like the nature of water—whether the water is clear or muddled, the nature of wetness is unchanged. Another analogy is the world of playdough: one can mold the dough into a person, a cow, a table, or anything that one wants. But no matter what shape the playdough takes, the nature of playdough does not change.

The nature of emptiness is like this. It is because of emptiness that there can be all sorts of forms and appearances. Some of these can be quite pleasant while others very scary. But no matter what the forms and appearances are, their nature is the same. We all share the same true nature. Once a playdough man realizes that he is made of playdough, as is everything else in his playdough world, he becomes aware that there is no creation or destruction, no gaining or losing. Yet when he sees that the other playdough people don't recognize that their suffering stems from gaining and losing, he helps them to realize their true nature. In the process of helping, he does not get caught up with people's problems or the act of helping. At the same time, he is completely connected with other playdough people. His recognition of the "playdoughness" of all things is wisdom. His intrinsic connectedness and actions that help others to realize their playdoughness are what is meant by compassion.

This is only an analogy, of course. We are nothing like playdough, which is inanimate and simple. But the analogy does point to something important that's inexpressible in words: that there is no

problem with you! Eat with peace of mind; sleep with peace of mind; meditate with peace of mind; and save all beings with peace of mind. If we're not at peace, it is only because we're caught up with forms and sounds, believing them to be fixed and concretely separated from us "out there."

It is because of this that Bodhidharma calls attention to the third dimension of entering through the principle.

3. The Covering of Adventitious Dust

Next the text states: "It is only due to the covering of adventitious dust and deluded thinking that this true nature is not revealed." Here, dust has the connotation of something extra, like the dust that covers a mirror. It is not part of the mirror. Similarly, the dustlike vexations are *not* part of the nature of mind. Even though our mirror-mind is covered, it has never lost the ability to reflect, to illuminate. Our deluded thinking falsely assumes that things are permanent, separate, and independent. This false assumption temporarily covers up our true nature, and as a result we make mistakes in judgment and cause problems for others and ourselves. Thus the text says, "It is only due to the covering of adventitious dust and deluded thinking that this true nature is not revealed."

Yet, we often confuse our own construct of reality for reality itself. We assume the adventitious dust to be who we are. Some years ago, a group of us were looking for a good place to build our retreat center in upstate New York. I was in a car with a friend when we stopped to rest. Up ahead, my friend saw what looked like a pile of dog poop on the side of the road. She became annoyed and began to complain about dog owners who don't clean up after their pets. Being righteous and environmentally conscious, she started to walk toward the pile with the intention of cleaning it up—like a good Buddhist. All the while I was sitting in the car meditating, calmly listening to her complain and then watching her walk away. When she came upon the pile, she turned toward me and waved with a smile, calling out,

“It’s just a bunch of pinecones!” In that moment of astonishment, I realized that everything was created by the mind.

In our life, we make judgments about this and that. We categorize some people as friends and others as foes. We formulate ideas and stories based on gain and lost, benefit and harm, good and bad, and self and others. But things are not as rigid as we make them out to be. In fact, they may be completely different than the stories we create about them. And if our judgments and decisions are based on our biased, subjective opinions about things, of course these will not turn out right. This is like the “adventitious dust” that covers the mirror of our mind.

We have the full potential to see things as they are, but often we get caught up in our self-referential ideas and stories. When the self is out of the way, everything becomes clear.

4. Relinquish Delusion and Return to the Real

The fourth dimension of entering the path through principle is stated as: “If one relinquishes delusion and returns to the true—abides in stillness and engages in wall-like contemplation, where the self and other are absent and the ordinary and the holy are equal.”

Why are ordinary and holy equal? This is speaking from the perspective of principle. A huge, dangerous tsunami wave and a limpid, peaceful pond have the same nature: wetness. We may sit one day with a lot of wandering thoughts and think it’s bad, and we don’t like it; at another time, as we become more skilled, we get into a nice, comfortable, blissful zone, which we think is good. But the scattered mind and the blissful mind have the same, equal nature of wetness. In meditation, whether there is thought or no thought, it does not affect our mind’s nature of clarity and openness. Because of our self-cherishing notions of me and mine, this versus that, we compartmentalize states of mind and experiences as good and bad. We fail to see our true nature and what is actually happening.

Chan practitioners should learn to look upon everyone with equanimity. We act from the perspective of the nature or essence, which is the wetness; we do not act from the perspective of the discriminating mind, which is the wave. However, water can quench thirst or it can cause damage; people can give us flowers or they can try to steal our wallet. We always have to be clear about different perspectives and functions. But the nature of water is the same.

As the text explains further, if we can be free from self-attachment, then "one is in sublime accordance with the principle." Self-attachment manifests as being moved by this or that, as being attached to what we think is right and wrong, or as thinking deludedly that this teaching is better than that one. Self-attachment is chasing after the finger pointing to the moon.

In the midst of our practice, let us not attach to our actions or use the Dharma like a measuring stick to judge others. Buddha-nature—the nature of fluidity, openness, and clarity—is everyone's true nature, whether one is a criminal or a sage. Allow this to resonate in you for a moment.

To be in accordance with the principle is to fully recognize our intrinsic freedom, which cannot be ensnared by all the constructs, narratives, and ideas we create about ourselves and the world. The relationship between these constructs and the nature of mind is like the relationship between the space inside a Chan hall and the furniture inside it. Does the furniture, no matter how dirty or clean, messy or orderly, affect the nature of the space? No. Similarly, all of us are originally enlightened. That is the true meaning of "wall-like contemplation."

Some people think that wall-like contemplation simply means to sit facing the wall the way we do at our meditation center, remaining still and not moving during meditation. But Bodhidharma is pointing to something more subtle than this. A wall has many functions, but it makes no judgments based on its own preference. When we hang beautiful paintings on a wall, it never says: "I do not want ugly paintings on me; I only want beautiful ones!" A wall can divide up a room and make it more livable; it can also confine criminals in a jail.

We can lean on a wall when we're tired, and we can decorate it to make it pretty. In all these instances, the wall has numerous functions, and its meaning for the user depends on its use. There are no self-referential attachments.

Like a wall, a practitioner is not swayed by self and others, holy and ordinary. Although the practitioner is useful to the world, he or she is not affected by the world. This is not to say that we become dumb to our senses or knowledge. We do not. All of our wonderful resources and abilities should be used wisely. In the midst of using them, we are not caught up with ourselves; in fact, we take ourselves out of the picture.

This is the meaning of "emptiness" in Buddhist teaching. Emptiness does not mean nothingness; rather, it means that amid great functions there are no vexations, no self-attachment. Buddhist selflessness is founded on a healthy, mentally stable sense of self. The process of practice is to first ensure that we have a stable sense of self, then to slowly mature the self spiritually. In the process of spiritual maturation, we realize no-self.

It would be useless to give the teaching of emptiness to people who are not upholding the precepts, or to those who have incorrect views of Buddhadharma, of themselves, and of the world. We first need correct views in order to help us navigate our life and mitigate our vexations. We need various practices so we have a chance to recognize the true nature of our mind and live happier lives, free from vexations. For this reason, Bodhidharma presents the *Four Practices,* which we now turn to.

ENTERING THE PATH THROUGH PRACTICE

The Second Entry

RECOGNIZING THAT WE are originally free is not sufficient. We have to live this truth by practicing it until we personally experience the nature of mind. For this reason, Bodhidharma tells us that the second entry to the Path is through practice. He divides practice into four essential categories: embracing retribution, adapting to conditions, nonseeking, and according with the Dharma.

Together, these four practices cover a range of correct views about understanding ourselves, our friends, our challenges and blessings, as well as the dynamic way to integrate the Dharma into our life. The aim of these practices is to correct our misunderstandings and to learn how to transform everything we experience into an opportunity to cultivate the Path. Practice cannot be limited to seated meditation, even though that is the foundation. Only through the practice of life will we truly bring forth our full potential of enlightenment.

1. Embracing Retributions

> **"For innumerable eons, I have forsaken the root to follow the branches, wandering through various existences, giving rise to countless instances of ill will and hatred against others. Although today I do no wrong, I am reaping the fruit of my past actions. Neither gods nor people can foresee when the ripening of**

[karmic] fruit may occur. I accept this with an open heart and without ill will or complaint." The sutra says, "Face suffering without distress." How is this possible? It is because your understanding is thorough. When you give rise to this understanding, you are in accordance with the principle. Experiencing injustice can cause you to advance on the path—this is called the practice of embracing retribution.

Life is full of difficulties and challenges. But these are not necessarily negative. They can also be opportunities for growth. Most people have gotten so used to resisting what they dislike and chasing after what they like that this has become their second nature. In our own lives, we're used to being lost in the sea of discriminations. But we have to recognize that it is our own biases that cause us to perceive things as good or bad, favorable or unfavorable. Our suffering and problems come from our own attachments to these discriminations. The truth is that difficulties and challenges show us where our troubles lie: how we tend to see things, our patterns of behavior; and how we can be free from them.

Through repeating these habit tendencies over time, we have lost the intrinsic luster of the mirror; we have given up the original freedom that is ours. This is the meaning of "forsaken the root to follow the branches." Everything comes to be because of causes and conditions. To face life productively, it is necessary to understand our life situation from a broader perspective.

Many people come to spiritual practice because they experience some kind of dissatisfaction or suffering in their lives. They recognize problems and wish to do something about them. There are also people who don't do anything about their suffering. They either ignore their vexations, thinking that ill will, greed, or jealousy are normal, or they blame others or the external environment for their problems. Still others just passively accept things with an attitude of hopelessness or dread. There are even philosophies that have

developed in order to justify these attitudes. None of these approaches get to the bottom of things.

Chan views things from the perspectives of cause and effect and causes and conditions. Everything happens for a reason, and everything happens due to various conditions coming together. There are no phenomena that come into existence haphazardly, out of thin air. And yet, cause, effect, and conditions often happen behind the scenes, and are too illusive for us to recognize. Most of the time, we see only the effect and are ignorant of the causes. The point of the passage above is to recognize the workings of karma, or cause and effect, and teach us how to use this to transform our difficulties.

Suppose we are blamed for something we didn't do. From our perspective, we're innocent, and for the life of us, we can't figure out why others would blame us. But if we look closely, others may be perceiving us a certain way because of our previous interactions and interpersonal relations with them. Or perhaps their perception can be traced back to other seemingly unrelated events. Or it may just be that those people have ideas about us that are ungrounded. Whatever the causes, we should know that, from a broader temporal perspective, there is a karmic history to everything; there is always a cause behind the things that happen to us. We have to trust that they don't happen without causes, and that these causes are intimately related to various factors. We can use the concept of cause and effect to help us navigate our lives and ease our mind when we face difficulties.

Karma

Cause and effect are related to the idea of karma, which shapes the world we live in. The process of karma consists of cause leading to an effect due to various conditions. Karma is technically defined in Buddhism as "intended action," which includes action that we normally think of as unintentional. From a Buddhist perspective, the action is actually intentional because what drives it is like and dislike, grasping and rejecting, good and bad—all of which derive

from a sense of self-referentiality. For example, a fly is buzzing around and you wave it away. This simple action of shooing away a fly comes from "I do not like that!" Embedded in each of our actions is the thought: "I like this better than that!" This and that intertwine; they are like desire and hate, which are inseparable.

In the example of the fly, the intention is actually the same as when we do more harmful things, such as telling a person, "I don't like you, so I am going to hurt you." In these two examples, the object of our action is different so the intensity is different, but the motivation is the same. A variation would be, "I see this fly and I really hate it." So you plan out a scheme: you figure out where the fly will land and you tell yourself, "Once it lands, I am going to smash it." You then carry out the action and smash the fly. You check to see that the fly is dead; sure enough, it's dead. Now you're satisfied. In this case, there was intention and planning, followed by a completed action. That is karma.

There are normally five stages or conditions to the completion of karma. These five conditions will determine the intensity of our retribution. They are:

1. Intention;
2. A real object of our action, whether it is "out there" or in our mind;
3. An actual action, followed by
4. The completion of the action; and, lastly
5. Our satisfaction after the completion of the action.

For example, a man drives down a certain street where he knows there are many squirrels. He decides to go "squirrel popping." This is his intention or motivation. Of course, Buddhists do not do such things, but there are people who do! He sees the squirrels—the object. They exist; they are really there and not in his imagination. He thinks, "I will swerve my car to the left so that when a squirrel runs that way, I will have a perfect hit." Then he actually runs over a squirrel; the action is done. He stops the car and gets out to check on

the squirrel. Is it dead? Yes, it is dead; the action is completed. He congratulates himself and laughs, “Wow, that was fun!” He feels satisfaction after completing the action.

The satisfied mindset that occurred after the action was completed would be considered an intense karma. However, because the object of the karmic act (the squirrel) is not a human being, the karma does not have the same intensity as it would if the man killed a person. So in addition to the action and the person’s state of mind afterward, the object of the karmic act also determines the intensity of the karmic retribution.

New scenario: While I am driving, I am chatting with my friend and not being mindful. I run over a squirrel; I immediately stop the car and check. I am horrified: “Oh, it’s dead!” I feel terrible. This sense of regret and contrition is also a factor in the completion of the karma. Or perhaps I see that the squirrel is not dead. I take it home, care for it, and then let it go free. That is a very different karma. Is the karma of running over the squirrel gone? No. But there are other conditions in this scenario that contribute to the karmic act, and they therefore change the outcome of the retribution. In this case, I do not fulfill the fifth condition, which is feeling satisfaction after the completion of the act.

This is the reason Chan teachings recommend the practice of repentance prostrations as a wonderful way to alleviate karma. The best situation would be to repent to the person or people we actually wronged and apologize directly to them. Even if the karma was done a long time ago, apologizing in this way still has influence. When this is not an option, we can practice repentance prostrations. Repentance means to recognize our mistakes. It may sound like a heavy word with Christian connotations, but in Chan and Buddhism, repentance is a method to humble and cultivate the mind. Most people don’t want to believe they are wrong; they see everyone else as the culprit. By generating a sense of contrition, there is possibility for change. And when we do this, the experience of our difficulties and challenges in life also changes.

To prostrate, while giving rise to a sense of contrition and repentance, activates the body, speech, and mind. When we do repentance prostrations, we bow down, sometimes to an image of the Buddha, and we use this image as a witness for our mistakes. In this practice, our body is engaged in the motion of prostrating as we lower ourselves to the ground; our speech consists of mentally repeating a set phrase such as "For all the karmic acts I have created through body, speech, and mind, from time without beginning, I now repent and vow to change"; and our mind is calm and open. When we open ourselves up, not hiding anything, there is a possibility for change and renewal. At the conclusion of our session of repentance prostrations, we make a vow to change. We may make the same mistake again, but that's OK. We can just repent and vow to change again.

Now let us take a positive example: A poor person who has only one dollar in her wallet feels so much compassion that she wants to give it away, perhaps to a Chan center or to earthquake victims. She completes the action with a mindset of sincerity and with the good intention to help others. In another example, a billionaire hesitates to give or not. He thinks, "I guess I should give something. If I don't, all eyes will be on me because I'm a celebrity." So reluctantly, he decides to give $20,000, which is a small amount considering his wealth. Afterward, he thinks, "Hey, I can use this charity as a tax write-off!" and he feels happy.

In these examples, the one dollar donation has a stronger karmic result than the $20,000. The intention of the billionaire was self-serving; he was thinking only about his gain and loss. His karmic merit is very small indeed, as narrow as his self. On the other hand, the poor person who thought about the suffering of others gave everything she had. Her karmic merit is great, as great as all those who suffer from the earthquake. This is not to say that $20,000 is less than one dollar. Of course it is more useful. But in terms of a karmic act, the reward is much greater. Thus, karma is primarily determined by the intent of the person performing the action.

This brings us back to the story in the introduction about Emperor Wu and his encounter with Bodhidharma. Emperor Wu said, "I built temples, promoted Buddhism, held ceremonies to ordain monks, among other things. What kind of merit do I have?" "None!" replied Bodhidharma. This answer functions on two levels. The first is that ultimate reality is emptiness; things dependently arise and perish. The very fact that the emperor could donate something was the result of the hard work and assistance of everyone else in his domain. Although he gave the orders, everyone else contributed to the tasks. Therefore, because of causes and conditions dependently arising, his gifts were empty.

The second level has to do with the karma that shapes our experiences. "What kind of merit do I have?" "None!" On a conventional level, whatever karma we perform will be experienced. But the issue is the intensity of the karmic reward or retribution. Sometimes we may do great things, but due to our narrow-mindedness while engaging in those acts, our karma is drastically reduced. If building monasteries and supporting the community of monastics is done with arrogance or for self-benefit, then the karma will be as little as the narrow self-centered self.

Retribution

We are continuously and inevitably creating karma from one moment to the next. We also have to understand karma in terms of lasting effects, or retribution. The scriptures describe one type of karma as drawing a line on water. When the line is drawn, it can be seen immediately, but the ripples make it go away quickly. The effect of drawing on water is light. The second kind of karma is described as carving a line on wood, which is something that can easily be seen. The effect of this karma can last a long time, even for a hundred years, depending on conditions such as the weather wearing away the wood. A third type of karma is described as a line edged in stone; it is more permanent than a piece of wood.

These three images—a line drawn in water, a line carved on wood, and a line etched in stone—describe different effects of karmic

intensity. For example: You want to listen to a Dharma talk but a fly is distracting you. You brush it off without harming it. This kind of karma is very small. Although it is in the same category of action that is based on liking this or disliking that, the object of this karmic act was a fly, which you did not really harm, so the intensity of the karma is not great. It would be the karma of drawing a line in water; it would fade quickly. However, if you always kill or harm flies, then it would be a different story.

The effect of karma is called retribution; it simply refers to the fruition of a karmic act. As we have seen, the intensity of karmic retribution depends on the intensity of the act, among other things. We are always living in the shadows of our karmic retributions which color the way we experience the world, and this, in turn, creates more karmic acts. An example of this would be a person traumatized in childhood. As a result of their experiences, they may now be a very insecure person who sees the world as a harmful place, always conspiring against them. They may be suspicious, never trusting anyone, always feeling victimized, and keeping their distance from others. They have created a world in which they live in continual anxiety. The physical actions that they carry out reflect their present karmic retribution; at the same time, they perpetuate new afflictions for the future.

After practicing for some time, they may be able to loosen their grip on their old ways of seeing things and become a happier person, able to recognize their behavior pattern and embrace it for what it was. When they finally accept themself, they will realize that they do not have to see others as they previously did. They will have learned to see fresh possibilities and new perspectives.

Cycles of Life

Bodhidharma talks about the “various existences” we wander through in our countless births. These worlds, shaped by our karma, include the three upper realms of humans, titans, and gods and the three lower realms of animals, hungry spirits, and hell beings. Buddhism and Chan accept the notion that sentient beings wander

through these realms endlessly. But from the Chan perspective, these realms also correlate to different states of mind, or mental dispositions. The refined or cultivated mind correlates to the upper realms of existence, and the coarser or uncultivated mind corresponds to the lower realms. Sometimes people in the human realm live like hungry ghosts, never having enough or never satisfied with what they already have. They received a human birth due to their past merit, but the way they now live, and the karma they create, will determine their next birth.

Karma is one of the few subjects that the Buddha said is too complex for ordinary people to comprehend, and thus he gave us only the basic principles. In this text, Bodhidharma talks about facing calamity and difficulties, and recognizing them as the retribution of past karma. If we want to know our past, we need only look at the present. If we want to know our future, we also look at the present. Why is it that siblings in the same family sometimes have very different lives, one as a victim and the other as a victimizer? Why is it that, from the same parents, one child follows a spiritual path, while the other wallows in desire, hatred, and ignorance? Why do people live in constant insecurity, victimizing themselves at every opportunity? It is because each of us carries different karmic baggage. We've been throwing all the karma that we have ever created into this bag. What we experience in our life is the ripening of seeds in our karmic bag.

We take from the bag whatever we need at the time, and what we grab is in direct proportion to what we have put in, either positive or negative. The hand reaching into the karmic bag corresponds to our reaction to the world around us. If most of the time we tend to experience life as a victim, then no matter what happens in the external world, we will respond as a victim. If our tendency is to be generous, then we will most likely respond to circumstances with generosity. In responding to any situation, we always draw from our karmic bag. But no matter what we draw and how we respond, as a rule we still perpetuate the same kind of karma, either positive or negative, that we have planted. It is at this juncture that practice

becomes important, and this is why karma is taught. It is not to philosophize about the different realms of existence, or to learn about existential philosophy. It is about using our understanding and circumstances to practice the Path.

When we encounter difficulties, we have a choice: to perpetuate the same kind of karma that got us here or to change our destiny. How? Just as the text says, we change our fate by understanding the cause. An apple seed will produce an apple; it will not produce a peach or a banana. A negative experience has the same quality as the original cause that brought about the event. Just as an apple seed will grow to be an apple, any negative seed we plant will result in negativity. So when we're faced with negativity, it is because we've planted that seed in the past. We may never know how or when we did it, but we can do something about it now.

Let's say someone shouts at us or does us harm. Our choice is to either generate the same negativity by responding negatively, or to take this opportunity to transform this negativity, to use it as an opportunity to advance on the Path. The text tells us that when negativity comes our way, we should see it as an opportunity to practice patience and understanding. This would be the beginning of the transformation of our future, our path, and our karma. It's like the sound of one hand clapping: Someone wants to clap with you. If you clap back, you will make a sound. If you don't clap back, then there is no sound, and the clapping has no effect on you.

Four Steps to Embracing Retributions

There are four steps to the practice of embracing retributions. Intentionally or unintentionally, at some point the people around you will create problems for you where there were none before. Bodhidharma's text states:

> **I am reaping the fruit of my past actions. Neither gods nor people can foresee when the ripening of [karmic] fruit may occur. I accept this with an open heart and without ill will or complaint.**

No matter in what situations we find ourselves, we can view them as opportunities for practice. We cannot foresee what will happen; sometimes causes and conditions are beyond our control. However, we can change our responses.

The first step is to have an open heart, to face whatever we are experiencing at this moment. Instead of reacting to it as we usually do, we first relax, open up, and face the problem.

The second step is to accept the situation as the ripening of past karma. Even if we do not believe in karma fully, the concept is useful. This means we don't try to deny what's happening or run away from it. When we accept things, we will be able to discover solutions, and we will be able to respond with compassion and wisdom.

This brings us to the third step, which is to resolve and respond to the situation. If we try to respond to the problem before we have accepted it, then our response will most likely be some kind of denial or aversion. Once we truly accept a problem, we can see opportunities and resolutions previously not seen. So accepting the problem is crucial.

After we have responded to the situation, the fourth step is to let go of it. This means that we let it pass without praising ourselves for the way we solved the problem or beating ourselves up if we couldn't solve it. As long as we have tried our best, then even if the problem persists, it's no longer a problem. A problem is only a problem when there is a solution. If you have truly tried everything and nothing worked, then it's no longer a problem!

Bodhidharma's teaching on embracing retributions through understanding karma is a good way to accept life's challenges and problems. To recap, when a problem arises, we:

1. Face it
2. Accept it
3. Resolve or respond to it
4. Let it go

These four steps must always be practiced in this sequence, or something will go wrong. When we respond to a problem before we accept it, it is not a true response, but a reaction. It shows that we just want to get rid of the person who created the problem. We are reacting with the same mechanism of "I don't like this, I like that" that got us there in the first place. The sequence is, first, to always be open, to face the problem. After we face the problem, then we accept it for what it is; we recognize that whatever we experience is the ripening of karma. But we don't stop there. Karmic retribution is an opportunity for us to improve ourselves, so we need to respond to the problem. Once we have tried our best, we leave no trace of the problem behind. There is no need to flatter ourselves with inner dialogue such as "Ha, I responded so well, I must be a good practitioner!" That would be leaving a trace. Instead, we need to just let the problem go.

If we keep these four steps in mind when we face difficulties, we will be able to transform our karma and live happier and more meaningful lives. This includes even intense karma, the type that is carved in wood or stone. The work of a bodhisattva, or an enlightened being, is to transform our relationship from negativity to one that deepens our understanding of life and practice. This is what we aspire to. It takes time and skill, hence we call this "practice."

Perhaps we don't respond well the first and second time we're provoked by someone, but by the third time, if we react with equanimity, it may convince the person that our character has changed. Their perspective of us will also change, as will our relationship and negative karma. Before we change the other person, we first have to change ourselves, and then we will be able to relate to them. We face the problem, accept it, respond to it, and let go of it. That is the practice of embracing retribution.

2. Adapting to Conditions

The second [entry through practice is that] of adapting to conditions. Sentient beings are without self and are whirled around by their attachment to karma. Their experience of suffering and joy arise from various conditions. Favorable rewards, such as honor and fortune, are results of causes from past lives. Even though rewards are gained in the present, they will be void when the conditions cease. What is there to be joyful about? Gaining and losing stem from conditions, but the mind does not increase nor decrease. Unmoved by the winds of joy, one is in sublime accordance with the Path. Therefore, it is called the practice of adapting to conditions.

The second practice that Bodhidharma addresses concerns facing favorable conditions and not being captivated by them. All things exist because of various conditions coming together. This is the teaching of causes and conditions, or dependent origination: conditions come together because of karma, which is the intended action that affects our life. This is also the teaching of cause and effect: everything is related, and everything has consequences.

This second practice, paired with the first practice of embracing retributions, is to help us not be defeated by life's challenges or captivated by favorable circumstances. Both are opportunities to practice. The first can be understood through a temporal perspective; the second, through a spatial perspective.

People usually become happy and proud when they encounter positive situations such as honor, fame, and rewards. They usually become resistant and sad when they're faced with adversities. The fortunate and blessed ones may think, "I deserve all that I have because I've worked hard all my life." Those with self-disparaging thoughts will of course have a different response. People who continually feel victimized, especially by others, will lament: "Why is this always happening to me?" But no matter how we respond, our basic pattern is the same: "I like this, I want it; I dislike that, I want

to get rid of it." Me and mine, like and dislike, define our sense of self. Our self-reference is strong, and as a result we don't see that everything we do is dependent on the support of many people and things, and is not just the result of our own efforts.

Eight Winds

As cited in the passage above from Bodhidharma's text, the conditions that push and pull us in life are part of what Buddhism calls the "eight winds." They are: gain and loss, fame and defamation, praise and ridicule, and joy and sorrow. These "winds" blow us back and forth without end; we are constantly under their influence, and they give rise to all kinds of emotional afflictions.

How do we face favorable conditions such as gain, fame, praise, or joy? We can observe the mechanism of self-reference, because it is most evident in these situations. The self, as already stated, is our basic assumption that amid all of our life choices, decisions, experiences, and knowledge, there is a "me" and "mine," and an "I am" in the center of everything. When good things happen to us, we become captivated by them. "This is good for me, so I want more of it; that is bad for me, so let me get rid of it." We make choices based on these attachments to good and bad. But everything changes—even our opinion as to what is good or bad. When conditions change, our views also change.

This doesn't mean that we should not enjoy the good things in life. Rather, the point is to recognize the workings of causes and conditions so that when good things happen, we are grateful to all those who helped us. The last thing we want to do is give rise to the false assumption that somehow we alone are responsible for favorable conditions.

When we encounter people and situations, we tend to follow our habit of self-reference and plant the same karmic seeds as we always have. But there is a different choice. We can pay attention to our mindset and take another path: we can experience the world through an understanding that everything is interconnected. This is the

attitude that practitioners should take when facing situations in their life. Our blessings and good fortune are not ours alone. The reality is that things come together because of different causes and conditions and everything is interconnected. The merit of our good deeds may have gotten us praise, fame, or status, but it came also from all the people who helped us in the past.

Let us take, for example, accomplishing a task at work. Even though we may be the director or the chairperson, or we may have planned an event to the last detail, other people have carried it out. We could not have accomplished the task without everyone's help. So any praise and honor that we get is dedicated to everyone else. Not only is everyone who worked on this task intimately connected, but everything else is as well, including the tools that we used, such as computers, or the grant that we received to finish the project. The reason we experience a great sense of loss when we lose our fortune and blessing is that we do not see the connectedness of everything. Instead, our perspective is from our narrow sense of self. Gaining and losing come from causes and conditions; it is the natural order of things. If we resist the natural order of things when we experience praise and good fortune, we will be whirled around by our vexations.

The other night, one of my students arrived at the Chan center early for meditation. She was surprised that no one else was there and that everything was already set up. She said, "Thank you very much for holding these classes and giving these teachings." I felt gratitude toward her and to everyone who comes here. How grateful I am that with my limited knowledge and experience, I am able to express gratitude to my own teacher by sharing these teachings with others! Those who praise others are blessed and have good fortune. When she thanked me, the merit of thankfulness belonged to her.

If you are praised, take yourself out of the equation and recognize the merit of the person who praised you. Recognize that whatever merit you have accomplished actually comes from many causes and conditions. Then you will generate gratitude. When the causes and conditions are no longer there, there is no sense of loss because

causes and conditions are impermanent and free. The “me” and “mine” in the equation is actually something extra.

We have to examine words of praise and see our attitude toward them; we cannot practice without examining them. Practicing Chan is to understand the self, to understand what self means, to know how our mind operates in relation to others. When we receive praise or blame, we must immediately observe our emotions. We must be mindful of what is happening inside us. If we are not mindful, we will automatically revert to the same old pattern, which is, when we are praised, we feel good, and when we are blamed, we feel sad. We get tossed around by the eight winds of emotional afflictions.

We can now understand these favorable conditions from a wider perspective. We no longer have to see them through the tunnel vision of our self-centered view: “This is good for me, I am happy,” or “What she said to me was hurtful; it was bad, I am unhappy.” When we catch our self and are aware of what is happening, we will naturally understand what to do. That is what practice is about. Once we can see it, we face it, and then we accept it.

If we see negativity arising, such as feeling arrogant after we have been praised, there is no need to cut off the arrogance. There is no need to say: “Arrogance is bad; compassion is good.” This would be repeating the same pattern, the same mechanism of “That which is good, I like; that which is not good, I do not like.” It would be replacing one vexation with another—a kind of spiritual substitution.

Vexations and True Nature

When we observe our thought and behavior patterns during practice, we discover that the same trends arise, that we tend to always do things in the same way. This is like a baby calling for our attention; this is what we have to take care of. There are some very smart people who tend to be arrogant; when they are praised, certain emotions arise. This is their karmic disposition, their karmic baggage. Others tend to interpret things in a self-disparaging way, thinking: “I am never good enough; I am not up to standard,” and so

on. There is no need to cut off or suppress these emotions. When a baby cries, do we tell them to shut up, then force a pacifier into their mouth? No, we take care of them. We do the same with our vexations.

Some Buddhists, as well as people in other spiritual traditions, teach that when vexations arise we should terminate them and cut them off. Chan does not do this, because we know that even before we practice, our intrinsic original nature is pure and that it is from this state of intrinsic awakening or purity that all kinds of defilements arise. Vexations are indicators to our enlightenment. They show us what practice is about.

Vexations come from our intrinsic awakened mind. They arise because we do not see our true nature. It is not that enlightenment will happen out of the blue once we have gotten rid of all our afflictions or vexations. Practice is not suppression; also, it does not *produce* enlightenment. Our intrinsic awakened mind is already here. We can compare this to a cup of water filled with all kinds of dirt and gunk. Does the water ever lose its nature of wetness? No. Although it is muddy, does the water ever lose its essence of clarity? It does not. The nature of clarity is not lost; the water may be muddy and thick, but its intrinsic nature is pure. Likewise, all of us are intrinsically awakened buddhas, but we do not know it.

We have been carrying around our karmic baggage all our life; no one else can carry it for us. Yet even though no one is forcing this baggage on us, we are unwilling to let go of it! If we would only open our grasping hands, we would realize that we don't need to carry this baggage around. The carrier is our sense of self, which is made up of values, judgments, experiences, and preconceived ideas. These in turn give rise to vexations.

It is easy to understand the need to let go of self-reference, but it is very hard to do because it involves what is most important to us—our vested interest in permanence. Deep down, we don't want to change our views, opinions, experiences, values, and feelings. They are familiar to us; they define us. They are what it feels like to be us. This attachment is the perpetual self-reference that causes our suffering.

But all these things that we attach to are actually our opportunity to recognize our true nature. The way to let go of this baggage is not to cut off or ignore vexations, but rather to recognize that the self is only a construct, a simulation of our brain based on fragmented memories and misconstrued ideas.

Facing favorable situations is an opportunity to let go of the self and realize our self-nature. We can also use the four-step process discussed above for facing favorable conditions. We face them, accept them, respond to them, and transform them. When we are blessed with something, we face it, accept it, and understand that this situation is the coming together of everything else. Understanding things this way, we will not attach to them so strongly as "mine"; instead we will generate gratitude. Being grateful, we will cherish all things and repay the kindness of everyone who has helped us in the past. In doing so, we nurture all the conditions that have led to our favorable situation. The circle completes itself again: we cultivate the same virtuous merit that has brought us good fortune, and in turn we will experience good fortune in the future.

However, in order to truly understand the workings of causes and conditions, we have to let go. Causes and conditions change—this is the nature of how things are. We cultivate gratitude, but we don't get worked up about being a grateful person. We let that go too, and simply let the circle of conditions flow.

Letting something go means that we are no longer burdened by it; it does not mean that we ignore it. When we let go of our attachments to things, we let go of the self. After enlightenment, or seeing our true nature, our conventional self or personality is still there. It is not that we forget our name, or that we do not recognize family members, or become zombies. The world is still there. Our response, our ability to draw from our memory, our knowledge, intellect, and experience, all of it is still there, except for our attachment to a "self" in the center of the world. We are no longer operating with the self-centered view of "This is either good for me or not good for me." From then on, we respond to what is actually needed in that situation.

This is the mirror-mind of Chan. The permanently etched "image" of our self in that mirror is taken away. The mirror now simply responds to each situation, to whatever is called for. A person with an enlightened view functions neither from a subjective nor an objective view. An objective view is just a collection of subjective views that may not always be good or appropriate. An action can be judged positive or negative, depending on whether it leads to liberation and freedom or to suffering. One acts from the perspective of liberation, not for one's own sake but for the sake of other people.

To recap: What should we do when we encounter favorable conditions such as praise? First, we turn the light inward, face the praise, and become aware of what is happening, instead of allowing the old mechanism of possessiveness to manifest. We see the connections, and we generate gratitude and work to cherish all things. We let the workings of conditions flow as they should, without being captivated even by gratitude. Then all situations in our daily life become practice.

As Bodhidharma's text says, suffering and joy are experienced through the rising and perishing of causes and conditions. Favorable rewards such as honor and fortune are the results of causes from the past. The point is that even favorable situations come from karma that ripens through various conditions. It's like drawing money from your own bank account—why get all excited? It's your money. Still, the reason you got the money is that you worked for it, and you can be grateful to have it. But you have to recognize that everyone else is involved in this merit.

Sometimes we think, "Why is it that I don't see the reward when I do something good?" Because the due date has not yet come! Some people, for instance criminals who do bad things by our conventional standards, live very happy lives. This may lead us to think that robbing banks or harming others will give us a happy life. No. Their happy life comes from causes in previous lives. In the future, they will reap the harmful karma they are now creating. Some karma ripens right away; at other times, if the karma is deep enough, it will ripen continuously, lifetime after lifetime. Karma will sometimes

manifest a few lifetimes or even hundreds of lifetimes after it was created.

Why does karma—those karmic seeds that we put in our bag—ripen? Because of causes and conditions. If the causes and conditions are not there, the seeds will not ripen. With no sunlight, water, and nourishment, seeds will not germinate. It is just a matter of meeting the right causes and conditions.

It is hard to understand one's own life if it is judged only from this one lifetime. Comparing one's life to watching a movie may be helpful. We cannot know the movie's overall narrative if we glance at a random scene for only one second. We may see someone hit a person, and immediately think that the hitter is bad and that the victim is innocent. We probably have the whole story wrong. The "victim" may have previously punched the hitter, or killed the hitter's wife, or did some other harmful thing. We just don't know. If we expand this view over several lifetimes, we can see the grand scheme of things, and perhaps understand why this or that event is happening now.

It's important not to dwell in the past or in the future, but instead, to see the patterns through which we respond to things in the present moment. As a rule, we may not be able to control the external environment, but we can always better ourselves. How? Through Bodhidharma's fourfold practices. We have already examined the first two: embracing retribution and adapting to favorable conditions. Meeting adverse situations, we are not defeated because we recognize the workings of karma. Finding ourselves in favorable situations, we are not captivated because we recognize the interconnectedness of all things. Next we will explore the third of the fourfold practices: the practice of nonseeking.

3. Nonseeking

The third [entry through practice is that] of nonseeking. People of this world are often deluded. To covet after

this and that is what is meant by seeking. The wise awaken to the truth. They adhere to the principle and transpose [the negative effects of] conventional reality, pacifying their minds effortlessly. Although they physically transmigrate in the turning [of samsara], they recognize that the ten thousand existences are empty. They wish for nothing and delight in neither merit nor darkness, which always follow one another. To dwell in the three realms is to dwell in a burning house. To have a body is to inevitably suffer. Who can acquire peace? If one reaches this understanding, then one will relinquish attachment to existences, [false] concepts will cease, and all seeking will be quenched. The sutra says, "To seek is to suffer; to not seek is bliss." Understand that nonseeking is truly practicing the Path. Therefore, it is called the practice of nonseeking.

In our everyday existence, we are always chasing after something. Most people seek after material things such as youth, beauty, and wealth; others seek after spiritual things, such as enlightenment, mental bliss, and happiness. A certain amount of seeking is necessary; if we don't seek anything, we will die. Here, the text is referring to excessive seeking due to misunderstanding reality. It is not that Buddhists and Chan practitioners do not seek anything. They seek. But their seeking depends on whether the thing they are seeking will lead to liberation or to more suffering.

In the beginning of the practice, there is correct seeking—a seeking that causes freedom—and there is incorrect seeking—a seeking that leads to more suffering. Practicing meditation can be both. Some people practice because they think they are great practitioners; others practice to gain better health, find peace, get a good complexion, learn to relax, become more useful, or become more successful. In Japan and Taiwan, corporations send their employees to monasteries to undergo training so they can function more efficiently; they do this, of course, so the company will flourish. It is

true that if we meditate we will be more efficient, focused, and healthy, and we will probably look younger than our age. But once we are on the Path and already practicing Chan, we need to forget about any benefits that we may receive. We just practice for the sake of practice. This is practice based on nonseeking.

To seek the Path in order to become beautiful or successful is the kind of seeking that perpetuates the same pattern of self-grasping that causes us suffering. The Buddhadharma is an expedient means; it is not something that we can use for selfish reasons.

In the *Lotus Sutra,* there is a story of a wealthy merchant who returns home and discovers that his house is on fire. His three sons are in the house but they refuse to come out, preferring to stay inside and play with their toys. The fire is slowly moving toward the children, and the father has to quickly find a way to lure them out of the fire. He knows that they like to play with carts, so he says to his first son: "If you come out, I will give you a cart pulled by a goat." The first son replies: "Yes, I would like to play with a goat cart," and he comes out. The father addresses his second son: "If you come out, I will give you a cart pulled by a deer." The second son likes deer, so he comes out. The father says to his third son: "If you come out, I will give you a cart pulled by an ox." This appeals to the boy because an ox is strong.

When the three boys are finally out of the burning house, the father says: "Actually, I don't have any of these carts. But I am going to give each of you a splendid white-ox cart, and all of you can ride on it."

These three carts represent the three teachings of the Buddhadharma. The first set of teachings refers to the vehicle of the arhats, those who are liberated from greed, hatred, and ignorance; this vehicle focuses on individual liberation. The second set of teachings is the vehicle of the *pratyekabuddhas,* those who reached enlightenment by themselves; this vehicle focuses on dependent origination. The third vehicle is the vehicle of the bodhisattvas, those enlightened beings who aspire to buddhahood by practicing the six

paramitas, or six perfections, for all beings; this vehicle focuses on buddhahood and liberating all beings.

In the analogy about the three carts, the Buddha is essentially instructing that there are no divisions among these three vehicles: those of the arhats, the pratyekabuddhas, and the bodhisattvas. There is only one great vehicle, which is the Buddha vehicle, the Buddha's teaching of full awakening. The Buddhadharma has only a single taste: the taste of liberation.

However, since people have different dispositions, they experience liberation differently. The difference depends on the seeking of sentient beings. In fact, it does not matter what vehicle one practices. A person can practice Chan and still be very selfish; a person can practice the so-called methods of individual liberation and still engage with the world like a bodhisattva.

All of the means to get people out of the "burning house" are expedient devices. In the same sutra, the Buddha said that it is because sentient beings are suffering that he gives teachings. The Buddha giving us teachings can be compared to pacifying a crying baby. We give the baby a pretty leaf to play with so that it will stop crying, but once the baby has stopped crying, the leaf has served its purpose. In a way, practice is like being entertained by the leaf. After we have stopped crying, it has served its purpose. If we continue to attach to our practice, it, too, becomes poison. Actually, the fact that we attach to the practice indicates that we are still seeking something and that we're not yet enlightened. Even after enlightenment, a person still practices, but the practice is no longer a means to an end. Practice is just practice.

Want and Need; Should and Could

In Chan, we must recognize: What causes us to seek? Why do we suffer when we seek? The principle to remember is to know what is proper seeking and what is not. We have to distinguish:

1. What we want from what we need; and

2. What we should have from what we could have.

Most of the problems in life come from the fact that we cannot distinguish between these two principles. Think of all the new gadgets that the material world has to offer, from the latest cell phone to the newest iPad. When we want something but don't have the money to buy it, we suffer. We compare ourselves to others and become envious of those who have the thing that we want. If it is something we actually need for our job or family, then we simply work to acquire it. But if we can't distinguish between what we want and what we need, then we will be forever whirled around by the vexation of endless seeking.

Sometimes it is beyond our capabilities to possess a certain object, and even if we try our best to obtain it, this attempt only causes us suffering. Then we have to just let it go and not force things. All of us have our social standing and obligations. We work hard in life and engage in meaningful endeavors. This requires us to know who we are and what we could have, and what is suitable to have.

For example, I have a childhood friend who recently lost his job. This is not the first time; all through his life he has jumped from one job to another. Whenever he has one job, he is always on the lookout for a better one. Because he is never satisfied with his current position, he sometimes ends up losing it. He recently told me that he finally realized that all his life, he has just been chasing after dreams. He said he was now ready to go deeper into Chan practice. I think he finally understands the difference between need and want, should and could.

These principles are worth examining. They relate not only to our daily life, but also to practicing Chan. Many people misunderstand the meaning of Buddhist nonattachment and nonseeking; they think that nonseeking means being stoic and having no emotions. This is a false understanding of this teaching. The practice of nonseeking tells us that, fundamentally, we do not lack anything; the practice is there to help us realize that.

Buddhadharma as Expedient Means

It is important to question why we do certain things in our life, including going to a Dharma center and practicing meditation. Perhaps some of you have sensed that having a meditation practice in your daily life has already helped you, so you pursue it. Perhaps you have been sitting for some time, practicing on your own or with a group. You may have heard the Dharma expounded a number of times by different people from different perspectives, and yet you are still not enlightened. But you know that once you are, you will see your true nature, so you keep on asking: "What is this Buddhadharma?" You keep on thinking, "It must be special and effective since I've already received some benefits from this practice. Even though I am not enlightened, I can now see the possibility." However, Buddhadharma is only an expedient means to help us let go of our constant seeking. While it is useful, Buddhadharma itself cannot be something to attach to. "Once enlightened, all my problems will be solved!" No. This is just another form of attachment.

One day, a monk had a dialogue with Chan master Yunmen Wenyan (Jp. Ummon Bunen, 864–949). The monk was deeply concerned about the preciousness of the Dharma. Since the Dharma is so special and effective, he desperately sought after it, which brought him to the congregation of Master Yunmen. He asked Yunmen, "Master, what is Buddhadharma?"

Yunmen said, "It is a shit-stick!" With a single stroke of his sword of wisdom, Yunmen slashed away the monk's attachment to some external idea called Buddhadharma.

Why is Buddhadharma a shit-stick? Perhaps Yunmen had just finished going to the toilet! In those days, people did not have toilet paper; in order to wipe themselves, they used leaves and twigs and basically anything they could find in the woods. So a modern answer would be, "Toilet paper!"

The monk had not only practiced meditation diligently for many years, he had also studied the doctrines and made use of the

Buddhadharma in his daily life. All that was missing for his enlightenment was to let go of this single, but biggest, attachment: the meaning of "Buddhadharma." So upon hearing Yunmen's words, he suddenly relinquished this last attachment and became enlightened. Although he had been practicing assiduously all these years to reach enlightenment, the obstacle of enlightenment had remained in front of him. When that dream was slashed and let go of, he was freed. There was nothing for him to rely on, nothing to seek, nothing to construct as an object of his desire.

We assume that Buddhadharma is something special, that it is different from our daily chaos. Actually, we bask in Buddhadharma all the time, and we don't even know it! We live in our natural enlightenment, but we choose to follow vexations instead. For this reason, Buddhadharma—all the teachings about cause and effect, causes and conditions—is just a means to make us realize something that is part of our true nature. The teachings can help us face challenges, accept blessings with gratitude, and practice diligently without seeking anything. And they can do so because these abilities are potentials that already exist within our self-nature.

In summary, cultivate nonseeking, this third entry to the Path, by first learning to distinguish, in your relations with the world, between need and want, should and could. Know that you lack nothing. You are originally free from fixed limitations of self and from fleeting vexations. Your true nature contains everything; there is no need to seek outside yourself. The Buddhadharma is only there to help us realize who we truly are. Therefore, be at peace in all that you do, but exert yourself, and don't inject your self-reference in everything you undertake.

4. Conforming to the Dharma

The fourth [entry through practice] is the practice of conforming to the Dharma. Dharma here means to perceive the principle that our nature is intrinsically

pure. By this principle, all appearances are empty, without defilement or [anything to be] attached to, without this or that. The sutra says, "In Dharma there is no sentient being because it is free from the impurities of sentient being. In Dharma there is also no self, since it is free of the impurities of a self." If a wise person is able to believe in and understand this principle, then the Dharma should be practiced accordingly. The essence of Dharma is without possessiveness. Thus one can give up life and wealth, and practice generosity. Since one's mind is free of miserliness, one will comprehend the three emptinesses. One depends on nothing and attaches to nothing. For the sake of removing one's own impurities, one conforms and transforms sentient beings without clinging to appearances. This is benefiting oneself, which can also benefit others and adorn the Path of Bodhi. When you give in this spirit, the other five [paramitas] follow suit. In order to eliminate delusion, practice the six paramitas, and yet nothing is practiced. This is the practice of conforming to the Dharma.

The Buddhadharma is not something esoteric or foreign. It is intimate, and it shows us a way to realize our full potential as human beings. The Buddhadharma describes what it is like to be happy and free, and it describes what we have done in order to cause our own suffering and bondage. It tells us that in order to live a happier and freer life, we have to realize our true nature, the nature of emptiness.

As I have explained earlier, emptiness just means interconnectedness and relationships; it means that all things are related. In traditional terms, emptiness means causes and conditions. It does not mean vacuity or nothingness. So in enlightenment, when we realize who we are, everything is there except our false sense of self, or self-reference. This is the way to be free from defilement and attachment. Here, defilement does not

mean impurity, as in being dirty. Defilement refers to all those concepts and categories that we use to define the world as good or bad. Attachment to these conventional labels is what defiles things as they are.

All beings are intrinsically pure and free, but because of our karma and attachments, we have a certain image of ourselves. We lead our lives according to our karmic baggage. It is through this mechanism that we have accumulated experiences and knowledge, and those things have shaped us in a certain way. All of our actions have repercussions on our future actions. The way we do things now, in the present, will mold who we will be in the future. Like a computer disk, we are shaped and formatted to become a certain type. But intrinsically, the disk is free from all labels, be it Linux, Windows, Mac, or whatever.

Because we are interconnected with all beings and everything else, we are in perfect accordance with the Dharma. Therefore the text says, "The essence of Dharma is without possessiveness." Dharma also means phenomenon. Each phenomenon is made up of all phenomena. Nothing can be claimed as "me" and "mine"; each phenomenon is without self. What is mine comes from everything else and everyone else; it is freely given.

Dharma without Self

In the text at the beginning of this chapter, Bodhidharma quotes from the *Vimalakirti Sutra*: "In Dharma there is no sentient being because it is free from the impurities of sentient being. In Dharma there is also no self, since it is free of the impurities of a self." This relates to Vimalakirti's critique of one of the Buddha's main disciples, who discriminated when he gave teachings to laypeople because he believed that they had less potential to realize the Dharma. In his criticism of this disciple, Vimalakirti said that in genuine Buddhadharma, there's no discrimination between sentient beings, and one should not defile the Dharma by discrimination. When one has no self-attachment, the Dharma that one teaches will be free from self-reference.

When a genuine teacher conforms to the Buddhadharma, they will not discriminate between students. It may look as if they have favorites, but this is only from the view of the students. A teacher sees the distinctive qualities among their students, but they also see the buddha-nature in all of them and will not dwell on the students' mistakes; past mistakes are not carried over to color the teacher's present interactions with their student.

A teacher also does not attach to their position as a teacher. When students receive benefits from their teachings, it is due to their own merit, and not the teacher's merit alone. If it were otherwise, then all students would receive the same benefits since the teachings are the same for all. But this is not so; everyone has their own perception of the teachings. From the same Dharma talk, some will benefit greatly while others may be bored! This shows that whatever benefits students get from a teaching is due to their own merit. A teacher is just one condition among many.

The student, however, should cherish the genuine teacher. They should not say, "The teacher is just a condition; I'm the one who merits the benefit!" This is upside down. Although the teacher may think that, the student should receive the teaching with great respect. Without such respect, the student's benefits will be few. They would receive only those teachings they gravitate to, namely those that fit their idea of how things are. As for the teachings that could really challenge them—those that have the potential to truly change them—the student would simply ignore them.

So a good teacher accords with causes and conditions and gives freely without holding back, without being miserly in the Dharma, and without possessing the Dharma. These principles also apply to students.

Types of Emptiness

The text speaks about three emptinesses—attachment to the self, or to the "I"; attachment to the "other"; and attachment to the interaction between the self and the other. The *Diamond Sutra*

further extends emptiness to a fourth type: self, others, sentient beings, and life span, or time, which is a subtler type of attachment.

One example of the emptiness of self occurs when we look at photos of ourselves as children. We say: “Ah, that is me!” But which part of the child is us? The face? The bones? The bones are so tiny! The brain? We would hope that our brain is more developed now than when we were kids! Our thoughts, views, and personality have also changed. Everything has changed.

Our sense of time also refers to our actions. We sense time because there are movements, there are actions. So when we attach to our actions, such as when we give something to someone, we have not only attached to the idea of ourselves as a giver, but we have attached also to the idea of others as receivers of our gift, as well as to the idea of our action or sense of time.

In the earlier story about the shit-stick, with a single blow Yunmen slashed the monk’s last attachment to his self, to other (in this case, the Dharma), and to the interaction between self and Dharma. All the monk’s years of practice, going from point A to point B, were suddenly erased. “You want to know the Dharma?” Yunmen asked. “Go around that corner where we shit; it is there, right there!” There are similar fun stories in Chan that illustrate that nothing can be attached to, even the Dharma. When we attach to our wholesome actions, the merit from those actions becomes very small indeed. If we can be free from attachments to self, others, and actions, then we are enlightened. In that case, our merit would actually be great.

The types of emptiness point to the fact that nothing can be attached to. Since this means that practice is also empty, does it mean that there is no need to practice? No! We must engage in practice diligently, but without seeking after anything. Although we can understand the principles of emptiness—how all things are interdependent—and why and how we fabricate our sense of self and the world around us, we still have many vexations. In other words, our knowledge is incongruent with our actions. This is why practice is necessary. We practice so that our whole being conforms to the Dharma.

Six Perfections

How do we conform to the Dharma? By practicing the six perfections or six paramitas—generosity, patience, morality, diligence, meditation, and wisdom—which are based on the principle of emptiness. Anyone who engages in benefiting self and others and who practices the six perfections is a bodhisattva. *Bodhi* means wisdom, *sattva* means person; therefore a bodhisattva is a person on the path of wisdom.

To nurture our wisdom, we have to forget about our own self-interest and cultivate compassion. To cultivate compassion means recognizing that we're inseparable from sentient beings. This recognition will lead to right action. In our daily practice we need to be generous to others; we need to live a blameless, moral life; and we need to cultivate patience and diligence, guided by our meditation practice and the wisdom of the Dharma.

All these aspects must be practiced together, and they must be grounded in the correct Buddhist view, which is that the causes of our suffering and unhappiness lie in our attachment to our desires and to our endless pattern of self-referential needs. Suffering begins here: "I want that which benefits me; I do not want what does not benefit me. Forget about others, I don't care."

A bodhisattva's practice of the six perfections is guided by the wisdom of emptiness, which is the last perfection. The bodhisattva understands causes and conditions and karma, and is free from attachment to the appearances and constructedness of the world. Bodhisattvas can see beyond the veil and understand things as they truly are—fluid, inseparable, interconnected, and without a fixed reference point such as the self. What is important is not to attach to appearances, to our own constructs of the world. Things may not be what *we* think they are. When we allow others to be, new possibilities of experiencing will be open to us.

Our practice does not end with concepts—we have to actualize this teaching. We know that awakening is within all of us, not outside of us. We also know that Buddhist teachings are not meant to be our

latest fashionable pair of rose-tinted glasses. This would be a delusion. We must use our eyes without filter, coloration, or rose-tinted glasses to see the world as it is, to see that things are as they are. The practice of conforming to conditions is to see that things function interconnectedly through causes and conditions: I exist because of everything else. A teacher exists because of their students. Students exist because of the teacher.

Emptiness is relationships, which means that there is no separation between self and other. Instead of seeing ourselves in the center of everything, we see the connectedness of everything. Selflessness is one of the core teachings that free us from attachments and suffering. It is the realization that all things—including us—are related, that they have no permanent, separate, independent self. This does not mean that we have no personality; we always have one, even after enlightenment. It is not that we do not know our name, or do not recognize anyone, or that our mind is blank—enlightenment is not that at all. What is absent in the enlightenment of selflessness is the fundamental assumption of a permanent, separate, independent self within us and within all things. What we consider as separate, independent, permanent, and solid is actually the coming together of everything else.

This book comes from non-book; the bell from non-bell; Guo Gu from non-Guo Gu. A book comes from paper; paper comes from trees; trees grow because of rain; rain comes from water, the ground, and the clouds. There is the factory where paper and ink are made, and then there is the publisher. The bell comes from bronze; it involves casting and coloration. There is also the machine that made the bell and the person who shaped it. Everything comes from everything else. Everything is interrelated into infinite expanse.

When we assume that things are fixed, separate, not interdependent but independent, we get in trouble. Why? Because we are not in accord with how things are. And that’s when things become unnatural and awkward, as they do not flow, but only obstruct.

The text goes on to say that when we abide by this principle of not attaching to forms and appearances—that is, to our own constructs of things, which usually gets us in trouble and clouds the dynamics of how things actually are—we will naturally benefit those around us. Why is that? Because if we attach to forms and appearances, we fail to see things in their fluidity and interdependence; and if we act out of this ignorance, we are doomed to make mistakes. But if we can accord with the Dharma, we can practice the perfections of generosity, patience, morality, diligence, and meditation, guided by this wisdom of emptiness.

The six perfections cover every aspect of our life, so they are principles to live by. Guiding our practice with the wisdom of emptiness is recognizing interconnectedness. When we perceive this, the rest of the five perfections become natural—as natural as the right hand helping the left hand. For example, when we practice generosity, we realize that since everything is related, helping others is really helping ourselves. We cultivate morality in order to live a blameless and beneficial life, because harmonizing with and benefiting others also brings benefits to ourselves. We have patience because we recognize the workings of causes and conditions—everything comes about because various conditions come together. If we want something to happen, we need to wait for the right conditions, cultivate the proper conditions, recognize conditions when they arise, and finally learn to flow with conditions. All of these require patience. We practice diligence because time is precious; it waits for no one. If we are not diligent, we may miss out on causes and conditions when they arise. With diligence, we can accomplish all that can be accomplished.

The perfection of meditation is the foundation of self-transformation. Seated meditation is the first step, but eventually we have to integrate every aspect of our life as meditation. In sitting meditation, we learn not to get caught up with our ideas and constructs, with grasping and rejecting. We recognize that our true nature cannot be affected by the wandering thoughts of "adventitious dust." We learn to sit like a "wall," unmoved by wandering thoughts.

If we do this in sitting meditation, we will eventually be unmoved by the eight winds in our daily life. In our practice of each of these five perfections, we cultivate the wisdom of emptiness, and we do not lose sight of our intrinsic nature that is always free.

All the words spoken and all the ink spilled in this book will mean nothing if we do not put them into practice. Our life is in our hands. Our happiness and well-being depend on whether we are able to accord with the natural order of things. The teachings in this book provide all the practical tools that will help us to walk the Path and deepen our Chan practice. The rest is up to us.

More Information

For more about the author or about Chan, visit the Tallahassee Chan Group at: tallahasseechan.com.

The Tallahassee Chan Center (TCC), founded in 2009 by Guo Gu, is a community of practitioners learning and living the Buddha's teachings through the tradition of the Dharma Drum Lineage of Chan (Zen) Buddhism, as established by Chan Master Sheng Yen.

About the Author

Guo Gu (Dr. Jimmy Yu) was one of the late Master Sheng Yen's senior and closest disciples. He assisted the master in leading intensive retreats and Buddhist studies classes at the various centers Master Sheng Yen founded. These include the Chan Meditation Center in New York City, the Dharma Drum Retreat Center in New York State, the Dharma Drum Mountain Monastery in Taiwan, and several other centers in the United States, Europe, and Asia. Guo Gu also edited and translated a number of Sheng Yen's books from Chinese to English.

Guo Gu first learned meditation at the age of four from Master Guangqin (1892–1986), one of the most respected Chinese meditation masters and ascetics living in Taiwan. Guo Gu moved to the United States in 1981 when his family relocated.

In 1982, Guo Gu began meditation practice with Master Sheng Yen, who was then residing in New York, and from 1989, he attended a number of his intensive Chan retreats. Master Sheng Yen gave him the Dharma name Guo Gu, which means "results from being the valley." In 1991, after college, Guo Gu was ordained as a monk and became Sheng Yen's first personal attendant and translator, traveling worldwide with him. In 1995, he received *inka* (the seal of approval) for his first Chan experience and was given permission by Master Sheng Yen to teach Chan independently. He has subsequently received several affirmations of his experience in 1996, 1997, and 2007. In a chance meeting in June 2007, his experience was also verified by the Rinzai Zen master Roshi Noritake Shunan of the Myoshin-ji Zen lineage.

In 2000, Guo Gu left monasticism and reentered lay life. He received his PhD in Buddhist studies from Princeton University in 2008 and is now teaching Buddhism and East Asian religions academically as an assistant professor at Florida State University, Tallahassee. In 2009, he founded the Tallahassee Chan Group. He is also the guiding teacher for the Western Dharma Teachers Training course at the Chan Meditation Center in New York and the Dharma Drum Lineage.

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