

The Heart of Empty Cloud

A selection from Empty Cloud :The Teachings of Xu Yun

*As compiled from the notes
and recollections of Jy Din Shakya and Related to Ming Zhen (Chuan Yuan) Shakya
and Upasaka Richard Cheung*

Chapter 2 - Chan Training

Many people begin Chan training by thinking, "Well, since all is Maya or Samsaric illusion, it doesn't matter what I do or how I do it. The only thing that's important is gaining Nirvana. So, since there's no such thing as good or evil, I'll do what I want." It does matter what we do. Chan is a branch of the Buddhist religion and as Buddhists we must adhere to ethical precepts. Samsara or no Samsara, we obey the Precepts. And in addition to this, we also follow the strict rules of discipline which govern our training. Let's start with the training rules:

While there are many different methods that may be followed, before beginning any of them, a practitioner must meet four basic requirements:



Illustration by Yao Xin

He or she must:

1. Understand the Law of Causality.
2. Accept the rules of discipline.
3. Maintain an unshakable faith in the existence of the Buddha Self.
4. Be determined to succeed in whichever method he chooses.

I will explain each of these four prerequisites:

First, the Law of Causality simply states that evil produces evil and good produces good. A poison tree yields poison fruit while a healthy tree yields good.

Conceptually, this appears to be simple; but in actuality it is rather complex.

Evil deeds are a vile investment. They guarantee a return in pain, bitterness, anxiety and remorse. There is no profit to be had from actions that spring from greed, lust, anger, pride, laziness, or jealousy. All such motivations merely serve the ego's ambitions. Evil deeds can never promote spiritual fulfillment. They only guarantee spiritual penury.

On the other hand, good deeds, provided they are not done conditionally - as an investment that will yield some future reward, will bring to the doer of them peace and spiritual fulfillment.

An egoless good deed is very different from a contrived good deed. On the surface, the effect may seem the same; help or kindness that is needed is given. But the person who helps another with the hidden expectation of receiving some future benefit, usually does evil, not good. Let me illustrate this point:

In China there was once a Prince who loved birds. Whenever he found an injured bird, he would feed and nurse it back to health; and then, when the bird had regained its strength, he would set it free with much rejoicing.

Naturally, he grew quite famous for his talent as a loving healer of wounded birds. Whenever an injured bird was found anywhere in his kingdom, the bird would quickly be brought to him, and he would express his gratitude to the thoughtful person who brought it.

But then, in order to curry the Prince's favor, people soon began to catch birds and to deliberately injure them so that they could take them to the palace.

So many birds were killed in the course of capture and maiming that his kingdom became a hell for birds.

When the Prince saw how much harm his goodness was causing, he decreed that no wounded bird should ever be helped.

When people saw that there was no profit to be gained from helping birds, they ceased harming them.

Sometimes it happens that our experiences are like this Prince's. Sometimes, when we think we're doing the most good, we learn to our chagrin that we're actually causing the most harm.

Perform a good deed in silence and anonymity! Forget about rejoicing. A good deed should have a very short life, and once dead, should be quickly buried. Let it rest in peace. Don't keep trying to resuscitate it. Too often, we try to turn a good deed into a ghost that haunts people, that keeps reminding them of our wonderful service - just in case they start to forget.

But what happens when we are the recipient of someone else's kindness? Well, then, we ought to let that good deed gain immortality. Letting someone else's good deeds live is much more difficult than letting our own good deeds die. Let me illustrate this, too.

There once was a grocer, a kind and decent man who valued all his customers. He cared for them and wanted them all to be healthy and well-fed. He kept his prices so low that he did not earn much money, not even enough to hire someone to help him in his little shop. He worked very hard in his honest poverty, but he was happy.

One day a customer came and told him a sad story. Her husband had been injured and would not be able to work for several months. She had no money to buy food for him and for their children. "Without food," she wept, "we will all die."

The grocer sympathized with her and agreed to extend credit to her. "Each week I'll provide you with rice for seven days and vegetables for four days," he said, "and that surely will be enough to sustain your family's health; and then, when your husband returns to work, you can keep to the same menu while paying off your account. Before you know it, you'll all be eating vegetables seven days a week."

The woman was so grateful. Every week she received rice for seven days and vegetables for four.

But when her husband returned to work she had to decide whether to pay off her old debt while continuing to eat vegetables only four days a week or to patronize a new grocer and eat vegetables seven days a week. She chose the latter and justified her failure to pay her debt by telling people that her former grocer had sold her rotten vegetables.

How often, when we want something badly, do we promise that if we are given what we desire, we will dedicate our lives to demonstrate our gratitude? But then, once we receive what we so ardently sought, our pledge weakens and dies, almost automatically. We quickly bury it, without ceremony. This is not the Chan way.

And so, just as a farmer who sows soy beans does not expect to harvest melons, we must not expect, whenever we commit selfish or immoral or injurious acts, to harvest spiritual purity. Neither can we hope to hide from our misdeeds by removing ourselves from the location in which we committed them, or to assume that time will expunge the record of them. Never may we suppose that if we just ignore our misdeeds long enough people whom we have injured will conveniently die, taking to the grave with them our need to atone for the damage we have caused. It is our good deeds that we must bury... not our victims or broken promises.

We may not think that because there is no witness around to question us, we will not have to answer for our misdeeds. Many old Buddhist stories illustrate this principle. Let me tell you a few of my favorites:

During the generation that preceded Shakyamuni Buddha's life on earth, many of his Shakya clansmen were brutally massacred by the wicked king, Virudhaka, the so-called "Crystal King".

Why did this terrible event occur?

Well, it so happened that near Kapila, the Shakya city in which the Buddha was born, there was a large pond and, on the shore of that pond, there was a small village. Nobody remembers the name of the village.

One year a great drought occurred. The crops withered and the villagers couldn't think of anything else to do but kill and eat the fish that lived in the pond. They caught every fish except one. This last fish was captured by a boy who played with the wretched creature by bouncing it on its head. That's what he was doing when the villagers took it from him and killed it.

Then the rains came again and everywhere in the kingdom life returned to normal. People got married and had children. One of those children was Siddhartha, the Buddha, who was born in the city of Kapila, near that village and pond.

Siddhartha grew up and preached the Dharma, gaining many followers. Among these followers was the King of Shravasti, King Prasenajit. This King married a Shakya girl and the two of them produced a son: Prince Virudhaka, the "Crystal One". The royal couple decided to raise the Prince in Kapila, the Buddha's city.

At first, everything was fine. Prince Virudhaka was a healthy baby and before long he grew into a nice strong boy. But before he was even ready to start school, a momentous event occurred.

It happened that one day, during the Buddha's absence from Kapila, the young prince climbed up onto the Buddha's Honored Chair and began to play there. He meant no harm - he was just a child playing. But Oh! - when the Buddha's clansmen saw the prince playing in this sacred place they became very angry and reprimanded the prince and dragged him down from the chair, humiliating and punishing him.

How can a child understand the foolishness of zealots? Adults can't figure it out. It's really quite mysterious. Their harsh treatment served only to embitter the prince and to cause him to hate all his Shakya clansmen. It was their harsh treatment that started him on his career of cruelty and vengeance.

Eventually, the prince, by killing his own father, it is said, was able to ascend the throne of Shravasti. Now, as King Virudhaka, the Crystal King, he was finally able to

take revenge against the Shakya clan. Leading his own soldiers, he began to attack the city of Kapila.

When the Buddha's clansmen came to tell him about the impending massacre, they found him suffering from a terrible headache. They begged him to intervene and rescue the people of Kapila from the Crystal King's brutal attack, but the Buddha, groaning in pain, refused to help. "A fixed Karma cannot be changed," he said.

The clansmen then turned to Maudgalyayana, one of the Buddha's most powerful disciples, and begged for his assistance. He listened to their sad complaint, and moved to pity, decided to assist the besieged citizens of Kapila.

Using his supernatural abilities, Maudgalyayana extended his miraculous bowl to the threatened Shakya and allowed five hundred of them to climb into it. Then he raised the bowl high in the air, thinking that he had lifted them to safety. But when he again lowered the bowl, the five hundred men had turned into a pool of blood.

The dreadful sight so alarmed everyone that the Buddha decided to disclose the story of his ancestors, those villagers who had killed all the fish during the drought.

"This marauding army of soldiers that are now attacking Kapila had been those fish," he explained. "The people of Kapila who are now being massacred were the people who killed those fish. The Crystal King, himself, was that last big fish. And who, do you think," the Buddha asked, holding a cold cloth against his forehead, "was the boy who bounced that fish on its head?"

So, for killing the fish, the people suffered death. And for hurting that fish's head, the Buddha was now plagued with an awful headache.

And what about Virudhaka, the Crystal King? Naturally, he was reborn in Hell.

And so, you see, there is no end to cause and effect. A cause produces an effect which itself becomes the cause of another effect. Action and reaction. Tribute and Retribution. This is the Law of Causality. Sooner or later our evil deeds catch up with us. The only way to prevent the effect is to prevent the cause. We must learn to be forgiving, to overlook injury and insult, and to never seek revenge or even harbor any grudges. We must never become zealots, self-righteous and proud in our vain notions of piety and duty, and above all, we must always be gentle, especially with children.

Let me tell you another cause and effect story. This one concerns Chan Master Bai Zhang who actually was able to liberate a wild fox-spirit. Very few people have been able to do that!

It seems that one evening, after a Chan meeting had ended and all his disciples had retired, Master Bai Zhang noticed that an elderly man was lingering outside the Meditation Hall.

Bai Zhang approached the man and asked, "Tell me, sir, who or what is it that you're seeking?"

The elderly man replied, "No, not 'sir'. I am not a human being at all. I am a wild fox who is merely inhabiting the body of a man."

Bai Zhang was naturally very surprised and curious. "How did you get into this condition?" he asked.

The elderly fox-man explained, "Five hundred years ago, I was the head monk of this monastery. One day, a junior monk came and asked me, 'When a man attains enlightenment is he still subject to the Law of Causality?' and I boldly answered him, 'No, he is exempt from the Law.' My punishment for this false and arrogant answer was that my spirit was changed into the spirit of a wild fox and so I ran off, into the mountains. As a fox-man I could not die, and, for so long as my ignorance remains, I must continue to live in this wretched condition. For five hundred years I have been roaming the forests seeking the knowledge that will free me. Master, I beg you to be compassionate towards me and to enlighten me to the truth."

Master Bei Zhang spoke gently to the fox-man. "Ask me the same question that the junior monk asked you, and I will give you the correct answer."

The fox-man complied. "I wish to ask the master this: When a man attains enlightenment is he still subject to the Law of Causality?"

Bai Zhang answered, "Yes. He is never exempt from the Law. He may never close his eyes to the possibilities of cause and effect. He must remain aware of all his present and past actions."

Suddenly the old fox-man was enlightened and free. He prostrated himself before the master and thanked him profusely. "At last," he said, "I am liberated!" Then, as he started to leave, he turned and asked Bai Zhang, "Master, since I am a monk, would you kindly grant me the usual funeral rites for a monk? I live nearby, in a den on the mountain behind the monastery, and I will go there now to die."

Bai Zhang agreed, and the next day he went to the mountain and located the den. But instead of finding an old monk there, Bai Zhang saw only a disturbance in the den's earthen floor. He probed this disturbance with his stick and discovered a dead fox!

Well, a promise is a promise! Master Bai Zhang conducted the usual monk's funeral rites over the fox's body. Everyone thought Bai Zhang quite mad, especially when he led a solemn funeral procession... with a dead fox on the bier!

So you see, dear friends, even the attainment of Buddhahood does not exempt one from the Law of Causality. When even the Buddha can suffer a headache for having been unkind to a fish, how much more is our need to remain heedful of the principle that an injurious act, sooner or later, will bring us an injurious retribution. Be careful in what you say or do! Don't risk becoming a fox spirit!

As to the second requirement, the strict observance of the rules of discipline, I will tell you sincerely that there can be no spiritual progress without morality and the fulfillment of religious duty.

Discipline is the foundation upon which enlightenment rests. Discipline regulates our behavior and makes it unchanging. Steadiness becomes steadfastness and it is this which produces wisdom.

The Surangama Sutra clearly teaches us that mere accomplishment in meditation will not erase our impurities. Even if we were able to demonstrate great proficiency in meditation, still, without adherence to discipline, we would easily fall into Mara's evil realm of demons and heretics.

A man or woman who is diligent in observing moral discipline and religious duty is protected and encouraged by sky dragons and angels, just as he is avoided and feared by demons from the underworld and heretics from everywhere.

It once happened that in the state of Kashmir, a poisonous earth dragon lived in a cave near a monastery of five hundred Theravadin arhats. This dragon terrorized the region and made people's lives miserable. Everyday the arhats would assemble, and together they would try to use the power of their collective meditation to drive away the dragon. But always they failed. The dragon simply would not leave.

Then one day a Mahayana Chan monk happened to stop at the monastery. The arhats complained about this terrible dragon and asked the monk to join them in meditation, to add the power of his meditation to theirs. "We must force this beast to leave!" they wailed. The Chan monk merely smiled at them and went directly to the poisonous dragon's cave.

Standing in the cave's entrance, the monk called to the dragon, "Wise and virtuous Sir, would you be kind enough to depart from your lair and find refuge in a more distant place?"

"Well," said the dragon, "since you have so politely asked, I will accede to your request and depart forthwith." The dragon, you see, had a fine sense of etiquette. So, away he went!

From their monastery, the arhats watched all this in absolute astonishment. Surely this monk possessed miraculous samadhi powers!

As soon as the monk returned, the arhats gathered around him and begged him to tell them about these wonderful powers.

"I did not use any special meditation or samadhi," said the monk. "I simply kept the rules of discipline and these rules stipulate that I must observe the minor requirements of courtesy as carefully as I observe the major requirements of morality."

So we can see that the collective power of five-hundred arhats' meditation-samadhi are sometimes not the equal of one monk's simple adherence to the rules of discipline.

And if you ask, "Why should strict attention to discipline be necessary if the mind has attained a non-judgmental state? Why should an honest and straightforward man even need to continue to practice Chan?"

I would ask such a man, "Is your mind so secure that if the lovely Goddess of the Moon were to come down to you and embrace you with her naked body, would your heart remain undisturbed?"

And you... If someone without having cause were to insult or to strike you, would you feel no anger and resentment? Can you be certain that you would always resist comparing yourself to others, or that you would always refrain from being judgmental? Can you be sure that you would always know right from wrong?

Now, if you are absolutely certain that you would never yield to temptation, that you would never err at all, then, open your mouth and speak loud and clear! Otherwise, do not even whisper a lie.

As regards the third requirement of having a firm belief in one's Buddha Self, please know that faith is the mother, the nourishing source of our determination to submit to training and to perform our religious duties.

If we seek liberation from the travails of this world, we must have a firm faith in the Buddha's assurance that each living being on earth possesses Tathagata wisdom and, therefore, has the potential of attaining Buddhahood. What prevents us from realizing this wisdom and attaining this Buddhahood? The answer is that we simply do not have faith in his assurances. We prefer to remain in ignorance of this truth, to accept the false as genuine, and to dedicate our lives to satisfying all our foolish cravings.

Ignorance of the truth is a disease. Now, as the Buddha taught, the Dharma is like a hospital that has many doors. We can open any one of them and enter into a place of cure. But we must have faith in our physicians and in the efficacy of the treatment.

Whenever he wanted to illustrate the problems which doubt and lack of faith cause, the Buddha would relate the parable of the physician. He would ask, "Suppose you were wounded by a poisoned arrow and a friend brought a physician to help you. Would you say to your friend, 'No! No! No! I'm not going to let this fellow touch me until I find out who shot me! I want to know the culprit's name, address, and so forth. That's important, isn't it? And I want to know more about this arrow. Is the tip stone or iron, bone or horn? And what about the wooden shaft? Is it oak or elm or pine? What kind of sinew has been used to secure the tip to the shaft? Is it the sinew of an ox, a monkey, or a ruru deer? And what kind of feathers are in the shaft? Are they from a heron or a hawk? And what about the poison that's been used? I want to know what kind it is. And who is this fellow, anyway? Are you sure he's a qualified doctor? After all, I don't want a quack to treat me. I think I have a right to know these things, don't you? So, please answer my questions or I'll not let the man touch me.' Well," said the Buddha, "before you could get your questions answered to your satisfaction, you would be dead."

So, dear friends, when you find yourself suffering from the ills of the world, trust in The Great Physician. He has cured millions of others. Which believer has ever perished in his care? Which believer has failed to be restored to eternal life and happiness by following his regimen? None. All have benefited. And so will you if you have faith in his methods.

Faith is a kind of skill that you can develop. If, for example, you wish to make bean curd, you begin by boiling and grinding the soybeans and then you add a solution of gypsum powder or lemon juice to the boiled beans. You know that you can stand there, if you wish, and watch the curds form. You have faith in your method because it always works. Thus you gain the feeling of certainty. Of course, the first time that you made bean curd, assuming that you were completely unfamiliar with its production, you may have lacked faith in the method. You might have been filled with doubt that gypsum or lemon water would cause the boiled beans to form curds. But once you succeeded and saw with your own eyes that the recipe was correct and that the procedure worked, you accepted without reservation the prescribed method. Your faith in the method was established.

Therefore, we must all have faith that we each have a Buddha Nature and that we can encounter this Buddha Nature if we diligently follow a proper Dharma path.

If we are afraid, we should also remember Master Yong Jia's words recorded in his Song of Enlightenment;

"In the Tathagata's Real World neither egos, rules, nor hells exist. No samsaric evils may be found there. If I'm lying, you can pull my tongue out and stuff my mouth with sand, and leave it that way throughout eternity."

No one ever pulled Master Yong Jia's tongue out.

As regards the fourth prerequisite, being resolute in our determination to succeed in whichever method we have chosen, please let me warn you about the folly of jumping around from method to method. Think of the Dharma as a mountain you must climb. There are many paths which lead to the summit. Choose one and stay with it! It will lead you there! But you will never get to the top if you race around the mountain trying one path and then rejecting it in favor of another that looks easier. You will circle the mountain many times, but you will never climb it. Stay with your chosen method. Be absolutely faithful to it.

In Chan we always tell stories about purchased devils. One particular story is very appropriate here:

One day a fellow was strolling through the marketplace when he came to a stall that said, "For Sale: First Class Devils." Of course, the man was intrigued. Wouldn't you be? I would. "Let me see one of these devils," he said to the merchant.

The devil was a strange little creature... rather like a monkey. "He's really quite intelligent," said the merchant. "And all you have to do is tell him each morning what you want him to accomplish that day, and he will do it."

"Anything?" asked the man.

"Yes," said the merchant, "Anything. All your household chores will be finished by the time you get home from work."

Now the man happened to be a bachelor and so the devil sounded like a pretty good investment. "I'll take it," he said. And he paid the merchant.

"There's just one little thing," said the merchant - there's always just one little thing, isn't there? - "You must be faithful in telling him what to do each day. Never omit this! Give him his instructions every morning and all will be well. Remember to keep to this routine!"

The man agreed and took his devil home and every morning he told him to do the dishes and the laundry and to clean the house and prepare the dinner; and by the time he returned from work, everything was accomplished in the most wonderful manner.

But then the man's birthday came and his friends at work decided to give him a party. He got very drunk and stayed in town overnight at a friend's house and went directly to work the following morning. He never returned home to tell his devil what to do. And when he returned home that night he discovered that his devil had burned down his house and was dancing around the smoking ruins.

And isn't this what always happens? When we take up a practice we vow with our blood that we will hold to it faithfully. But then the first time we set it down and neglect it, we bring disaster to it. It's as though we never had a practice at all.

So, regardless of whether you choose the path of Mantra, or Yantra, or Breath Counting, or a Hua Tou, or repeating the Buddha's name, stay with your method! If it doesn't deliver you today, try again tomorrow. Tell yourself that you will be so determined that if you have to continue your practice in the next life, you will do so in order to succeed. Old Master Wei Shan used to say, "Stay with your chosen practice. Take as many reincarnations as you need to attain Buddhahood."

I know it's easy to become discouraged when we think we're not making progress. We try and try but when enlightenment doesn't come we want to give up the struggle. Perseverance is itself an accomplishment.

Be steadfast and patient. You're not alone in your struggle. According to ancient wisdom, "We train for dreary eons - for enlightenment that occurs in a flashing instant."

Chapter 3 - Gaining Enlightenment

Chan has two famous Masters named Han Shan: a 9th Century recluse whose name means Cold Mountain and a 16th Century teacher whose name means Silly Mountain. Cold Mountain is Chan Buddhism's greatest poet. Silly Mountain was a pretty good poet, too. He's probably Chan's second best poet.

Cold Mountain appealed to nature to lead him to peace and understanding. In finding beauty in the natural world he found beauty in himself. That's the way hermits operate. They look; they ponder; they convert loneliness into solitude.

Silly Mountain transcended himself by working for others. He strove to help ordinary folks gain enlightenment. That's a little harder than surviving frost and hunger.

Han Shan, Cold mountain, said:

High on the mountain's peak
Infinity in all directions!
The solitary moon looks down
From its midnight loft
Admires its reflection in the icy pond.
Shivering, I serenade the moon.
No Chan in the verse.
Plenty in the melody.

Han Shan, Silly Mountain, tried to put what couldn't be said into words everybody could understand:

Put a fish on land and he will remember the ocean until he dies. Put a bird in a cage, yet he will not forget the sky. Each remains homesick for his true home, the place where his nature has decreed that he should be.

Man is born in the state of innocence. His original nature is love and grace and purity. Yet he emigrates so casually, without even a thought of his old home.

Is this not sadder than the fishes and the birds?

We would all like to reflect the Moon of Enlightenment. We would all like to get home to Innocence. How do we accomplish this? We follow the Dharma.

The Buddha saw the unenlightened life's ignorance as a diseased condition. His Four Noble Truths have a medical connotation:

One, life in Samsara is bitter and painful. Two, craving is the cause of this bitterness and pain. Three, there is a cure for this malady. Four, the cure is to follow the Eightfold Path.

First, we need to recognize that we are ill. Second, we need a diagnosis. Third, we need to be assured that what's wrong with us will respond to treatment. Fourth, we require a therapeutic regimen.

Samsara is the world seen through the ego. It is a troubled and sick world because of the ego's unceasing cravings.

Trying to satisfy the demands of the ego is like trying to name the highest number. No matter how large a number we can think of, one more can always be added to it to make an even higher number. There is no way to attain the ultimate.

Dear friends, is it not true that no matter how much money a person has, he always thinks he needs a little more, that no matter how comfortable a person's home is, he always wants a place that's a little more palatial, that no matter how many admirers he has, he always needs to hear a little more applause?

Constant striving results in constant strife.

So what are we to do? First we must understand that the problems which the ego creates cannot be solved in Samsara's world of ever changing illusions. Why? Because the ego is itself an ever changing, fictional character that merely acts and reacts in response to life's fluctuating conditions - conditions which it can never quite comprehend.

It's like trying to play football when the length of the field keeps changing; and instead of one ball in play, there are twenty; and the players are either running on and off the field or sleeping on the grass. Nobody is really sure which game is being played and everybody plays by different rules. Now, anyone who was expected to be both player and referee could never find pleasure in such a game. He'd find his life on the field to be an endless exercise in fear, confusion, frustration and exhaustion.

The Eightfold Path guides, delimits, and establishes rules which are clear. Everyone can follow them.

The first step is Right Understanding.

Understanding requires both study and consultation with a Master.

Information acquired only through reading is never sufficient. Is the book accurate? If it is, do we truly comprehend what we've read? We cannot test ourselves. Think of what would happen if students devised their own tests and graded them, too. Everyone of them would get an A! But how many of them would really know their subject?

Many students of Chan read a book and then, by way of testing their comprehension, engage their friends in sophomoric arguments or regale them with lordly pronouncements. Teachers say of these discussions, "In the land of the blind the one-eyed man is king."

A good teacher is indispensable. A good teacher engages us and determines if we understand what we've studied.

If we are unclear about a passage in a book, we cannot question the book. If we disagree with certain views of a teacher, we cannot skip over his instruction the way we can skip over troublesome paragraphs. It's often necessary to consult with a good teacher. There is no substitute for regular, face to face interactions.

You know, there was once a sailor who, while on leave, met the girl of his dreams. He fell madly in love with her. Unfortunately, he had to return to his ship to finish the two years of his enlistment. So he thought, "I'll not let her forget me. Every day I'll write to her. If nothing else, she'll love me for my fidelity."

Everyday, wherever he was, he wrote to her; and when he returned two years later, he learned that along about his two hundredth letter, she had married the mailman!

Dear Friends, don't be like that poor sailor who relied on the written word to achieve an understanding. Find a master who will meet regularly with you. Open your heart to him. The better he gets to know you, the better he will be able to advise and instruct you.

The second step is Right Thought.

Right Thought requires us to become aware of our motivations. Always we must inquire why we want to have something or why we want to do something, and we must be ruthless in our inquiry. If a friend wanted to purchase something he couldn't afford or to do something that was bad for him, we would give him sound advice, cautioning him, helping him to see the likely outcome of his foolish desires. Can we not be that kind of friend to ourselves? Can we not apply ordinary common sense to our own desires?

Careful investigation will illuminate our situation:

The Warlord T'ien Chi and the King of Ch'i enjoyed the sport of horse racing. Regularly they met to race their horses.

Now, each had three classes of horses. The third class was the draft horse. These are the horses that pull wagons. They are big and strong but very slow.

The second class was the cavalry horse, these are the horses upon which lancers, archers, and swordsmen are mounted. These horses are strong and reasonably fast; but they are older because they require years of training.

The first class of horse was the young thoroughbred upon which noblemen and high officers would be mounted. This class of horse was light and very fast.

So, whenever the King and the Warlord held a racing contest, they would race all their 3rd classes horses against each other, then they'd race their second class horses, and last, they'd race their first class thoroughbreds.

Now, the King was very rich and possessed much better horses than the warlord. So naturally he won all the races.

In his frustration, Warlord T'ien Chi appealed to Sun Ping, a wise descendant of Sun Tzu - Sun Tzu wrote the famous "Art of War". T'ien Chi asked Sun Pin, "Please advise me. How can I win against the King?"

The wise man thought for a moment. Then he said, "Sir, I suggest that when the King sends his third class horses into competition, you send in your second class horses to race against them. When the King sends in his second class horses, you send in your first class horses; and when the King sends in his first class horses, you send in your third class. You will win two out of three races."

The answer was simple, but why couldn't the warlord figure it out for himself? Because his ego had gotten him too emotionally involved in the competition. He didn't step back from his situation and look at it objectively. He didn't apply Right Thought.

Dear Friends, be ruthless in your examination of your desires. Apply to yourself the same common sense you would use to counsel a friend.

The third step is Right Speech.

How often do we impress words into the ego's service. To gain some advantage, we gossip, or we exaggerate, or we neglect to tell the whole story, or we insinuate the probable guilt of others while protesting our own inviolable innocence. Sometimes, just to be the center of attention, many of us will tell sordid tales or smutty jokes.

We think that words are not deeds, that they have little power and a short life, that somehow words just evaporate with the breath that speaks them. But words do have power and they can live forever; and, furthermore, they can heal as well as harm.

Just as Right Speech discourages us from uttering falsehoods, insults, accusations, or from bragging about our own accomplishments, it also encourages us to speak words of comfort, to utter words of forgiveness, to express acknowledgment and appreciation for the accomplishments of others.

Never underestimate the power of words. Let me tell you an old story which illustrates their power:

It was a beautiful day in Spring and many people had come to the park to see the green grass and the flowering trees and plants. Among the people who came were two blind beggars.

The first beggar had a sign that read, "I am blind." Most people just walked past him and kept on admiring the view.

The second beggar did much better. Nearly everyone who passed him put a coin in his cup. Some people who had walked past him without giving actually turned around to go back and give him a coin.

His sign read, "It is May - and I am Blind!"

Dear Friends, when deciding to speak or not to speak, think about that blind man who saw how much difference one little phrase can make!

The fourth step is Right Action.

Right action contains the Precepts.

1. The Buddhist vows to be nonviolent. This does not mean that he cannot defend his life or the lives of those persons who are in his care but that he cannot initiate hostile actions against others.

But what about himself? He, also, is one of the people against whom he may take no hostile action.

Peace is not merely the absence of war. Anxiety is not an aggressive state, but it isn't peaceful, either. The fellow who's in a coma is not at war, but he's not at peace, either. Peace is a state that is deliberately achieved and maintained.

It is not enough merely to be nonviolent; we must also act to promote harmony, well-being, and good health.

Smoking, for example, is inimical not only to the smoker's health but to the health of all around him. On both counts, then, smoking is forbidden by the precept against violence.

Whenever possible, a Buddhist should abstain from eating meat. I say 'whenever possible' because this rule is not absolute. Many people, for example, live in arctic regions where they have no choice but to eat fish and other marine creatures. They cannot grow gardens in the tundra; and we cannot deny the Dharma to human

beings because their environment does not conduce to vegetarian diets. But where vegetables are plentiful, there is no reason to eat meat.

On the positive side, a vegetarian diet promotes good health and for this reason, also, it should be followed.

Exercise, particularly Tai Ji Quan or Qi Gong, releases aggression and anger and also has a salubrious effect on the body. Yoga is also very beneficial.

2. The Buddhist vows to be truthful, not only in his social life, but in his business life as well. All forms of cheating and chicanery are included in this Precept. Whenever we sacrifice truth in order to gain some imagined advantage, we enter a tangled, convoluted world:

In Tokyo there were two merchants who after years of competitive conniving and deceit thoroughly distrusted each other.

One day they met at the railroad station. The first merchant asked, "Where are you going?"

The second merchant thought for a moment and answered, "To Kobe."

The first merchant gasped, "You liar! You tell me you are going to Kobe because you want me to think you are going to Osaka; but I have made inquiries, and I know you ARE going to Kobe!"

Dear Friends, this is the destination of even the smallest deceit. Our reputations are like the label on a shipping box. Once we are known as liars and cheaters, we consign our intentions, no matter how innocent, to the place of doubt and mistrust.

3. The Buddhist vows not to appropriate property which is not his own. This is the Precept against stealing.

Some people think that this Precept involves only cat-burglars and pickpockets. So long as they are not "breaking and entering" or purse-snatching, they think they needn't worry about this Precept. And for this reason, they feel no twinge of remorse about acts of petty theft or other misappropriations of property.

But what is an unpaid debt? Is this not stealing? What is borrowing something and not returning it? Is this also not stealing? What is using another person's property and damaging it without compensating him for the damage? Is this not stealing?

Sometimes we act as if we are entitled to appropriate the property of one person because another person has appropriated our property. The Golden Rule says that we should do to others what we would want them to do to us. It doesn't say that we may do to others what others have done to us.

It is because we excuse or overlook our own larcenies that we feel no need to repent of them.

According to ancient wisdom, "The thief is sorry he is to be hanged - not that he is a thief."

If, before we committed any act, we examined its ethics and its possible results, we would never need to worry about the gallows.

4. The Buddhist vows to be sexually moral, modest, and responsible.

In this one Precept we can see how easy it is to break all the others. In the cause of his lust, a man will steal. In the cause of his lust, he will ply the woman he desires with alcohol and deceive her with false promises. And when he uses and abuses her body in such a way, is he not harming her?

And as greatly as we condemn immorality, so greatly do we praise morality. Much honor attends the virtuous person, the person who is chaste in his single life or faithful to his sacred marriage vows!

It is in the failure to observe the Precept of morality that we find the worst hypocrites. How often do we encounter a man who ferociously guards his own daughters, while conniving to debauch other men's daughters? Or, who strictly guards his own wife, while casually seducing another man's wife? If he were to kill a man who defiled his daughters or wife, he would expect the Courts to see him as a victim and to absolve him of guilt. Yet, when it is he who debauches and seduces, he regards himself as heroic. Is this not a sad and terrible truth?

It is not easy for a man to overcome lust. The temptations are ubiquitous and infinite in variety. Yet, if any man were to divert some of the energy he squanders on sexual conquests into conquering his own lust, he would make true spiritual progress.

All honorable men concur on the struggle's severity. Even the Buddha said, "If I had had another obstacle as difficult to overcome as my sexuality, I never would have made it."

The Buddha's good humor and self-deprecating candor should give us all encouragement.

5. The Buddhist vows to abstain from the use of alcohol or other intoxicants.

There are those who say, "An occasional drink won't hurt anyone." But an occasional drinker is still a drinker. It is rather like the state of being "a little pregnant." Either there is a pregnancy or there isn't.

The description "occasional" is an unlocked door which any thief can enter. Either sobriety's door is locked or it isn't. Experience tells us that the best way to solve a

problem is to avoid it. Complete abstention is the best way to observe and guard this Precept.

The occasional drinker can remain sober when he's not beset by problems; but as soon as he's under serious stress, he may easily succumb to the dead-end escape of alcohol. Once he is captured by drink, he discovers that one drink is too many and a hundred drinks are not enough.

Alcohol relaxes our inhibitions so that we may indulge our egos. It allows us to override the rules of decorum and decency and then to blame our misconduct on the drink - not on our having taken the drink in the first place. Of course, we tell ourselves that we took that drink in order to enjoy ourselves; but when we drink and dull our senses, how can we enjoy a pleasure? And even if we could, what value is there in experiencing a pleasure that we cannot later remember or savor?

We often find that an intoxicated man who commits an immoral act will afterwards, when sober, regard himself with disgust; but then this same man will use that self-disgust as an excuse to drink again.

Let him instead become aware of his true nature, his Glorious Buddha Self. Let him instead learn that within himself he will find truth, peace, joy and freedom. Assure him that if it were possible to grow these on a vine and put them in a bottle, we should all be vintners and sots.

Dear friends, there is an old saying, "In Vino Veritas" which means "In wine there is truth" providing we drink enough of it. But the only truth we ever find when we overindulge in wine is that life in Samsara is bitter and painful.

The fifth step is Right Livelihood.

Obviously, if we can't participate in illegal activities for fun, we certainly can't participate in them for profit.

But any livelihood that is honest is honorable. Honest work is honest work. There are no noble occupations and no ignoble occupations. But for some reason this isn't so elementary a concept as it seems.

In India, for example, there has traditionally been a caste system. There's a priest class, and a warrior class, and a merchant class, and a worker class, and, down at the very bottom, a class of untouchables or social outcasts. In whatever caste a person is born, he remains. He can't jump around from job to job. No matter how talented or intelligent he is, if he's born into a family of farm laborers, that's the only work he's permitted to do. He's not even allowed to socialize outside his caste. The system's not so rigid today, but in the Buddha's time the rules were inviolable.

Despite this, the Buddha refused to participate in such an unjust system. He wouldn't follow the rules at all. People liked that about him. He was a prince, but he wouldn't discriminate against others who were more lowly born. And actually, most everyone he met was more lowly born. When you're a prince you don't have too many social superiors.

So the Buddha wasn't influenced at all by a person's occupation or social rank. The Buddha, you see, possessed the "Eye of Discernment". No pious fraud could fool him. He only had to look at a person to see just how holy that person was. Not too many people have this gift.

It so happened that near Shravasti there was an outcast named Sunita, a man so low on the social scale that he was not permitted to work for a living. He was an untouchable and nobody would dare break the caste rules to hire him. So Sunita earned money for food by being a flower scavenger. Every day, he'd go to the town dump and rummage through discarded flower bouquets searching for that occasional flower which inexplicably manages to stay fresh while all the others have wilted.

Sunita would arrange all the scavenged flowers into a bouquet and sell it to people who passed on the road.

There may have been other people in Shravasti who were just as poor as Sunita, but certainly there was no one who was poorer. Yet despite his poverty, Sunita had attained enlightenment. He was a gentle and loving man. Needless to say, he had heard the Buddha preach and was a devout believer.

One day, in a procession, the Buddha came down the road near the dump where Sunita was picking through the trash.

As soon as Sunita saw the procession approach, he quickly crouched behind a rock. But the Buddha had already seen Sunita, and with his Eye of Discernment he recognized an enlightened being.

"Hello, there!" he called to the crouched man. "Please, stand up and let me see you."

Abashed, Sunita slowly stood up, keeping his head bowed and his hands prayerfully pressed together before his face.

"Why were you crouched behind that rock?" the Buddha asked.

"Blessed One," said Sunita, "I didn't want the sight of me to offend your eyes. I am unworthy of your glance."

Many people in the Buddha's procession agreed. They tugged at his sleeve, trying to get him to continue walking away from the outcast. "He's unclean," they said. "He's just a trash picker, an untouchable!"

"Is he?" said the Buddha stepping across some refuse to put his arm around Sunita's shoulder. "Look! I have touched him, and still he lives."

Then the Buddha asked Sunita, "Good Sir, if you are not too fond of this labor, could I induce you to come to assist me in my ministry? I could use a good worker like you."

With tears streaming down his face, Sunita agreed. And it is said that for the rest of his life, in accordance with the Buddha's wishes, Sunita always stayed close to the Buddha's side, where the Buddha could reach out and touch him.

The sixth step is Right Effort.

We exert Right Effort when we discontinue bad habits and practices and develop good ones. This is easier to say than to do.

We know that skill comes with practice, but in order to practice the spiritual lessons we have learned, we need to find opportunities. In Chan we must become aware that every breath we take provides us with an opportunity for practice.

People think the world intrudes on them. They do not understand that they are the gatekeepers of their own minds, that they can easily shut and lock the doors to their minds. If people intrude, it is because the gatekeeper has left the doors open.

Some people who cannot control their own minds strive instead to control the minds of others. They find it less daunting to try to direct the thoughts of hundreds of other people than to direct their own thoughts. This situation is what the Buddha had in mind when he said that the man who conquers ten thousand men in battle is not so great a hero as the man who conquers himself.

Everyday, in all our interactions, we must act to further our goal of enlightenment and self-awareness. If we have acquaintances whose company leads us easily into error, we should avoid contact with those acquaintances. If we have insufficient time to meditate because we're too busy with clubs or hobbies or sports, we should cut back these activities.

It takes conscious effort to gain Chan tranquillity. Spiritual composure is gained by practice. A very wise man once noted that the mind of a true Man of Chan cannot be distressed or intimidated because, whether in good times or bad, it simply continues at its own steady pace, like a clock ticking in a thunderstorm. I like that. We should all try to be like clocks that even in thunderstorms just keep on ticking.

The seventh step is Right Mindfulness.

In addition to keeping our minds focussed on our mantra whenever we have undertaken to follow this method and in observing the disciplined thoughts required

to discriminate the real from the false should we have chosen this method, we must also remain mindful of the causes and effects of all our actions.

Dear friends, we should never allow a day to pass without reflecting upon our conduct. Have we done all we could to be kind and helpful to others and to put them at their ease? Have we acted in ways that are contrary to the Buddha Dharma? Have we been petty or mean? proud or lazy? gluttonous or greedy? jealous or angry? Have we sullied ourselves or others with lascivious thoughts or words or actions?

It is not easy to see our own faults. Sometimes we strain to detect them but can see nothing.

At night, if we stand in a brightly lit room and try to look out a window at the dark landscape, all we'll see is our reflection in the glass. We'll see nothing more than what we already know - the image of ourselves and that small confined space in which we are enclosed. If we want to see beyond ourselves, we have to turn off the lights. We have to dim our egos or shut them off entirely. Only then will we be able to see through the glass.

The eighth step is Right Meditation.

1. The Hua Tou

Dear Friends, according to ancient wisdom: If a man wishes to be happy for an hour, he eats a good meal; If he wishes to be happy for a year, he marries; If he wishes to be happy for a lifetime, he grows a garden; If he wishes to be happy for eternity, he examines a Hua Tou.

What then is a Hua Tou?

Hua Tou means "head word" and we may contrast Hua Tou with Hua Wei which means "tail word". If a dog were to walk past us, then, before we saw the dog's body we would see its head; and after we saw the body we would see its tail. So far, so good. So the head word or Hua Tou is the point at which the thought originates - the point before it enters the "body" of ego-consciousness. The tail is a subsequent thought. We'll get to the tail word later.

In ancient times, it was regarded as sufficient merely to point to the stilled mind in order to realize Buddha Nature. Bodhidharma spoke of "quieting the mind" and the Sixth Patriarch talked about "perceiving Self-Nature". Both advocated a simple recognition of the mind's true state of undefiled purity. But pointing wasn't as simple as it sounded.

As the years passed and Chan became popular, people with differing degrees of ability were attracted to it. Many practitioners claimed to have found easy ways to reach exalted states of enlightenment. They boasted of possessing the Dharma's

precious jewels, but the jewels they described they had merely seen in the possession of others.

True Chan masters could, of course, see right through such false claims; but beginners couldn't always tell a lie from the truth. The masters, worried about the confusing effect such bad information was having on new practitioners, decided to devise methods of authenticating and standardizing accomplishments.

One of the methods they devised was the Hua Tou.

So, what is a Hua Tou? It is a statement designed to concentrate our thoughts upon a single point, a point that exists in the Original Mind's "head", a point immediately before the thought enters our ego consciousness. It is a "source" thought.

Let us examine the Hua Tou, "Who is it who now repeats the Buddha's name?" Of all the Hua Tou questions, this is the most powerful. Now, this Hua Tou may be stated in many different ways, but all the ways indicate one basic question, "Who am I?" Regardless of how the question is stated, the answer must be found in the same place that it originated: in the source, the Buddha Self. The ego cannot answer it.

Obviously, quick and facile answers are worthless. When asked, "Who is it who now repeats the Buddha's name?" we may not retort, "It is I, the Buddha Self!" and let it go at that. For we must then ask, "Who is this I?" We continue our interrogations and our confrontations. A civil war goes on inside our mind. The ego fights the ego. Sometimes the ego wins and sometimes the ego loses. On and on we battle. What is it that makes my mind conscious of being me? What is my mind, anyway? What is consciousness?

Our questions become more and more subtle and soon begin to obsess us. Who am I? How do I know who I am? These questions go round and round in our minds like tired and angry boxers. Sometimes, we may want to quit thinking about the Hua Tou, but we find we can't get it out of our mind. The bell won't ring and let us rest. If you don't like pugilistic metaphors you could say that the Hua Tou begins to haunt us like a melody that we just can't stop humming.

So there we are - always challenged, always sparring. Needless to say, a Hua Tou should never degenerate into an empty expression. Many people think they can shadowbox with their Hua Tou and just go through the motions of engagement. While their minds are elsewhere, their lips say, "Who is repeating the Buddha's name? Who is repeating the Buddha's name? Who is repeating the Buddha's name?" This is the way of feisty parrots, not of Chan practitioners.

The Hua Tou has meaning. It is a question that has an answer and we must be determined to find that answer.

I know that "Who am I?" sounds like a simple question, one we ought to be able to answer without difficulty. But it is not an easy question to answer. Often it is extremely puzzling.

In fact, many people reach a point in life when, apart from any Chan technique, they really do begin to wonder who they are.

Let's, for example, consider a middle aged woman who might have reached the point where she's no longer sure of who she is. She's having what psychologists nowadays call "an identity crisis". Perhaps her children have grown up and moved away and her husband no longer finds her attractive. She is depressed and confused.

Suddenly she realizes that for her entire life she has identified herself in terms of her relationship to other people. She has always been somebody's daughter or sister or employee or friend or wife or mother. This woman now begins to wonder, Who am I when I'm not being someone's daughter, wife, mother and so on? Who exactly am I?

Perhaps she reviews her life and sees that when she was attending to the needs of one person, she wasn't available to satisfy the needs of another and that those who felt neglected by her, criticized her, while those who received her help, just accepted it as if they were somehow entitled to it. Being criticized on one hand, and being taken for granted on the other, has caused her much suffering.

Worse, she may realize that in satisfying the demands of these external social relationships, she neglected the requirements of her internal spiritual life. Now she feels spiritually bankrupt and wonders why she invested so much of herself in others, why she saved nothing for her Buddha Self.

But a bond holds two parties together. It is not a one- way ligature. Is it not because we desire to be loved or respected, feared or admired that we allow or encourage these attachments? Is it not our desires for the people, places, and things of Samsaric existence that ultimately cause us bitterness and pain? Of course it is.

There was once a man who worked at a food market. Every day he would steal food and bring it home to his family. His wife and children grew strong and healthy and used the money they would otherwise have spent on food to purchase clothing and other objects. They told him he was the best husband and father anyone could have.

Soon, the man's brother, seeing this prosperity, asked him to steal food for him also; and the man complied. His brother praised him. "You are the best brother a man could have," he said.

Next, a friendly neighbor who was having financial problems begged him for help; and the man stole even more food. His neighbor was so grateful. "You are the best friend a man could have," he said.

The man felt important and appreciated. In his desire to be loved and respected, he did not realize that he had become a common thief.

Before long he was caught, tried, and convicted for the thefts. He was sentenced to spend years in jail.

Which of the people he had helped volunteered to take his place in jail for even one night of his sentence? None.

Which volunteered to make restitution for even half of what he had provided? None.

Sadly the man learned that his family was embarrassed to admit being related to a thief. Sadly the man learned that his friend was voicing relief that a neighbor of such low character was now safely in jail.

And so, as we wonder who we really are we must reflect upon our ego's foolish desires and the pathetic ways it will grovel for affection.

When we ask, "Who am I?" we must also wonder whether we identify ourselves in terms of our wealth or social positions. What would happen if we lost our money or were cast out of society because of a flaw in our pedigree? Are we our bank accounts, our social circle, our lineage?

What about our jobs? Are we our occupations? If a musician injures his hand and can no longer play his instrument, does he cease to exist? Is he deprived of his humanity because he has been deprived of his identity as a musician?

Do we identify ourselves in terms of our nationalities, our cities, our neighborhoods, the language we speak, or the sports team we support? Do we lose part of ourselves if we move to a new locale?

Are we our bodies? If a man has a head, trunk, and four limbs, what happens if he loses two limbs? Is he only two thirds of a man? Think of how foolish this would be if he and his brother were equally to share an inheritance and his brother claimed that because he was missing an arm and a leg he was entitled to only two-thirds of his share!

May we define ourselves as our egos, our conscious sense of "I" or "me" or "mine"? What happens when we sleep? Do we cease to exist? What happens when our attention is completely focussed on a problem or a drama or on some beautiful music? What happens when we meditate and completely lose our sense of I-ness? Do saints who attain a selfless state cease to exist? And Shakyamuni Buddha, who was so bereft of Siddhartha's personality that he could only be called "Tathagata" - the Suchness of Reality, Itself - did he cease to exist because he had no ego nature?

In trying to answer the Hua Tou, "Who am I?" or "Who is repeating the Buddha's name?" we must examine our illusive identities, our shifting, conditional, samsaric identities. The Hua Tou will then reveal much to us.

Dear friends, break old attachments! Dissolve prideful self-images and special relationships and create instead humble, generic varieties!

Don't require friends. Try merely to be someone who is friendly, someone who respects all people and treats them all with kindness and consideration.

Don't confine filial affection to just parents but be solicitous towards all elderly persons, and so on.

Once we detach ourselves from specific emotional relationships and extend ourselves to all humankind, a new strength of character begins to emerge.

The Hua Tou, "Who am I" is a Vajra Sword which, when wielded properly, will cut away the troublesome ego.

A Hua Wei or tail word traces a thought back to its origin. This, too, can be very useful. For example, a child, in the company of his friends, asks his father a question, let's say, "Can we go to the seashore this weekend?" and his father answers roughly, "Don't bother me!" and pushes the child away causing him to feel embarrassment and the pain of rejection.

That answer can be a Hua Wei. The man must ask himself, Why did I answer my child in this way? Why was I suddenly so upset? He knows that before his child approached him, he was in a good mood. So what was there in the question that upset him?

He begins to retrace each of the words. Was it the word "weekend"? What does he associate with that word? If he can find nothing, he tries the word "seashore". He begins to recall his experiences at the seashore. He thinks of many events and suddenly he recalls one that disturbs him. He doesn't want to think about it, yet the Hua Wei discipline requires that he examine that event. Why does the memory disturb him? What was so unpleasant about it? He continues to investigate this event until he gets to the root cause of his distress.

Dear friends, that root cause will surely involve damage to his pride, his self-esteem. And so the man recalls and, in a way, relives the experience, only now he is able to see it from a different, more mature perspective. Perhaps that bitter experience actually involved harsh treatment he received from his own father! At any rate, he will surely see that he transferred the pain of his childhood seashore experience onto

his innocent son. He will be able to make amends for his unkind rebuff, and in this way, his character will grow.

It occasionally happens that if the man concentrates on the Hua Wei enough, the dog may bite its own tail; and he may actually go from tail to head in one gulp.

Sometimes a Hua Tou functions as an instruction, a kind of guide that helps us to deal with life's problems. Such a Hua Tou sustains us and directs us as we travel the hard road to enlightenment.

You know, long ago Chan Master Hui Jue of Lang Ye Mountain had a woman disciple



Illustration by Yao Xin

who came to him for instruction. The master gave her the Hua Tou, "Let it be." He told her that if she faithfully used this Hua Tou as a scythe, she would cut down illusions and reap enlightenment.

The woman had faith in her master and, being resolute in her determination to succeed, she sharpened and honed this Hua Tou. Let it be. Let what be? Who let's it be? What is being? On and on she honed the blade. Her house burned down and when people came running to tell her she gently closed her eyes and whispered, "Let it be." Her son drowned and when people came running to tell her she gently closed her eyes and whispered, "Let it be."

One day she started to prepare fritters for dinner. She got the batter ready and the oil hot. Then, when she poured a ladle of the batter into the hot oil, it sizzled. And this little sizzling noise reverberated in her mind, and she attained enlightenment! Right away she threw the pan of hot oil on the ground and began jumping up and down, clapping her hands, laughing and laughing. Her husband naturally thought that she had lost her mind. "What a calamity!" he shouted. "Whatever shall I do?" And his wife turned to him and said, "Let it be. Just let it be." Then she went to Master Hui Jue and he verified that she had indeed harvested the Holy Fruit.

Keep your mind on your Hua Tou whenever you are doing anything that does not require your undivided attention. Naturally, if you're flying an airplane you don't want to start thinking about your Hua Tou. Discovering whether or not a dog has Buddha

Nature will not be of much use to you if you crash your plane. Driving an automobile is also something that requires your full attention. You may not risk killing other people's small selves just because you are trying to dispatch your own.

But there are many times during a day in which you can safely work on your Hua Tou. Usually we try to stuff these times with frivolous activity. We play silly games or do puzzles or listen to the radio or gossip or become spectators at some sporting event. These are the times that we should rivet our minds to our Hua Tou. No one can ever tell when the magical moment will arrive.

In China we call a cut of meat "pure meat". It is not mixed up with other ingredients as, for example, a sausage is. Sometimes "pure meat" means the best cut of meat. People always tell the butcher that's what they want. Pure or prime meat.

There was once a man who was considering the Hua Tou, "Who has Buddha Nature?" Everyday he had to pass a butcher shop on his way to work. He always heard people clamoring for "pure meat" but he never paid them much attention.

One day a woman was buying meat and, according to custom, she insisted that the butcher give her only pure meat. That was what she cried out. "Give me only pure meat." Her insistence particularly irritated the butcher and he shouted, "Which piece is not pure?"

The man heard this angry shout and he suddenly realized that all the meat is pure meat, that is to say, everyone contains the pure Buddha Nature. Who has Buddha Nature? Hah! Who does not have Buddha Nature?

The man attained enlightenment in that very instant! He got so excited he hopped and jumped and kept on saying, "Which piece is not pure? Ah, hah! Which piece is not pure?" over and over again. "Which piece is not pure?" This craziness we call Chan Disease. It doesn't last very long, maybe only a few days before the victim calms down; but it is a wonderful disease to catch. Fortunately, there is no medicine to cure it.

A monk once asked Master Zhao Zhou, "What happens after a person finally grasps the nonsensory state?" Master Zhao Zhou replied, "He lays it down." The monk did not understand. So this quandary became his Hua Tou. "How can one lay down the absence of something?" He worked on this and worked on this and still he could not understand. So he returned to Master Zhao Zhou and asked, "How can one lay down the absence of something?" Master Zhao Zhou answered simply, "What you can't lay down, carry away." Instantly the monk was enlightened.

You see, Master Zhao Zhou knew that the only thing we can't lay down is our Buddha Self. This and this alone is all that we can truly carry with us. Sometimes you hear

the expression, "You can't take it with you." Usually people mean that you must leave money or fame or power behind when you go to your grave. The ego, too, cannot be taken with you when you enter Nirvana.

Master Zhao Zhou was also telling the monk that the attainment of enlightenment is nothing a person can brag about. Nobody can say, "I am enlightened" because the experience of enlightenment is precisely an egoless experience. The ego is extinguished and the pure Buddha Self is experienced. There is no "I" there who can claim to be enlightened. This is a most exhilarating and salutary experience. Anyone who suffers from any of the ego's ills should try one dose of enlightenment. The cure is permanent.

2. Meditation on Sound

Before beginning this instruction, it is important, I think, to understand the difference between Host and Guest.

In the Surangama Sutra, Arya Ajnatakaundinya asks, "What is the difference between settled and transient?" He answers by giving the example of a traveler who stops at an inn. The traveler dines and sleeps and then continues on his way. He doesn't stop and settle there at the inn, he just pays his bill and departs, resuming his journey. But what about the innkeeper? He doesn't go anywhere. He continues to reside at the inn because that is where he lives.

"I say, therefore, that the transient is the guest and the innkeeper is the host," says Arya Ajnatakaundinya.

And so we identify the ego's myriad thoughts which rise and fall in the stream of consciousness as transients, travelers who come and go and who should not be detained with discursive examinations. Our Buddha Self is the host who lets the travelers pass without hindrance. A good host does not detain his guests with idle chatter when they are ready to depart.

Therefore, just as the host does not pack up and leave with his guests, we should not follow our transient thoughts. We should simply let them pass, unobstructed.

Many people strive to empty their mind of all thoughts. This is their meditation practice. They try not to think. They think and think, "I will not think." This is a very difficult technique and one that is not recommended for beginners. Actually, the state of "no-mind" that they seek is an advanced spiritual state. There are many spiritual states that must precede it.

Progress in Chan is rather like trying to climb a high mountain. We start at the bottom. What is our destination? Not the summit but merely our base camp, Camp

1. After we have rested there, we resume our ascent. But again, our destination is not the summit, but merely Camp 2. We attempt the summit only from our final Camp.

Nobody would dream of trying to scale Mount Everest in one quick ascent. And the summit of Chan is higher than Everest's! Yet in Chan, everybody wants to start at the end. Nobody wants to start at the beginning. If beginners could take an airplane to the top they would, but then this would not be mountain climbing, would it? Enthusiasm for the achievement is what makes people try to take shortcuts. But the journey is the real achievement.

A better way than deliberately trying to blank the mind by preventing thoughts from arising is to meditate on sound. In this method we calmly sit and let whatever sounds we hear pass in one ear and out the other, so to speak. We are like good innkeepers who do not hinder guest-thoughts with discursive chatter. If we hear a car honk its horn, we merely record that noise without saying to ourselves, "That horn sounds like Mr. Wang's Bentley! I wonder where he's going!" Or, if we hear a child shouting outside, we just let the shout pass through our mind without saying, "Oh, that noisy boy! I wish his mother would teach him better manners."

You know, in some styles of Chan, it is the custom to strike someone with a stick if he begins to show signs of sleepiness. Up and down the aisles patrols a fellow with a stick. No one is allowed to move or make any breathing noises or, heaven forbid!, to nod sleepily. The fellow with the stick will strike him! This is foolish and, in truth, violates the First Precept of nonviolence.

What shall we do when an elderly nun or priest begins to slumber in the Meditation Hall? Should we strike him with a stick? Are we confusing laziness with sleepiness? Perhaps the sleepy person has been up most of the night tending to the sick. Should we punish him if, in his exhaustion, he begins to drift into sleep? No. We should offer him some strong tea. If he wants to perk up, he drinks the tea. But if he takes a little catnap we should let him rest. Perhaps a person's noisy breathing or restlessness is actually a symptom of illness. Should we punish the sick person and add to his discomfort? No. This is not the Chan way.

What should we do once, of course, we are sure that his noisiness has not arisen from fatigue or illness? We should use the sound of his breathing or his movements as we would use the sound of an auto's horn or a child's shout. We should just register the noise without thinking about it at all. We should not let our ego get involved in the noise. Just let it pass through our minds unhindered, like a guest at an inn. A guest enters and departs. We don't rummage through the guest's belongings. We don't detain it with gossip or idle chatter.

You know, the Buddha once asked Manjushri to choose between the different methods of attaining enlightenment. "Which was the best?" he asked. Manjushri easily chose Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva's method of using the faculty of hearing as the best.

Always remember that when meditating on sound it is essential to remove the ego from the listening process and to let the non-judgmental Buddha Self record the sounds that enter our ears. In whatever place we do this, we make that place a Bodhimandala, a sacred place in which enlightenment may be obtained.

We do not need to be in a mediation hall to practice this technique. Every day, in all of our ordinary activities, wherever we happen to be, we can practice it. We shouldn't try to limit our practice of Chan to those times in which we are in a Chan Meditation Hall. In fact, the function of a meditation hall is really only to provide a place of minimal distraction for those people who have difficulty in keeping their attention focussed on what they are doing.

Sometimes people like to go to meditation halls because they need to be forced to meditate. They won't practice at home alone. Why should a person have to be forced to have a beautiful experience? How foolish this is!

Sometimes people go to meditation halls because they want to meet friends there. This is a misuse of Chan. It is converting Chan from a Path to Enlightenment into just another dead-end, Samsaric trail; and isn't that a pity?

3. Meditation on a Specific Object

Sometimes a guest is not a transient. Sometimes a guest comes to the inn with the intention of staying awhile. Well, then the host must pay him special attention.

The innkeeper does not investigate the guest-object before he lets him sign the register. This is another way of saying that before sitting down to meditate we do not go and study the object that we will be meditating on.

Suppose we pick as our object a rose. This is a particularly nice object for Chan meditation because, after all, roses are one of China's gifts to world horticulture.

A rose can engage our senses in many ways.

After we have attained calmness and regulated our breathing, we begin by gently closing our eyes and trying to construct a rose in our mind. We do not allow ourselves to digress into personal recollections about roses.

We see a stem - how long it is, how thick, how green, and so on. We see thorns, their shape, their points, their arrangements on the stem. Again, we don't digress

into thinking about specific occasions when we were stuck by thorns. Perhaps we gingerly feel the thorn, but only in our mind. Then we come to the various parts of the flower. Depending on our knowledge of botany we assemble the flower... pistil, stamen, petals, and so on. The petals are so soft. What color are they? The pollen is so yellow and powdery. We see the yellow dust on nearby petals. A rose has fragrance. What is the specific scent of our rose? We actually begin to smell it.

This is how to meditate on a rose or on any object. Remember, we never allow ourselves to digress into "Roses I have known..." or instances in the past when roses were given or received. No thinking at all! We just become aware of a rose in all its parts and sensations.

Soon, the rose will glow in our mind. The rose will be of such exquisite beauty that we will know we have seen the Ideal Rose of Heaven, itself. Afterwards, we may squeal with delight. Not many people are permitted to view one of Heaven's treasures.

4. Meditation on the Buddha's Name

In Mahayana Buddhism, the Buddha Amitabha, the Buddha of the West, is very important. Chinese people pronounce Amitabha Amitofo. And so, repeating the name Amitofo is an excellent practice.

First, we keep in our mind an image of the Buddha Amitabha. We also acknowledge our great debt to him. Did not the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara-Guan Yin spring from his brow? Where would Mahayana salvation be without our beloved Guan Yin? So we keep the Buddha in our mind as we repeat his sacred name.

What is the wrong way to repeat the Buddha's name? That's easy to describe. Think of a sick person who is given a bottle of penicillin pills. Think of him sitting there holding the unopened bottle repeating "penicillin, penicillin, penicillin". Will that cure him? No. He must take the penicillin into himself. He must swallow and assimilate it. Merely repeating the name of the medicine will not cure him.

Chapter 4 - The Buddha's Flower Sermon

A good teacher is better than the most sacred books. Books contain words, and Chan cannot be transmitted by mere words. I suppose you will think, "Well, if this old man says that words are useless why does he talk so much?" Religion has many mysteries and why teachers say that words can never suffice and then talk and talk until their students' ears turn to



Illustration by Yao Xin

stone is perhaps the greatest mystery of them all.

The Buddha stood beside a lake on Mount Grdhakuta and prepared to give a sermon to his disciples who were gathering there to hear him speak.

As the Holy One waited for his students to settle down, he noticed a golden lotus blooming in the muddy water nearby. He pulled the plant out of the water- flower, long stem, and root. Then he held it up high for all his students to see. For a long time he stood there, saying nothing, just holding up the lotus and looking into the blank faces of his audience.

Suddenly his disciple, Mahakashyapa, smiled. He understood!

What did Mahakashyapa understand? Everybody wants to know. For centuries everybody's been asking, "What message did the Buddha give to Mahakashyapa?"

Some people say that the root, stem, and flower represented the Three Worlds: underworld, earth, and sky, and that the Buddha was saying that he could hold all existence in the palm of his hand. Maybe.

Some people say he was reversing the Great Mantra, "Mani Padme hum" The Jewel is in the Lotus. When the Buddha held the flower in his hand, the Lotus was in the Jewel. Hmmm.

Some people say that the root, stem, and flower stood for the base, spine, and

thousand-petaled lotus crown of the Chakra Yoga system and that by raising the plant he was advocating that discipline. Other people say it could just as easily indicate a result of that discipline, the Trinitarian fulfillment: as the Buddha was Father and Mother, he was also Son- the Lotus Born and Lotus Holding Maitreya, Future Buddha, the Julai. That's certainly something to think about!

In Chan we're not sure of too many things. We only really know one: Enlightenment doesn't come with a dictionary! The bridge to Nirvana is not composed of phrases. As old Master Lao Zi wrote, "The Dao that we can talk about is not the Dao we mean."

So the Buddha spoke in silence, but what did he say.

Perhaps he was saying, "From out of the muck of Samsara the Lotus rises pure and undefiled. Transcend ego-consciousness! Be One with the flower!"

There! The Buddha gave a lecture and nobody had to take any notes.

Chapter 5 - Stages of Development

What stages do we pass through as we progress towards enlightenment?

First, as we meditate, we may experience a moment of utter purity and lightness. We may even feel that our body is beginning to levitate or that our mind is rising up right out of our body so that we can look down and see ourself sitting below. These experiences are very strange to learn about, and stranger still to experience. What is strangest of all is that so many people experience them.

Second, we may experience a state of egoless purity in which we merely witness the objects and events of our environment, without being in any way affected by them. Sensory data do not reach us. We remain as unaffected by



Painting by Yao Xin

events around us as a stone resting in water. Whenever we reach this state we should strive to remain aware and alert and conscious of the experience.

Third, we may hear a great clap of thunder which nobody else hears, yet we could swear it shook the entire house. Or the sound we alone hear may be like the buzzing of a bee or the note of a distant trumpet. These auditory experiences would be very unusual to the average person, but to the person who practices Chan, they're quite ordinary.

Whenever we have a strange, inexplicable experience - a vision, perhaps, we should discuss it with a master and not with others who may mislead out of ignorance or malice. Too often a Chan practitioner who hasn't been able to get anywhere in his own program will denigrate the experience of someone else.

What should we do when we can't meditate at all, when we sit down and experience only restlessness? We should approach ourselves gently as if we were children. If a child were learning to play a musical instrument, he would not be taught musical

theory and notation and the particulars of his instrument and an entire composition all at once. No, a child would be taught incrementally, with short instruction sessions and short practice sessions. This is the best way. An accomplished musician can easily practice eight hours each day, but not a beginner. A beginner needs to achieve a continuing series of small successes. In that way he cultivates patience, confidence and enthusiasm. A long series of small successes is better than a short series of failures. We should set small goals for ourselves; and we shouldn't task ourselves with larger goals until we have mastered all the little ones.

Beyond meditation practice, there is attitude. A beginner must learn to cultivate what is called, "the poise of a dying man". What is this poise? It is the poise of knowing what is important and what is not, and of being accepting and forgiving. Anyone who has ever been at the bedside of a dying man will understand this poise. What would the dying man do if someone were to insult him? Nothing. What would the dying man do if someone were to strike him? Nothing. As he lay there, would he scheme to become famous or wealthy? No. If someone who had once offended him were to ask him for his forgiveness would he not give it? Of course he would. A dying man knows the pointlessness of enmity. Hatred is always such a wretched feeling. Who wishes to die feeling hatred in his heart? No one. The dying seek love and peace.

There was a time when that dying man indulged himself with feelings of pride, greed, lust and anger, but now such feelings are gone. There was a time when he indulged his bad habits, but now he is free of them. He carries nothing. He has laid his burdens down. He is at peace.

Dear friends, when we have breathed our last, this physical body of ours will become a corpse. If we strive now to regard this physical body as a corpse, that peace will come to us sooner.

If we regarded each day of our life as if it were our last day, we wouldn't waste one precious minute in frivolous pursuits or in grudging, injurious anger. We wouldn't neglect to show love and gratitude to those who had been kind to us. We wouldn't withhold our forgiveness for any offense, small or great. And if we had erred, wouldn't we ask for forgiveness, even with our dying breath?

Well then, if this is the great difficulty for a beginner, what obstacle does an intermediate practitioner face? Results! After he cultivates the discipline of the Buddha Dharma, he must continue to tend his garden as he awaits the ripening of the Holy Fruit! However, his waiting must be passive waiting. He cannot expect or schedule the harvest season. In farming, it is possible to estimate how long beans will take to mature or apples to ripen. But Enlightenment will come when it will come.

When it comes, the meditator will suddenly experience his True Nature. He will also understand that his ego truly is a creature of fiction, a harmful illusion. Now, with confusion eliminated, he will become imperturbable. He will develop a singleness of mind, a oneness that will shine in purity and be absolute in tranquility. Naturally, when he reaches this stage, he must act to preserve this Diamond Eye of Wisdom. He must be vigilant in not allowing his ego to reassert itself since to do so would be a foolish attempt to graft a second useless head onto his neck.

Whenever we reach the egoless state of perfect awareness, we find it impossible to describe. The situation's rather like an observer who watches a fellow drink a glass of water. Was the water warm or cool? The observer can't tell but the fellow who's done the drinking does know. If the observer disagrees, can they argue about it? No. Can we debate enlightenment with the unenlightened? No. Such discussions would be futile. Chan Master Lin Ji used to say, "Fence with fencing masters. Discuss poetry with poets." A person who has reached the egoless state can communicate this experience only to someone else who has reached it.

But after Enlightenment, then what?

After Enlightenment, we experience the Great Bodhisattva adventure. In our meditations we enter Guan Yin's realm. This is the most wonderful world of all.

But after this, the accomplished practitioner must separate himself from Chan, graduate, so to speak, and be what he has studied to become: a person who seems to be quite ordinary, just another face in the crowd. Who would guess that this face is an Original Face? Who would guess that this person has been one person and two persons and then three persons and now is one person again, a person who is living out the life of the Buddha Self? No one could guess from merely looking.

And so the final problem the practitioner faces is actually to enter the Void that beginning students like to theorize about. He must attain "no-mind". Instead of proceeding in any one direction, he has to expand in all directions, or as Han Shan (Cold Mountain) would say, "into infinity". In Chan we also call this "letting go of the hundred-foot pole".

Chan is a slippery hundred-foot pole. It is difficult to climb. But once a practitioner does find himself sitting on top of it, what does he do next? He lets go. He steps off into empty space. He cannot cling to Chan. He has discovered what it means to be egoless, but now he must live out the results of that discovery. His actions can't be deliberate and contrived. And so he achieves spontaneity and becomes one with reality. No need to struggle further.

So, gaining Chan is the difficult task when we begin; and letting go of Chan is the difficult task when we end.

The woman or man of Chan doesn't sit atop the hundredfoot pole and stare at his Enlightenment diploma. He reads the diploma, shouts "Kwatz!", and tosses the diploma to the four winds. Then he jumps off the pole into infinity.

Dear friends, although enlightenment may be reached by entering many different Dharma doors, the Buddha, the Six Patriarchs, and all the Chan Ancestors are in agreement that the most wonderful of all portals is the Door of Chan.

Chapter 6 – Difficulties

Sometimes the teaching of Chan can be as frustrating as the learning of it.

There was once a Chan Master who undertook the instruction of three novices. He explained to them the need for spiritual discipline and ordered that, starting from that very moment, they observe the rule of absolute silence. Then, holding his finger to his lips, he ordered them to go to their rooms.

The first novice said, "Oh, Master, please let me tell you how grateful I am to receive your instruction!"

Whereupon the second novice said, "You fool! Don't you realize that by saying that you broke the rule of silence?"

And the third novice threw his hands up and wailed, "Lord! Am I the only person around here who can follow orders?"

Sometimes we look around and suppose that nobody else measures up to our

standards. We are like those three novices. Often, like that first novice, we say we want to learn but then we don't really pay attention to what our books or teachers tell us. Or, like the second novice, we understand the rules but think that they apply only to others. Or like the third novice, we clamor for praise every time we do what we're supposed to do.

Sometimes we share the frustration of that Chan master.

Perhaps we see inattention, laziness, frivolity, or intellectual smugness. Worse, we may see people who are accomplished hypocrites - people who pretend that their



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interests are purely spiritual while in fact they are a ninety-nine percent amalgam of pride, greed and lust. And then we throw up our hands in dismay and conclude that the Golden Age of Chan is over. We're too late. There is no hope for Chan. We came just in time for the funeral. Every age thinks that it has just missed being included in the Golden Age of Enlightenment.

Master Yong Jia, who studied under Sixth Patriarch Hui Neng, worried about the future of Chan. He despaired of the profusion of worldly men and the scarcity of sincere followers of the Buddha Dharma. "Alas!" he cried in his Song of Enlightenment, "In this time of decadence and worldly evil, no one cares to submit to discipline. The Holy Period's over and the Era of Perversion has begun."

Now, Master Yong Jia, for all his worries about being in an era of darkness, managed to attain enlightenment in a very short time. He was what you'd call an "Overnight Sensation." In fact that's how Hui Neng referred to him. "The Overnight Enlightened One!" Master Yong Jia's lamp burned for a long time in what was supposed to be a dark era.

Master Wei Shan who was born in 771 and died in 863 saw his earthly life end just as the Tang Dynasty's Golden Age of Chan was ending. Master Wei Shan used to lament, "Isn't it regrettable that we were born at the end of the Enlightenment Period?" He despaired of the profusion of worldly men and the scarcity of sincere followers of the Buddha Dharma. How he wished that he had been born earlier! He truly feared that there would be no one to take his place.

But let's take a moment to recall how Wei Shan got to be called Wei Shan.

Wei Shan's original name was Ling You and he was from FuJian Province. He studied Chan under Master Bai Zhang Huai Hai.

Now, Master Bai Zhang Huai Hai had been born back in the middle of the Tang Dynasty; but he also despaired of the profusion of worldly men and the scarcity of sincere followers of the Buddha Dharma.

Bai Zhang Huai Hai was so upset about the state of Chan that he decided to solve the problem by starting a new monastery on Mount Wei, Wei Shan, which is in Hunan Province. Naturally, since he thought that there were so few enlightened men available, he supposed that he'd have to go there and do the job himself.

One day while he was trying to figure out just how he would accomplish this feat, the old ascetic soothsayer Si Ma happened to pay him a visit.

"Give me your advice," asked Bai Zhang Huai Hai. "First, what do you think about building a new monastery on Mount Wei?"

"Excellent idea," said Si Ma. "It's an ideal location and can easily support a community of fifteen hundred monks."

Bai Zhang Huai Hai was delighted to hear this. But then Si Ma added, "Don't get any ideas about going there yourself. The mountain is young and strong and you're old and weak. You'll have to send somebody else."

But who? Bai Zhang Huai Hai couldn't imagine that anyone around could replace him.

Si Ma tried to help. "Let's see who you've got available," he said.

So, one by one Bai Zhang Huai Hai summoned all his monks. Naturally, he started with his head monk.

Si Ma took one look at the head monk and shook his head, rejecting him. He continued to reject each of the various candidates until finally it was Ling You's turn to be interviewed. When Si Ma saw Ling You, he nodded his approval. "This is the man!" he said. "Send him to Wei Shan."

The head monk didn't like this judgment very much and asked Master Bai Zhang Huai Hai to affirm the decision by examination, that is, to let each candidate actively demonstrate the depth of his Chan.

So Bai Zhang Huai Hai held a contest. He put a pitcher in the middle of the floor and one by one invited his monks to come into the room and answer the question: "Without calling this object a pitcher, what should it be called?"

His head monk came in, looked at the pitcher, thought for a minute and then answered, "Well, it can't be called a wedge." Bai Zhang Huai Hai was disappointed. This obviously contrived answer showed that the head monk was approaching the problem too intellectually. He was still too involved with names and forms.

Every candidate gave an unsatisfactory answer until, finally, it was Ling You's turn. Ling You came into the room and when Bai Zhang Huai Hai asked, "Without calling this object a pitcher, what should it be called?" Ling You spontaneously gave the pitcher such a kick it shattered against the wall. Bai Zhang Huai Hai threw back his head and laughed. Si Ma was right. Ling You was indeed the man. A pitcher? So much for name! So much for form!

So you see, teachers, too, sometimes need to learn a lesson. Bai Zhang Huai Hai thought that the glorious days of Chan were all in the past. He was wrong. Ling You went to the mountain and founded a monastery and that is how he came to be known as the great Master Wei Shan.

Over a thousand years have passed since that contest and Chan masters are still despairing of the profusion of worldly men and the scarcity of sincere followers of the Buddha Dharma.

Take my own case. When I was young, most of the monasteries in the area south of the three rivers were destroyed during various rebellions. Many monks of the Zhong Nan mountains came south, on foot, to help rebuild these monasteries. What did they have? Nothing. They carried a gourd and a little basket and the clothes on their backs. That was all. Everybody wondered what on earth they could possibly accomplish. But they did the job. They rebuilt the monasteries.

Later as these monasteries flourished and more monks were needed, new monks began to arrive. They came in carts, needing yokes and poles to carry all their possessions. And everybody thought, "Oh, they are too worldly. They won't get anything done." But they did, didn't they?

And now, when I travel someplace and I see monks getting on trains and airplanes with their matched sets of leather luggage, I find myself saying, "Oh, they are too worldly. They won't accomplish anything." But they will, won't they?

You will, won't you?.

1. In unstructured breathing, we lower our gaze and simply follow the breath, counting ten successive breaths. If we lose count, we simply start again. When we complete ten counts or breath-cycles, we simply start a new ten-count.

We begin by focussing our attention on the inhalation, noticing the air as it enters the nose, descends down the throat and fills the lungs. We mentally watch the chest expand and the shoulders rise.

As we prepare to exhale, we take note of the count; and then we watch the air as it seeps out of our lungs through the nose. We note our shoulders as they relax and fall as our lungs are emptying. As we complete the exhalation, we observe our abdominal muscles contract. With practice, all of the muscles of our abdomen, groin and buttocks will contract to force out the residual air in the lungs.

For some reason, it is easier to count breath cycles when beginning to exhale than when beginning to inhale. But each of us is different. Counting inhalations or counting exhalations is a matter of personal choice.

2. In structured breathing, we inhale, retain the breath, exhale, and either begin a new cycle or else we hold the lungs empty before beginning another breath-cycle. The amount of time we allot to each part of the cycle, depends on the particular formula we follow. Because lung capacity varies from individual to individual, no single formula can suffice. The practitioners may select from several ratios:

a. The ratio, 4:16:8, requires that the inhalation take four counts, the retention take sixteen counts, and the exhalation take eight counts.

The ratio, 4:16:8:4 requires an additional period in which the lungs are left empty for four counts. This is more difficult, but many practitioners find it more conducive to attaining deep meditative states.

Usually, one second per count is the prescribed cadence. However, some people have great difficulty in holding their breath, for example, for sixteen seconds. These individuals should then simply hold their breath for twelve seconds. With practice they will quickly achieve the count of sixteen. If twelve is also too difficult, then they may try eight and work up to twelve and then to sixteen.

b. The ratio, 5:5:5:5 or other similar equalized counts are also very effective. Beginners may find it easier to eliminate the final count of holding the lungs empty.

The aim of all breathing exercises is to establish a rhythmic, controlled breath.

Resisting the Impulse to Flee

For a reason no one has yet been able to determine, we often find that when we sit down to meditate our cushion turns into an ant hill. Chan beginners most frequently experience this mysterious cushion transformation but sooner or later it happens to us all. We begin to squirm and the only thing we can think about is getting away from that itchy place.

When we first sit down, we're full of good intentions. We plan to do a complete program - at least twenty breath-cycles. But then, after four or five cycles, we discover that we're sitting on an ant hill and have to cut our program short.

Sometimes there are no ants there. But all of a sudden we remember many important things that we've forgotten to do: straighten the books on the library shelf; purchase noodles for tomorrow's dinner; read yesterday's newspaper. Clearly, these things must be attended to and so, with great regret, we get up from our cushion.

Dear friends, how do we maintain our good intentions? How do we prevent our resolve from diminishing so drastically?

First we have to recognize how we are deceiving ourselves. You know, there is an old story in Chan about a rich man who contracted a disease and was in great jeopardy of dying. So he made a bargain with the Buddha Amitabha. "Spare my life, Lord" he said, "and I will sell my house and give the poor all the proceeds from the sale." All of his family and friends heard him make this pledge. Then, miraculously, he began to recover. But as his condition improved, his resolve began to diminish; and by the time he was completely cured, he wondered why he had made such a pledge in the first place. But since everyone expected him to sell his house, he put it up for sale. In addition to the house, however, he sold his house-cat. He sold the house and cat

for a total of ten thousand and one gold coins. But a promise is a promise, and so he gave one gold coin to the poor. That was what he sold the house for. The cat, you see, was a very valuable cat. When we don't want to do something, trivial things become very important. A house cat is worth ten thousand times as much as a house.

We should all remember this man whenever we get the urge to jump up from our cushion. We should all remember him whenever we suddenly decide to cut short our program. But if we do not excuse ourselves from performing our practice, neither should we remain on our cushion because of sense of duty.

Sometimes people act as if they are making a great sacrifice when they perform their meditation practice. "I'll do it and get it over with," they think. But this is not the proper attitude. The time we spend in meditation should be the most beautiful time of our day. We must cherish this time.

Dear friends, be grateful for the Buddha Dharma. Be grateful for the Three Treasures. Never forget that eternal refuge that exists for us all in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. Be thankful for the Lamp that leads us out of darkness and into the light.

Chapter 7 - Breathing and Posture

Although we may perform many meditations while walking or working, when we do formally sit to meditate, we should be careful to maintain a reverent attitude and to sit and breathe correctly.

Dear friends, however many benefits we may derive from our efforts, meditation is a spiritual exercise, not a therapeutic regimen. We do not practice in order to counter psychological disturbances or to help us cope with the ego's frustrations. We meditate in order to transcend ego-consciousness and to realize our Buddha Self. Our intention is to enter Nirvana, not to make life in Samsara more tolerable.



Painting by Yao Xin

This instruction can be confusing, I know. Many people think that they are meditating when they achieve a peaceful and quiet state. They look forward to practicing because they enjoy the hour or so of peace and quiet it gives them. But quietism is not meditation. Corralling a wild horse doesn't make him tame or responsive to the reins. He may rest for awhile and look tranquil. He may even begin to graze. But when the gate is opened he will escape - as wild as he ever was.

You know, at Nan Hua Si, the Sixth Patriarch's monastery, there was once a monk who spent hours each day sitting quietly on his cushion enjoying the peace and tranquility it brought him. He thought that he was meditating. Hui Neng, the Sixth Patriarch, noticing the monk's error, approached him. "Why do you devote so much time to your cushion each day?" he asked.

The monk looked up, surprised. "Because I want to become a Buddha," he answered.

Hui Neng smiled. "My son," he said, "you can make a mirror polishing a brick sooner than you can make a Buddha sitting on a cushion!"

We should always remember this exchange between a great master and an erring monk.

Before we enter the meditative state we are always awake and alert. Our minds, freed from external cares, are focussed on our meditation exercise. After we succeed in entering the meditative state we are usually quite euphoric. This joyful giddiness is experienced by practitioners in every religion. It is called Chan Disease or God

Intoxication or Divine Madness. Quietism doesn't produce euphoria. It produces a zombie-like dullness that has nothing whatsoever to do with Chan Buddhism or any other religion except, perhaps, voodoo.

We should never begin a meditation exercise if we are excited or agitated. The mind and body must come to a relaxed state. If we are angry, introspection and an application of Buddhist principles, particularly of forgiveness and acceptance, may help us to regain our composure; but if our distress persists we should pray for guidance or seek counsel in order to resolve our problems before sitting down to meditate.

If our agitation is merely a temporary condition, due perhaps to being rushed or fatigued, we should follow the "one-half inch incense stick" method. We simply sit quietly and watch an incense stick burn down for half an inch. If by that time our composure has not been restored, we should end the meditation session. We can always try again later.

Likewise, our breathing must be gentle and rhythmical. Occasionally, while we are practicing meditation, thoughts may arise which disturb us or we may gasp for air because we've incorrectly performed a breathing technique. Again, we should follow the "one-half inch incense stick" method and allow our mind and breath to settle down before resuming our practice.

Posture

A natural, relaxed but upright posture is the best posture. We sit without rigidity or pain. This is very important. Pain initiates a panic-response, a perceived emergency which causes the body's blood pressure and heart rate to rise; and under such conditions, meditation is impossible. However, anyone who is easily able to sit in a more formal meditation posture such as the lotus position, may use this posture to good advantage.

Of course, we must sit erectly so that our lungs can fully expand. We may not slump forward or sideways. If we find ourselves drifting into sleep, we should rouse ourselves with a few swallows of tea and by rocking from side to side a few times and taking a few deep breaths.

Failure to control body, mind, and breath may result in small harms, such as emotional or physical discomfort, or in great harms, such as strained muscles or fearful encounters with hallucinated demons which, I think we can all agree, are most distressing events.

Breathing Exercises

Before beginning any formal meditation technique it is absolutely necessary to gain control of the breath.

There are two basic approaches to breath control: unstructured and structured. In both methods the lungs are compared to a bellows. When we wish to fill a bellows with air, we pull the handles apart. In like manner, when we desire to inflate the chest, we begin by extending the abdomen, pushing it outward, away from the spine as though we were pulling apart the handles of a bellows. When we exhale, we first let the air seep out and then slowly contract the abdomen, squeezing the remaining air out of the lungs as if we were closing the bellows.

Always, our aim should be to make our breathing so fine and unstrained that if someone were to place an ostrich plume in front of our nose, we would not ruffle it when breathing in or out.

1. In unstructured breathing, we lower our gaze and simply follow the breath, counting ten successive breaths. If we lose count, we simply start again. When we complete ten counts or breath-cycles, we simply start a new ten-count.

We begin by focussing our attention on the inhalation, noticing the air as it enters the nose, descends down the throat and fills the lungs. We mentally watch the chest expand and the shoulders rise.

As we prepare to exhale, we take note of the count; and then we watch the air as it seeps out of our lungs through the nose. We note our shoulders as they relax and fall as our lungs are emptying. As we complete the exhalation, we observe our abdominal muscles contract. With practice, all of the muscles of our abdomen, groin and buttocks will contract to force out the residual air in the lungs.

For some reason, it is easier to count breath cycles when beginning to exhale than when beginning to inhale. But each of us is different. Counting inhalations or counting exhalations is a matter of personal choice.

2. In structured breathing, we inhale, retain the breath, exhale, and either begin a new cycle or else we hold the lungs empty before beginning another breath-cycle. The amount of time we allot to each part of the cycle, depends on the particular formula we follow. Because lung capacity varies from individual to individual, no single formula can suffice. The practitioners may select from several ratios:

a. The ratio, 4:16:8, requires that the inhalation take four counts, the retention take sixteen counts, and the exhalation take eight counts.

The ratio, 4:16:8:4 requires an additional period in which the lungs are left empty for four counts. This is more difficult, but many practitioners find it more conducive to attaining deep meditative states.

Usually, one second per count is the prescribed cadence. However, some people have great difficulty in holding their breath, for example, for sixteen seconds. These individuals should then simply hold their breath for twelve seconds. With practice they will quickly achieve the count of sixteen. If twelve is also too difficult, then they may try eight and work up to twelve and then to sixteen.

b. The ratio, 5:5:5:5 or other similar equalized counts are also very effective. Beginners may find it easier to eliminate the final count of holding the lungs empty.

The aim of all breathing exercises is to establish a rhythmic, controlled breath.

Resisting the Impulse to Flee

For a reason no one has yet been able to determine, we often find that when we sit down to meditate our cushion turns into an ant hill. Chan beginners most frequently experience this mysterious cushion transformation but sooner or later it happens to us all. We begin to squirm and the only thing we can think about is getting away from that itchy place.

When we first sit down, we're full of good intentions. We plan to do a complete program - at least twenty breath-cycles. But then, after four or five cycles, we discover that we're sitting on an ant hill and have to cut our program short.

Sometimes there are no ants there. But all of a sudden we remember many important things that we've forgotten to do: straighten the books on the library shelf; purchase noodles for tomorrow's dinner; read yesterday's newspaper. Clearly, these things must be attended to and so, with great regret, we get up from our cushion.

Dear friends, how do we maintain our good intentions? How do we prevent our resolve from diminishing so drastically?

First we have to recognize how we are deceiving ourselves. You know, there is an old story in Chan about a rich man who contracted a disease and was in great jeopardy of dying. So he made a bargain with the Buddha Amitabha. "Spare my life, Lord" he said, "and I will sell my house and give the poor all the proceeds from the sale." All of his family and friends heard him make this pledge. Then, miraculously, he began to recover. But as his condition improved, his resolve began to diminish; and by the time he was completely cured, he wondered why he had made such a pledge in the first place. But since everyone expected him to sell his house, he put it up for sale. In addition to the house, however, he sold his house-cat. He sold the house and cat

for a total of ten thousand and one gold coins. But a promise is a promise, and so he gave one gold coin to the poor. That was what he sold the house for. The cat, you see, was a very valuable cat. When we don't want to do something, trivial things become very important. A house cat is worth ten thousand times as much as a house.

We should all remember this man whenever we get the urge to jump up from our cushion. We should all remember him whenever we suddenly decide to cut short our program. But if we do not excuse ourselves from performing our practice, neither should we remain on our cushion because of sense of duty.

Sometimes people act as if they are making a great sacrifice when they perform their meditation practice. "I'll do it and get it over with," they think. But this is not the proper attitude. The time we spend in meditation should be the most beautiful time of our day. We must cherish this time.

Dear friends, be grateful for the Buddha Dharma. Be grateful for the Three Treasures. Never forget that eternal refuge that exists for us all in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. Be thankful for the Lamp that leads us out of darkness and into the light.

Chapter 9 - Wordless Transmission

Stay with Chan! This is the most efficient way to attain enlightenment. Don't allow yourself to be tempted into adopting other methods.

Even Yong Jia, by his own admission, wasted a lot of time with intellectual philosophizing before he tried the Chan method with Patriarch Hui Neng. "In my youth," he said, "I studied sutras and shastras and commentaries trying endlessly to discriminate between name and form. I might as well have tried to count sand grains in the ocean. I had forgotten the Buddha's question, 'Does a man who counts other men's gems get any richer?'"

The Chan method is truly like the Vajra King's sword. In one stroke it can cut through illusion to reach Buddhahood.

Whenever I think about the years of practice that often precede enlightenment's momentary experience, I think about Chan Master Shen Zan. We can all learn a lot from him.

Shen Zan had a master who unfortunately was not enlightened. One cannot give what one does not own; and so, empty handed, Shen Zan left his old master in order to go and study with Master Bai Zhang.

Now, under Master Bai Zhang's guidance, Shen Zan attained enlightenment and then, with fond respect, he went back to visit his old teacher.

The old man asked him, "What did you learn after you left me?" And because he was enlightened, Shen Zan was able to reply kindly, "Nothing, absolutely nothing." To the old man, this was bittersweet news. He was sorry that his student hadn't learned anything, but he was happy to have him back. "If you want, you can stay here," he said.

So Shen Zan stayed and served his old master.

One day, while taking a bath, the old man asked Shen Zan to scrub his back which was very dirty. As Shen Zan began to scrub he said, "Such funny crystal windows in your Buddha Hall." His master didn't know what he meant. "Please explain your remark," he asked.

As Shen Zan continued to scrub away the dirt, he said, "Although you can't see in, your Buddha Self sends out such illuminating rays." This answer puzzled the master.

A few days later, as the old master sat under a waxed- paper window studying a sutra, a bee began to buzz around the room; and the bee, drawn to the outside light, kept crashing into the window paper, trying to get out of the room. Shen Zan

watched the frustrated bee and said, "So you want to get out and enter the infinity of space! Well, you won't do it by penetrating old paper..." Then he said simply, "The door stands open but the bee refuses to go through it. See how it knocks its head against the shut window. Foolish Bee! When will it understand that the Way is blocked by paper?"

Now a glimmer of light began to penetrate the teacher's mind. He sensed the deeper meaning of Shen Zan's words. Slyly he asked, "You were gone for a long time. Are you sure you didn't learn anything while you were away?"

Shen Zan laughed and confessed, "After I left you, I studied under master Bai Zhang. Through him I learned how to halt my discriminating mind... to cease being judgmental... to transcend the ego's world. Through him I attained the Holy Fruit of enlightenment."

Now, when the old master heard this wonderful news, he assembled all the monks and ordered that a banquet be prepared in Shen Zan's honor. He was so happy. "Please allow your old master to become your student," he asked Shen Zan. "Please expound the Dharma to me... especially that business about the baths and bees."

Shen Zan laughed. "Your Buddha Self shines out from you even though you can't see it for yourself. It is always pure and no amount of dirt can ever soil it. Also, your eyes are always turned outwards, fixed on printed pages; but Infinity cannot be captured in words. Books only engage us in debates. If you want to be free from illusion, you must look inwards. The Way into Infinity is on the other side of your gaze. Look inward to see your shining Buddha Self!"

Suddenly the old teacher understood! Suddenly he saw into his own Buddha Nature! He got so excited that he declared that Shen Zan would be the Abbot of the monastery. "Who would have believed that in my old age I finally would have made it across?" he shouted.

But that's what's so nice about the Eternal Moment, isn't it? Step outside of time just once, and all the years you spent in ignorance and suffering recede into vagueness. They're only something you seem to remember. Your old small self is gone and all his old enemies and friends and relatives and all his old experiences, bitter or sweet, have lost their power over him. They were like a cinema show... believable while he was in the theatre, but not when he came out into the daylight. Reality dispelled the illusion.

In Nirvana you're neither young nor old. You just are. And who are you? That's easy. The Buddha.

