

Chan Master Sheng Yen

Zen

&

Inner Peace

Volume Two



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Chan Master Sheng Yen



Dharma Drum Mountain

Zen and Inner Peace

(Great Dharma Drum)

Talks with Master Sheng Yen

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About the Chan Meditation Center

In 1979, Master Sheng Yen established the Chung-Hwa Institute of Buddhist Culture, more commonly known as the Chan Meditation Center. The mission of CMC is to be a Buddhist meditation and practice center for anyone whose good karma brings them to its front door. (As often is the case, adventitiously.)

CMC has a varied and rich offering of classes in meditation and other forms of Buddhist practice, in particular, its Sunday Morning Open House, which is a very popular event for individuals as well as families. It features meditation sittings, talks on Chan and Buddhist Dharma, and a vegetarian luncheon. All are welcome.

Information about CMC is available at
<http://chancenter.org>

About the Dharma Drum Retreat Center

In 1997, Master Sheng Yen established the Dharma Drum Retreat Center in Pine Bush, New York. It is a sister organization to the Chan Meditation Center, and is located about two hours from the Chan Meditation Center by car.

DDRC offers a rich schedule of intensive Chan meditation retreats of varying lengths, from 3-day weekend retreats, to those of longer duration, typically 7 to 10 days. While the retreats are open to all without regard to affiliation, it is preferred that participants have at least some beginner-level meditation experience and/or have attended at least one intensive meditation retreat.

Information about DDRC is at:

<http://www.dharmadrumretreat.org>

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Teacher: Chan Master Sheng Yen (1930-2009)

Producer/Director: Mr. Zhao Dashen

Program Host: Ms. Chen Yue-ching

The Dharma Drum Mountain Cultural Center, Taiwan

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Preface

The Chan masters of old times discovered the principles of Chan through their own practice and shared them with their disciples so that they too, could awaken to the essence through the teachings. In the TV series “Great Dharma Drum,” which was first broadcast by Taiwan’s Chinese Television System, modern-day Chan Master Sheng Yen, using accessible language and media technology, addressed questions posed by the host, Ms. Chen Yueqing. Using Chan wisdom and compassion, Master Sheng Yen provided easy-to-understand and practical guidance to address these questions that are commonly experienced by many in daily life.

Many of the broadcasts were re-aired on New York City’s educational Channel WNYE-TV as “Zen and Inner Peace.” It is from that series that the name of this book is taken. Of the many broadcasts that were aired in New York, ten topics comprising 70 broadcasts were transcribed and translated into English to create the two volumes of *Zen and Inner Peace*. In February 2013, the Chan Meditation Center in Elmhurst, New York, published Volume One containing topics One through Five. The book was published as part of the annual “Passing of the Lamp” ceremony to commemorate the passing of Master

Sheng-Yen on February 3, 2009. This book, Volume Two, presents topics Six through Ten.

This rare treasure of a book abounds with wisdom, especially for those who are interested in learning and experiencing Chan and Buddhism. As buddha-nature is within all beings, this book expounds the meaning of “Life is Chan, and Chan is Life.” Everyone can benefit by applying Chan wisdom and compassion in daily life, regardless of the complexity of their lives, their environments and interpersonal relationships, along with the associated stresses and conflicts. The more one learns and applies these principles, the more one benefits. At a minimum one can lessen their vexations, and then further oneself to achieve happiness with an eventual advance into the essence of Chan.

May all readers of this book practice Chan at all times and benefit from the experience wherever they go.

Ven. Guo Xing Fashi

Abbot, Chan Meditation Center, Queens, New York

Abbot, Dharma Drum Retreat Center, Pine Bush, New York

Topic Six



Business and Leadership

Being a Good Leader

Aug 15, 1997

Ms. Chen: Greetings, everyone, and welcome to another segment of Great Dharma Drum. It is said that “people’s minds differ just as their faces do.” Because of the differences among people, their working styles, methods, ideas, and responses will be all different. How can a leader guide people to work together in a coordinated way as one, and maintain harmonious relationships? This is a great skill. What kinds of leadership skills are needed to be a successful leader? Let us ask Master Sheng Yen for his guidance.

Master Sheng Yen: There are two types of leaders. One type leads through authority. People who are led by this type of person dare not oppose his leadership; if they refuse to obey his leadership, then their job or even their life may be at risk. So he can still exercise leadership without much problem. Another type naturally emerges as a leader; he is respected, supported, and followed. People listen to him not because he has power, but because he helps others, leads the group well, allows unorganized people to unite for a shared vision, and inspires a divided group to join hands and work towards a common goal. In other words, he has good communication and interpersonal skills. He is able to move and influence others. He identifies with and respects others.

He is able to influence and lead others to work towards the same objective. This kind of leader is a democratic leader. The democratic leadership style is usually the best and most natural kind of leadership.

Sometimes, leadership can be seen in children. Some are strong, big, speak loudly, and are very assertive. So, other kids are afraid of them, and accept their leadership. Everyone follows their orders obediently. This is leadership based on might. There are also kids who are good at communicating with other kids, coordinating their actions, and taking care of them, so other kids feel it's safe, meaningful, and beneficial to be with them. We can easily discern whether or not a child has such a gift. I think the point of your question is, from the Buddhist perspective, what makes a good leader? Let me share this with you: Shakyamuni Buddha was the best democratic leader. He became the best leader naturally. He didn't use power or authority, be it religious or military, to threaten people or terrorize them into submission. Rather, he used compassion and wisdom to bring peace to all people and help all people attain wisdom. So, people gathered around him and accepted his leadership. Yet he was always very modest. He said, "I do not lead the assembly." In other words, he was not the leader. He followed the norms of the group, regarding it as the true leader. He was one of the group, and not the leader.

What did his followers need? They needed rules,

principles, and direction in life, and he figured these out. He believed these were what people needed. That was why people came to join the group. After joining the group, they accepted its rules. People could leave anytime if they didn't accept them. No one was forced to accept the living style the group adopted and its concepts. People were free to come and free to go. But Shakyamuni Buddha kept getting more and more disciples. Why? People accepted his leadership; they weren't forced to accept it. He used the Dharma to lead people, encouraging them to look upon the Dharma as their teacher, rather than encouraging a personality cult, or demanding that people treat him as a leader, someone who gives orders.

I often tell people today that good leaders should not see themselves as leaders. Good leaders should accept group leadership, point out the road that the group should take, and win people over to their proposals. Such proposals should be revised if others don't approve. Everyone can express their opinions about the direction they would take. And then they form a common goal and principle. This becomes the focus and goal of the group. They all work towards the same objective. These kinds of leaders are the best. Therefore, good leaders don't think of themselves as leaders; rather, they abide by the shared views, rules, and living styles of the group, like all members. People who are able to do this are ideal leaders; they will never be overthrown. Even if they

step down, they are still the spiritual leader of the group. After they pass away, they will still be seen as the role model for the group. Amituofu.

Summary: A true leader doesn't use might to lead. Being wise and modest, he follows the rules of the group, just as every member does, and is able to influence the group to work toward common goals.

Buddhist View on Leadership

September 1, 1997

Ms. Chen: Greetings, everyone, and welcome to another segment of Great Dharma Drum. It is said that “people’s minds differ just as their faces do.” Because of the differences among people, their working styles, methods, ideas, and responses will be all different. How can a leader guide people to work together in a coordinated way as one, and maintain harmonious relationships? This is a great skill. What kinds of leadership skills are needed to be a successful leader? Let us ask Master Sheng Yen for his guidance.

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step down, they are still the spiritual leader of the group. After they pass away, they will still be seen as the role model for the group. Amitufofo.

Summary: A true leader doesn't use might to lead. Being wise and modest, he follows the rules of the group, just as every member does, and is able to influence the group to work toward common goals.

Leaders' Attitude Towards Employees

April, 19, 1996

Ms. Chen: Greetings everyone, and welcome to another segment of Great Dharma Drum. In this program, we will discuss ideas concerning business management. Many business leaders believe that their company's successful growth is entirely a result of the foundation they laid and their hard work. They believe the company's assets came from their own toil and even the risks they've taken, and that employees help them make money just to receive salaries. This way of thinking leads to rifts and disharmony between labor and management and prevents a company from growing healthily. Therefore, what kind of attitude should a business leader have? How can such a leader work with his employees without being dictatorial? Let us ask Master Sheng Yen for his view.

Master Sheng Yen: Business owners, management, and executives often contribute a lot; they invest capital, offer their wisdom and their time and take on risks. So staff members should thank their management. However, entrepreneurs, business owners, investors and managers should have a democratic attitude and view others with an attitude of equality. According to Buddhist teachings, every phenomenon, every achievement or success is a result of

the convergence of many causes and conditions. Take for example an ancient story: General Kongming once needed an easterly wind in order to launch a fire attack. Without an easterly wind, the fire might spread in the wrong direction, or not burn strongly enough. So Kongming needed an eastern wind. But was it reliable? It was a factor out of his control, so it had to be “borrowed” from the gods, from Heaven. All he could do was position and deploy his army. The wind, however, needed to be borrowed from elsewhere, from Heaven.

Similarly, any success in business requires “easterly winds” from many sources, such as the social and the international environments, and the cooperation and contributions of many talented employees. If there is only the owner, with his money and wisdom, without anyone else to help, then at most he will have some stock, some cash, and some checks, but no business. Only by bringing together the effort and wisdom contributed by many people can a business be built. In this relationship, labor and management interact, help, need, and make requests of each other. Things are not achieved by a single party working alone.

As for employees, without the managers’ wisdom, capital, and expertise, they have nothing. For example, we may feel that entrepreneurs make a lot of money, and we may want to get rid of them and run the business ourselves: “You

entrepreneurs have made enough money; now it's our turn to make money.” The problem is, without the entrepreneurs who put their experience, wisdom, capital, and skill together, along with their management ability, there is no way to build up a business. If we chase these entrepreneurs out, what will we have left? Just barren land, probably.

So employees should thank the investors, managers and professionals. However, management should also thank the employees for their contributions, their hard work, their cooperation, and their support. Without employees, as I have just said, the management is powerless. Therefore, some people feel that management is evil; capitalists are the exploiters, and employees are the exploited. Capitalists and management, though, consider themselves benefactors and patrons. They believe all that they possess was achieved through their own hard work, and that employees rely on them for their livelihood. So these employees are their burden; they are all parasites. If an owner thinks this way, his business won't grow very big for very long. Sometimes he might be lucky enough to have hundreds or thousands of employees working for him. However, he will not last long because employees have their own opinions and judgment. It might not be long before they say to him, “OK, if you are so brilliant, so all-powerful, then, I'll just quit and let you do it all by yourself.” Amitufo!

Chen: Management and employees are both

necessary to a successful business. They should appreciate each other and treat each other with the spirit of equality and cooperation.

Recruit and Retain Talent

April 22, 1996

Ms. Chen: Greetings everyone, welcome to another segment of Great Dharma Drum. Many business managers often have trouble recruiting new talent and can't identify the talent they already have and use them effectively. They continuously lose talent which leaves gaps in the company's organization that make growth impossible. How should a business executive identify, utilize, and retain talent so every employee can work up to their potential? Let us ask Master Sheng Yen for his view.

Master Sheng Yen: This issue requires great skill and wisdom. A person is able to become a leader because others are willing to be led by him. If you need people, you can recruit them, but once you have found them, how do you keep them and help them develop? Training employees without having them leave later is not easy. Let's first discuss what kind of people we should look for when we need employees. In the beginning of the search, no one knows where the talent is. Sometimes, a couple of people will come, but no one knows if they have talent. Therefore, first, we must publicize the qualifications required and the job description. We must list the qualifications the applicant must have to do the job successfully. We can post the opening,

place ads, or rely on referrals. This will attract many more people. Let's say we only need one general manager, but 17 or 18 people come for an interview and we need to choose one. Here we must use skill. We have to see which one of the 17 or 18 people is the most suitable for the position. So when we're considering this potential manager, ask yourself: first, what is our first impression? Second, how are their responses? Third, what are their qualifications? Fourth, are they sincere? How serious do they seem?

Sincerity is the most important factor; skills are secondary. If someone lacks skill, ability and professionalism, they will not be able to do the job, though. A person with good professional skills but insufficient sincerity will cause trouble after they join your company. Sparks will fly. So loyalty is very important. However, sometimes, we cannot tell how loyal people are on the first meeting. That is OK. First of all, among those we feel are sincere, we should hire the one who is most sincere and most qualified in terms of skills, knowledge, and experience. It depends on luck as well. There is no guarantee. It depends on karmic affinities. If we have karmic blessings, then our first pick will be right. If we lack karmic blessings, then, we still won't find the right person even after dozens of interviews, and we'll end up picking the wrong one. Then, there is nothing we can do about it.

If we have karmic blessings, then someone who

has an affinity with us as well as ability and loyalty will come. And when they come, they will stay. Now, we need to recruit qualified entry-level employees who can work under supervision. When they come, we need to train and nurture them. Do not worry that they'll turn out to be not trainable, or that after being trained they'll leave. Don't think like that. We need to invest in on-the-job training, or pre-placement training. After training them, see how many people are suitable to be kept. Once we hire them, we must treat them like family. Take care of them at work. Take care of their physical and mental well-being, and their family as well. If we take care of them so thoroughly and sincerely, why would they ever quit? Salary is secondary. How much we care about them is very important. If we give them an average salary, and don't care for them much, then they will often think about leaving. Why? They don't know how much longer they'll stay at your company. The money is OK. But it's OK at other places too, maybe even better. If we are thoughtful and caring, help them solve their difficulties, and train them, if we treat them this way, they can gradually be cultivated from day one to become the most loyal, reliable, useful people in your enterprise.

One of my disciples is a big entrepreneur. He claims that talent emerges from within a company at entry level positions. They must be trained gradually from the beginning. The problem is some people will still leave when

they feel like it, no matter how well we treat them or how much we invest in them. They may revolt at any time. No matter how good we are to them, they may still desert you. These situations are to be expected. That's just the way people are, so do not be disappointed. Continue to care for others, and nurture and train them with kindness as we always have. Anyway, the ones who leave are the unreliable ones. Let them go. They should go. Even if they don't go now, they will sooner or later. It's OK for them to leave. It's good for them to take another position at another company. Our training of them is a kind of contribution to society. This way, the person who leaves will not think of us as an enemy because we were so big-hearted and generous. That is very good, too. Amitufo!

Chen: When recruiting, look for sincerity as well as skill. Once we've hired people, train and care for them so they will be both competent and loyal. Then, even if they leave, it will be on friendly terms.

Employer-Employee Relationship

April 23, 1996

Ms. Chen: Greetings everyone, welcome to another segment of Great Dharma Drum. Many businesses experience a turnover in staff after the New Year. Some people will hand in their resignation after receiving their year-end bonus. Some people quit without notice, leaving behind a pile of problems and causing a headache for the boss. The relationship may even be destroyed completely in spite of mutual past kindnesses. How should a boss create a harmonious relationship with employees so that a good cooperative relationship can be maintained even when the employees quit. Let us ask Master Sheng Yen to talk on this.

Master Sheng Yen: The employer-employee relationship is mutual; it is not based on simple advantage. The parties should be a collective living organism. The boss and the employees work as one living entity. They work together and spend their lives together, sharing happiness and unhappiness. So it's best for a company to cultivate a common vision to be held by both the employees and the employer, and to act as a common goal and foundation. Sometimes the boss and the employees just look out for themselves; the boss only uses the employees to make a profit, and the employees just work to earn a salary. When

the relationship is held together only by money, there will definitely be problems.

A good employer does not think of his employees as his property, but as his friends or his relatives. It is a relationship based on feeling, not mere advantage. It is not just a financial or economic relationship; it is also an ethical relationship; if not, the relationship will definitely become antagonistic, filled with disagreement and conflict. When that happens, employees often become unscrupulous with the boss. The employee thinks, “I’m leaving anyway, so why not ruin your business?” If a manager treats his employees like siblings, like his own family, his friends, and people who work for the same vision as him, then the employees will certainly be touched. Not all employees are that terrible; they are human beings too.

So, let’s say that an employee gets his year-end bonus and leaves without warning after the New Year, or after receiving his bonus, he says, “Sorry boss, I am quitting as of the New Year,” catching the boss off guard and leaving him no time to figure out who can take over his job. This might not be completely the boss’s responsibility. Maybe the employee is just that kind of person. He’s like that no matter where he goes. He is very nice to you in the beginning, very nice but it’s just because he wants to get a bit of money then leave. He’s always like that. The boss needs to check references before hiring this kind of person. Before he came

to this company what was he like at other places? What was his personal integrity, his character, his attitude? If he was terrible at other places, how can you hire him? Also, if he left our company without warning, took his money and ran, when he looks for his next job elsewhere, his prospective employer may ask us, his previous bosses, what he was like at our company. This may happen unless this person goes forth on his own and no longer works for other people, or does work that does not require any references. There aren't really that many people like this, but a boss should be prepared to take the risk.

Let's say we hire a general manager, and we, the bosses, respect and rely on only him. We don't know if there'll be a problem with him on any given day, but we just trust there won't be. How can we be so sure?! The world is as unpredictable as the weather. One day there may be a problem, not a personal problem but something beyond his control. If he cannot carry out his duties anymore, then what will we do as bosses? We must have a back-up plan. A company with a sound structure should be able to handle a situation where a manager walks away suddenly because another person would be able to take over his duties easily. If a company lacks a sound structure, if its accounts and responsibilities are unclear, and lets the general manager run the company on his own without proper supervision, then losing the manager might mean losing the company.

The problem and responsibility lies not with the manager but rather with the boss. How, as a boss, did you become so unaware of the risks? Amituofu!

Chen: The employer-employee relationship is ethical as well as financial. A boss should cultivate a vision everyone can identify with and treat his employees like family while being prepared for departures.

Leading by Example and Serving Others

January 22, 1999

Ms. Chen: Hello everyone. Welcome again to Great Dharma Drum. Today, we'll continue discussing safety issues. We've mentioned that in Taiwan, there are many traffic accidents and public safety affairs. In a previous program, the Master advised us that to reduce such accidents, it is essential to reinforce the psychological and conceptual build-up for people working in those sectors. Then how do we go about enforcing such kinds of build-up? Let's ask Master Sheng Yen for further advice.

Master, in our last program you said that to reduce traffic accidents, we must acquaint people in the transportation sector with the concept of service, which enables them to feel grateful to the people they are serving. This way, accidents will likely decrease. In the setting of a company, how do we go about such kind of conceptual build-up?

Master Sheng Yen: I think it should be carried out thoroughly from top to bottom, from the corporate leader down through managerial levels all the way to the employees, regardless of position. Why? Isn't it enough just to demand it from the employees? If you only demand it from the employees, they won't feel convinced. When the bosses are selfish, self-serving, and ignore the employees' benefits, but

always demand them to give, serve, and be thankful, then subordinates will feel used and exploited. That would cause morale to suffer greatly, and poor morale will compromise any ideal you may want to promote. By mere preaching, the ideal won't work at all, because at a managerial level there are problems. Thus, those in charge should hold on to the ideal, and set an example by their own actions. We cannot say: "Officials are allowed to set a fire but ordinary citizens are not permitted to light lamps."

Therefore, a leader has to be a virtuous and wise person. He has to serve as a symbol for that ideal, by promoting and acting on the ideal himself. The benefits should be equal for everyone. The customers' benefit should come first, and then the employees' benefits, and finally the company's profits. If we do this in the reverse order, considering the corporate benefit ahead of employees, or the employees ahead of the customers, it won't work. So, we must have the concept of serving others, first by making the customers the top priority.

This reflects the principle of the Buddhadharmā, which is that it exists for the benefit of sentient beings. The easiest and most reliable way to benefit ourselves is by benefiting others. If we only benefit ourselves while exploiting others, then eventually we will run into trouble, because everyone will want a piece of the pie from us. So firstly, we should consider others, and then our own corporate

profits. We should be very clear about the profits we've made, about what to do with our profits, and what to do if we suffer losses. A boss should consider possible situations of profits and loss when running a company. What if the company suffers a loss? It's wrong to ask employees to share the losses. It depends on the boss's wisdom to determine how to manage profits to make the employees happy, and then give back to society and the company's customers. This way, the company will definitely do very well. It all comes down to benefiting others and ourselves equally.

It's essential to have a correct corporate culture from top to bottom. As a corporate model, the boss should serve the company assiduously and attentively, without always considering making money for his or her own sake. Instead, the boss should consider how much the enterprise will benefit society and the whole world, and how he or she can give to the whole world through wisdom and ability. The boss should regard assets as something to be managed; as money belonging to the whole of society instead of his or her own. With this concept, this person will achieve success.

Chen: So can we say this is not only a concept, but also in accordance with the truth? As you Master have said, we'll gain benefit ourselves only by benefiting sentient beings. Isn't it also a truth?

MSY: Yes, it is. Some people think that because

Buddhist monks have no children, we can make unrealistic comments, saying, “I am here for all of you, so I don’t need anything. After my death, I don’t need to leave behind any inheritance. All is to be given back to society.” They seem sure this is easily done by monastics and probably impossible for the laity. In fact, lay believers can also do it, by giving to society all they have achieved. As to children, it is very simple: bring them up, and provide them with a good education. They will have their own jobs and stand on their own two feet. There is no need to leave a fortune to your children. Entrepreneurs, company owners, or people running any kind of business can emulate this spirit as well. By emulating this spirit, their companies will definitely operate very well.

Chen: Thank you Master, for your advice. The Master said that the best corporate culture lies in benefiting sentient beings. Let us all ponder on this truth.

Summary: Benefiting others will in turn benefit us. Businesses should operate in the spirit of serving others, by making their customers and employees the top priority.

Emerge from the Game of Pursuing Wealth

May 11, 1995

Ms. Chen: Hello everyone, and welcome again to Great Dharma Drum. People worship buddhas and bodhisattvas, hoping to gain the support of their power to bring blessings upon themselves and avert calamities, to let wealth flow in. However, if these prayers are based on selfish desire, they'll be out of accord with the compassion of buddhas and bodhisattvas. People's motivations for seeking wealth are all different, that is true, but the fulfillment of desires that wealth can bring, whether spiritual or physical, is like narcotics, causing people to become mired in it, unable to extricate themselves. How, then, can one emerge from the game of pursuing wealth? We now ask Master Sheng Yen for his guidance.

Master Sheng Yen: I often hear that with money, you can do anything. The allure of money is truly incredible. There are always those who say that anything is okay, just don't be poor. They say that when you are poor you have nothing; they believe that the greatest security in life is wealth, to be rich. They say that with money you can buy status, acquire power, reputation, position, prestige. Thus, they say, money is all-powerful. This is especially true in the current era of material culture and worship of Mammon, in

which rationalism is in ascendancy. Everybody hopes to get rich; everybody hopes to acquire more wealth. This wealth is not for survival alone, but for the sake of possessing it, for to have money is to have security, to have status. These things, it is thought, require that one have money.

This mindset is prevalent not just here in Taiwan, but all over the world; it's the same everywhere. Capitalist societies are like this, and in fact, communist societies are like this now too. Mainland China is a communist society, but they are in pursuit of wealth too. As for the saying, "Rich nation, strong citizenry; strong citizenry, rich nation," this means that if a nation has plentiful financial resources, then the people's lives will be a little more comfortable. In this case, it is for the good of the nation that wealth is sought; there is nothing wrong with this. There is also nothing wrong with earning money for the sake of sentient beings. The problem is that it's almost always for individual self-interest, or for an individual's family, or for an individual's own small group, that wealth is pursued without scruple. This will surely bring harm to oneself and others. In the short term, it will appear as if the financial resources and the wealth obtained unscrupulously are already yours safe and sound; but, over a long period of time, the harm will come back to you.

Therefore, some people ask me, "Master Sheng Yen, do you need donations?" I say, "Think about it. To establish

Dharma Drum Mountain, we need small sums and we also need large sums, but not to the exclusion of small sums.” Without money, how can we spread the Dharma and benefit others? Social work, cultural work, and the so-called work of purifying people’s minds, all these require money. Where does it come from? Money cannot be magically conjured out of thin air; we cannot try to print counterfeit bills. Money is currency, but it must represent something to have value. Thus, one must try hard to be productive; if one is productive, what one gets is real money. When people who are not productive have a lot of wealth, their money is suspect. It is like a heap of scrap paper without usefulness. So, for Dharma Drum Mountain to fulfill its mission, money is necessary.

The question, however, is the means by which wealth is pursued. This must be considered. But the average person supplicates the gods and buddhas; in particular, everyone prays to the Earth God, saying that only with earth can there be wealth. Businesspeople, in order that their business can be tranquil and smooth, all make offerings to whom? To the Earth God. Why? This belief was created in an agricultural society, in which it was true that wealth came from the earth. So, making offerings to the Earth God brings in wealth. But if we don’t do any work, don’t use our brains, and have no capital, and only pray to the Earth God: “Hey, Earth God, let’s have some money!” This is most definitely wrong.

The reason behind the belief that earth brings wealth

is that, in an agricultural society, if you have land you will till it; after you have tilled it, it will produce crops. That is our wealth, our security in life. This is the significance of wealth coming from earth. The original meaning was not that praying to the Earth God would cause money to flow in. Now, we have this belief that by worshiping the Earth God, wealth will come in. Is this notion good, or bad? I believe there is nothing bad about it. If one understands the meaning, understands the principle, then worshiping the Earth God becomes symbolic. I believe that this thing we call seeking, seeking for the individual, without hurting others – there is nothing bad about it. Seeking wealth for one’s family without harming others: there is nothing wrong with that either. Seeking wealth for one’s group, without harming others: that’s very good, because it’s for the benefit of more people. If we seek wealth for all society, for all human beings, for the whole world, wouldn’t that be even better? If everyone, all of us, got rich, wouldn’t that be great? If everyone became very rich wouldn’t our society be better? But, the correct principle for getting rich is to do it without harming others. Do not sacrifice other sentient beings. This is compassion; this is wisdom; this is good karma. It is called cultivating blessings and accumulating merit. If you don’t do it this way, then in becoming rich, you will lose merit, lose blessings. What good will such wealth do?

Chen: Acquiring wealth without using methods that harm other sentient beings is compassionate and wise.

Topic Seven



The Art of Work

Attitude towards Work

May 19, 1995

Ms. Chen: Hello, everyone, and welcome again to another segment of Great Dharma Drum. Many people do things in a disorderly and unsystematic way; they turn a very simple matter into something extremely complicated. Wise people, on the other hand, are very methodical and orderly. They can take something very difficult and solve it methodically and with clarity. All matters have roots and branches, beginnings and ends, and varying degrees of urgency and importance. Addressed correctly, they'll be smoothly handled. Modern people in particular, who always race against time, must learn how to be at ease in handling things. Let us now ask Master Sheng Yen to explain to us the art of work.

Master Sheng Yen: Everyone must work; even children who are just beginning to understand the world are trained to work by their parents. This spirit is worth our encouragement. The Chinese word for "activity" is composed of two elements, "action" and "life." People can live if they act; and can act only if they are alive. However, acting is not to act heedlessly or recklessly; action must abide by certain rules, a goal and a direction. Thus, each of us should work. Some people work when they are young, and work very hard

when they're a little older; then, on retiring, stop working and have nothing to do. People with no work and nothing to do will likely fall ill; they are probably just waiting to die, and they'll die a little quicker. Their health will be a bit poorer. We must encourage people, up until the time of death, as long as they aren't bedridden, to definitely keep working, to definitely have something to do. If they don't have something to do, then, if not for money, they should use their time to do volunteer work, to serve the public. Work, therefore, is extremely important.

An idle person is not even the equal of an ant or a fly; even insects work, for without work, they cannot survive – ants, flies, and bees all work very diligently. People should work, but they differ in physical and mental capabilities – no two people are quite alike. Brothers and sisters are not alike; classmates and colleagues are not alike; people of the same age may not be physically or mentally equals. They might have different learning ability or work efficiency. Thus, people cannot be compelled, we cannot demand of other people, or of ourselves, that we do the same as those above us, comparing ourselves to more capable or talented people. We should only learn from them, emulate them, but not compare ourselves with them. If we compare with others, we're sure to suffer. When we compare and come out as the loser, we will be downcast in spirit and lose our self-confidence. And, if we compare and come out as the

winner, we might feel very proud, very smug. Neither of these are good states of mind – they cause others to be hurt, and ourselves to be hurt as well.

How then can we employ our ordinary mind to do what we should, what we can, and what we are given to do? If we are unable to do something, we should learn. Therefore, I have three suggestions: do our best; strive our utmost; learn as much as possible. We go by these three things, combined into a single attitude, putting them all together. We just make our best effort. What about things we cannot do? We do our utmost to learn. How well do we try to learn? There is no limit to that: we can always do better. There is also no limit to doing poorly: we can always do even worse. So do our best; strive our utmost, learn as much as possible, and work with our ordinary mind.

When people work today, many of them are doing it for the compensation: for the money, for the status, for the sake of promotion. This is the wrong attitude. In Taiwan today, as long as you work you will not starve. No one dies of starvation in Taiwan; there is no such person. Our work, then, is just a responsibility which we fulfill as a contribution to society. Everyone, every person, should fulfill it, contributing to society, helping each other out. Of course, a salary is necessary – without it, one couldn't eat, one could not live. But work should not be just to earn a living; if we work for the sake of work, we will be able to devote

ourselves to our work. Then, promotion is of little relevance. If we get promoted, that's great; if not, then someone else will; we should be happy for him or her. We should rejoice in others' good fortune. If someone else is promoted, we should congratulate them. If we are not promoted, that's okay; it's also great if someone else gets the promotion. If there is only one position to be filled, then someone is certain to be passed by. If that someone is us, it means we've not been diligent enough, or, perhaps, the other person needs harsher training, needs the opportunity to grow, and was therefore promoted. As for me, I just do my very best where I am.

Some people are very picky about work, wanting this work, not wanting that work; there is a problem with that attitude. We can choose according to our ability, our interests, and the choices currently available. We can choose, but there is no need to be finicky. If there is no other job available, do we still need to work? Yes. I often think about this, and urge others, and urge myself as well, to "be on horseback when searching for a horse." We must definitely have a horse to ride: do not be without one. Otherwise, we will panic. Whether it is a good job, or a bad job, an inferior job, a big job, or a little job, as long as we have work, we should safeguard it. Then, when something better comes along, when there is an opportunity, and then we can change jobs. There is no problem with that. This is the kind of attitude that we should learn. We must have work, but do not compare

ourselves to others. Just do our very best; strive our utmost, and do our best to learn what we do not know. This is what I keep repeating to people.

Chen: Do our very best, learn as much as we can, don't compare ourselves to others, do the work that we should and can do with ordinary mind, and we will be happy in our work.

Achieving Peace of Mind in the Workplace

January 14, 1999

Ms. Chen: Hello everyone. Welcome again to Great Dharma Drum. Many people feel that their mind is usually more or less at peace, but it becomes uneasy when they are at work. The workplace comes with a lot of pressure, a lot of problems and gossip. Under such circumstances, we can't attain peace of mind. How can we attain peace of mind in the workplace? Let's ask Master Sheng Yen for his advice.

Master, in our last program you told us that when we feel uneasy, we should reflect on ourselves, and then we can attain peace of mind. This is how I feel. Usually, my mind is quite peaceful, but as soon as I arrive at work a lot of problems just flood in, and I just lose my peace of mind right away. Is it possible to maintain peace of mind at work? Master, could you tell us how to achieve that?

Master Sheng Yen: Where does an uneasy mind in the workplace come from? It may be because we dislike our job, or our work is too hard and the workload too heavy, or we're bothered by our relationship with our colleagues. Or perhaps we were in low spirits that day, because we quarreled with our mates that morning. Or maybe we caught a cold that morning, and still felt lightheaded after arriving in the office, and therefore we felt uneasy. Many reasons can cause unease

in the workplace. So we should still find out what caused our uneasy mind. If we can identify the cause, we'll be able to handle the problems more easily. We might have quarreled with our mate at home, but he or she is not here now, so we needn't bring that atmosphere with us from home.

Or if you have a cold, you feel restless and fretful; your head and stomach are not well, your eyes itch, your backs and shoulders ache. On the whole, you perform poorly. At this moment, you don't need to feel upset, because that's how it is when you're not feeling well. Don't force yourself; just recite "Amitufo" and remain peaceful. Tell yourself to accept the reality that you have a cold and are not feeling well today. If you had a good day at work, that's fine. But it is also normal to have a bad working day because you're not well. Then, you won't feel so uneasy.

If there is a dispute between you and a colleague, then you can think that he or she is probably not feeling well. Maybe something has happened at home; or they have something on their mind. So, they lost their temper and gave us a hard time. Or this is their personality; this is what they are always like. When we interact with them, they always react that way, making people feel uncomfortable. If we look at it in this way, we'll find that it's not our problem. We must see it as an objective, circumstantial problem rather than our own problem, so then why feel uneasy? If it is not our problem, but theirs, or one of circumstances, why should we

feel uneasy?

I think many problems at work spring from demands. For example, we demand things from others, and put pressure on them. Other people's demands also put pressure on us. Another cause, I think, is comparing. If the team as a whole fails to perform outstandingly, we will probably lose out in the keen competition. So, as now we can see an economic downturn, many enterprises are struggling for survival. The pressure of competition is tremendous. Under such circumstances, how can we achieve peace of mind at the workplace? First we should do our best, and try to develop ourselves. We should work hard, be devoted, master our work, and be clear about our overall work environment. Then we'll be able to improve ourselves.

It is the same with interacting with others – while they may not understand us, we'd better understand them. For example, if we are a boss, we should understand the market situation. Markets keep changing all the time, just like battlefields. That's right – doing business is like fighting a war in which things change constantly. This changing represents impermanence. First, we should be prepared by bracing ourselves for challenges anytime. The other is to brace ourselves for setbacks anytime, and brace ourselves for growth as well. Setback and growth are relative. A challenge or a setback is not necessarily a bad thing; it can either make us grow, or make us feel frustrated. But let us say

setbacks can be good, because in turn, we gain experience. Experiencing setbacks is like paying tuition. It is also good. Though we may encounter setbacks repeatedly, let's not see that as something painful; instead, see them as experiences. If we have gained experience but still can't manage, then it is because causes, conditions, and blessings are not with us.

When we play soccer, don't we often hesitate whether to take the ball or not? As a result, others intercept it and take it away. That means we are clumsy, slow to act and react. If this is an innate trait there's nothing we can do. Then we should consider changing careers. So we should find a way out. Which way? To change a position or a post. That means to seek a suitable position commensurate with our ability; this is an important consideration. Some people just rush into a business without careful consideration, only to end up bruised and battered. In the end their effort failed; all is but a heroic endeavor. Acting this way is foolish and stupid. The prerequisite for a happy career is to identify our own ability. We should also know it all depends on causes and conditions – are the causes and conditions there for us to undertake, to strive, to engage in a certain career, at this time, in this environment? Can we go about it now? And will we be able to make it? We should often consider this.

Chen: Thank you Master for your advice. Please join us in our next program as we share the wisdom of the Dharma.

Summary: To acquire peace of mind at work, we should enjoy our work, get along well with our colleagues, try our best, and brace for setbacks, as an opportunity to develop ourselves.

Diligence with a Balance

January 15, 1999

Ms. Chen: Hello everyone. Welcome again to Great Dharma Drum. Talking about peace and security, many people think that people today are so uneasy because of their tense lifestyle, and their strong material desires. Every day, they're nervously hustling and bustling and chasing after things so busily that they can't put body and mind in order. How can we seek peace of mind amid material desires and tension? Let's ask Master Sheng Yen for further advice.

Master, I remember that Bertrand Russell, the prominent English author and philosopher, advocated a concept called "In praise of idleness." My first reaction was: how can he teach people to be idle? But his concept is quite interesting. What he meant was that Earth's natural resources are limited. If we labor too studiously, seek material pleasures too eagerly, and therefore exhaust all the resources, then it may affect our descendants. So, in fact, he advocated that we should be a bit idler and a little simpler, and that life will be better if we value spiritual enjoyment more. Master, what is your view on this concept of idleness?

Master Sheng Yen: Buddhism advocates diligence. Diligence may sound contradictory to idleness; but Buddhism also advocates an idea analogous to tuning a violin or guitar.

If we tune the strings too tight, they won't sound pleasant, or they will sound too stiff and harsh. Or, they may snap when we start to play.

Chen: That's right, unpleasant to the ear.

MSY: But the strings mustn't be too loose either. Otherwise we only hear “pu, pu, pu” and the strings won't produce a correct sound. So, the strings must be tuned just right – not too tight and not too loose. And then we can keep going. This analogy of tuning string instruments shows the way to be diligent. It will pose a problem if we're overly stretched and tense. It is the same with people's way of life. I think Russell's idea of idleness was aimed at workaholics or people who eagerly and relentlessly chase after fame, wealth, and status, without ever feeling content or satisfied, and therefore always living in pain. Such people actually inflict pain both on themselves and others.

As for material desires, it is not because of our hard work that our living resources are wasted, are used up, or decreased over time. Rather, it's because we don't use resources wisely that we are destroying them. For our own convenience or enjoyment in life, we exploit nature and therefore damage it. In fact, we'd better not make our lives too hectic. So in spiritual practice I always teach people to relax body and mind first. By relaxing body and mind, we can do anything calmly and orderly. So, I don't fully agree

with Russell's idea of idleness, but I do agree that a person should have some leisure time, to unwind as appropriate. As a verse says, "Taking my leisure, I gaze at the mountains." But it doesn't mean that we should just sleep all day long and do nothing. It is also good to see the mountains occasionally. But the poet worked in the daytime and retired at sunset, living a farmer's life. He still worked. It's not that he didn't do any work, for that would be laziness.

So, this poem reflects the enjoyment of pastoral life found in the past. Nowadays, we live an urban life, so it is very important to know how to adjust our lives. If we don't, we'll live in pain. When we have finished our work, we need to adjust a little, instead of going on and doing the same tasks. I tell people that over the course of a week we work each day for money. Can't we devote one or two days a week to something else that's not for money or fame? Though our bodies are in motion as usual, it will be different from when we move for money and fame. Our state of mind will be different, and so will our feelings. This is adjusting ourselves.

Now, there are over ten thousand volunteers working for our organization. These volunteers give themselves constantly; they give up their holidays, their leisure time, and come to volunteer in their golden years after retirement. They work very happily. They work day and night in the same way they used to for fame and wealth, only with a completely different mood. So, adjustment of mood enables

a person to change his concepts or feelings completely. It is not necessarily called being idle. What kinds of work do these volunteers do? They do service work, helping to clean up the environment. We hope that things we've used can be re-cycled, and reused. Renewed, such resources can still be given to those in need. Such kinds of work won't destroy nature and neither will it damage our natural resources. So, we should vary tasks to adjust our body and mind, or we change our mindset. It's also a kind of adjustment. It is not necessarily to be idle and require taking a rest.

Chen: Thank you Master, for your enlightening talk. The Master said that a balanced life requires us to be neither too tense nor too loose. It's not bad to enjoy a leisurely mood occasionally, but still, we need diligence in our life. Please join us in our next program as we share the wisdom of the Dharma.

Summary: In order to gain peace and security, we need to live a life that is neither "too tight" nor "too loose," relaxing our body and mind while remaining diligent in spiritual practice.

Engaging in Appropriate Leisure Time from Work

January 18, 1999

Ms. Chen: Hello everyone. Welcome again to Great Dharma Drum. Today, people over-emphasize efficiency, seek success too eagerly, and often become tense and uneasy, causing physical and mental disease, as well as accidents. So they find themselves further away from the peace and security they may be eagerly seeking. Then, how can we be efficient, while remaining peaceful and secure at the same time? Let's ask Master Sheng Yen for further advice.

Master, Dharma Drum Mountain published a small book about peace and security, in which there are articles written by famous writers. In particular I remember an article titled, "Leave some wealth for your descendants to earn." The author's theory was that if you're busy making money, concentrating on your work too many hours a day, then you are exchanging health for wealth, burning health for money. Eventually, you're going to lose peace of body and mind. So, he called for people to leave some wealth for our descendants to earn. Master, what is your view on his theory?

Master Sheng Yen: If this refers to those who are greedy and know no satisfaction, those who seek success

relentlessly, knowing no limits to success and making money, then I agree. Some people are satisfied with a little gain; some are content with what they've got. These two are different – to be satisfied with small gains is different from being content with what we have; in the latter case, whether we have much or little, we are still at ease and happy. We feel fine when we gain much, and we also feel content when we gain less; we remain balanced without ourselves suffering, or making others suffer. This is being content with what we've got. On the other hand, being satisfied with small gains means we don't want to improve ourselves. For example, if after reading just one book, someone feels there is no need to read another one, then this is being content with a little gain. On the other hand, another person can read to their heart's content, however many books that means. This is what these two statements mean.

Another case is when a person is working desperately to earn money and chasing after success and wealth and knows no limits. He is willing to employ any measures, or just intends to become the richest man of his town, or his region, or his country, or the world. Such desire is endless. Chasing after that kind of dream is very painful and extremely nerve-wracking. You get it and lose it again. After you lose it, you try to get it back, in the way a gambler does. All gamblers wish to turn all others' money into theirs, by winning all the money in one go. When they lose, they hope

to win it back; and when they win, they hope to win even more. Gamblers are never content; that is a very painful thing. Ordinary people like us are not like this if we live a happy life. By being content and happy with our life, we will feel joyful all the time.

Chen: Last time, the Master talked about appropriate leisure activities. How can we enjoy appropriate leisure activities? And how can they benefit our life?

MSY: Last time, I used the analogy of tuning stringed instruments neither too tightly nor too loosely. Every day, we need to take time out to allow our brains to have some rest. Sometimes, our brain is at rest while our body is still in motion. Sometimes our body is at rest but our brain isn't, and that doesn't count. Primarily, we want to give our brain, the cranial nerves, and the nervous system a rest. So, people drink tea, enjoying a light and easy moment, they have a chat with their friends, sharing anecdotes or personal trifles, about this and that, without taxing the brain. This relaxes the brain as well as our body. It's wrong to say leisure activities are equal to sleep. So, I think when people in the West sit in a café, they're not sleeping, but enjoying their leisure. This leisure enables the brain to relax, but the body is not asleep. So, we are adjusting ourselves instead of being idle.

Nowadays, some Chinese people like to act like they

are so elegant by spending hours at a time at a teahouse. This really is over the top. There are such people! Leisure should be just in the right measure. It is not being self-indulgent at a teahouse. Fooling around at a teahouse is pointless. In China, some people take a walk with their bird in cage, all day long. They walk their bird in the morning, spend all day in a teahouse, and go home to sleep at night. Such a lifestyle is very bad for society. So I still admire the Europeans' way of leisurely drinking tea and living lives of ease. Nonetheless, they work very hard when they're at work, rather than wasting time at the teahouse all day long. Sometimes, the Chinese work extremely hard at work, and will expend similar time and energy by wasting time in the teahouse. I think this kind of behavior needs to be adjusted.

Chen: Thank you Master for your advice. Sometimes, if we are too stressed out we will lack efficiency. So, appropriate leisure activities actually boost efficiency. Please join us in our next program as we continue to share the wisdom of the Dharma.

Summary: We can achieve peace of mind by always feeling content constantly and engaging in proper leisure time activities that relax our brains.

Striking a Perfect Balance between Hard Work and Relaxation

January 19, 1999

Ms. Chen: Hello everyone. Welcome again to Great Dharma Drum. Our culture particularly praises hard work and frowns on idleness. Particularly in the hustle of today's industrial society, we seem to have lost the meaning of leisure, and don't know how to spend it appropriately. We either crowd into karaoke bars or spend our free time eating and drinking excessively. I heard that here in Taiwan, even when we are watching TV, we channel-hop more than people anywhere else. So how do we keep a leisurely mind in the daily grind of modern life? Let's ask Master Sheng Yen for his guidance. Master, what do you think is the proper way to spend our leisure time?

Master Sheng Yen: When we can relax body and mind, breathe in fresh air, and live our life in a relaxed and comfortable pace – this is what we mean by a leisurely life. Learning to enjoy life is very important. Many people think that excessive eating, or indulging in romantic relationships, represents enjoying life. Some people think enjoying life means presenting oneself in a certain way, dressing in trendy clothes, or a stylish way, or driving luxurious cars. These are all wrong. True enjoyment of life is being at ease, when

one's peaceful in both body and mind. It is not about how much or how little material possessions one owns.

I have been to many parts of the world. I grow up near Shanghai, then I came to Taiwan, then I went to Tokyo. I have also lived in New York, and traveled to many places in Europe, big cities and small towns alike. These experiences have made me feel that the life in Chinese villages provides a very good model. Why is that? People rise before dawn to go to work and come home in the evening. Since we didn't have electricity back then, we'd light an oil lamp in the evening. And the whole family would gather around the table to chat. Maybe a neighbor or a visiting relative would join us for tea. We'd all sit around the table and just have tea and talk. Or, sometimes we'd have something to snack on, usually some fruit in the summer, peanuts in the winter. This was how we would spend our leisurely evenings together. And the next day, people would again rise early to go to work in the fields, coming home in the evening to spend time with family. This is truly what leisure means and true happiness. This is enjoying life. We may have been very poor, but spiritually we were very wealthy. It was a very healthy way of living.

But I saw a very different lifestyle when I moved to the city. People in the city are constantly competing with one another – over cars, clothes, shoes, so they have to work extremely hard to make money for it all. When they become tired from all the hard work they just go to sleep. The moment

they wake up, they rush to work to make more money. Tired from work, they indulge in pleasures, until they get tired of that, too, and fall asleep, and when they wake up, they again go and make more money. They are stressed even when they are asleep, or dreaming. Living like this is almost inhumane. It's a most painful thing.

Then when I went to Europe I found it quite different. In Europe, you always take a break after some hard work. For example, I have been to Croatia, which used to be part of Yugoslavia, and I have been to Warsaw in Poland, and I recently went to Russia. In these Eastern European countries, the pace of living is a lot slower, and a lot less stressed. There is not so much hustle and bustle on the streets. When I give a lecture there, the audience is always very focused and engaged. And then we will have a question-and-answer session afterwards. Sometimes when it is time for me to go and get some rest, they still want to hear more, they still have more questions to ask me, then, the organizer will suggest a change of venue – perhaps a coffee shop, and continue our discussion over coffee. The atmosphere is very different then. It is very relaxed. We'll just talk about everything. It is no longer a very formal Q & A session. I think a lifestyle like this represents balance between hard work and relaxation. It is an ideal balance. So I think we can all learn a lot from the Europeans how to enjoy life. They still work hard during the day, but then they take it easy when the day's work is done.

This is also very relevant to our monastic life. We live a rather busy life, too, but we do have our ways for relaxation as well. Not by going to karaoke bars or indulging in eating and drinking. Not like that. After a day's hard work, we relax by chanting, by making prostrations, by listening, by reading, or by doing meditation. We do have many different ways to keep our life well balanced, between hard work and relaxation. This is how we monastics live our life. From the way people look at it, I may live an incredibly busy life, but I do actually have some leisure time, too.

Chen: Thank you Master for your guidance. Many great ideas come out of moments of leisure, so the Master tells us to remain well balanced in life. Please join us next time as we continue to share the wisdom of the Dharma.

Summary: We should learn to spend our leisure time wisely. The ideal lifestyle should be a perfect balance between hard work and relaxation.

Living in the Present Moment: The Busy Make the Best Use of Time

April 5, 1995

Ms. Chen: Greetings, everyone, and welcome to another segment of Great Dharma Drum. Competition in our modern society gets stronger every day, and the importance of time grows in proportion. For modern people, time represents the pressure to make the most of each and every minute. However, when we face an environment of increasing instability, where there are more unforeseen situations, time is continually disturbed by the interference of various internal and external factors, which create even greater stress. Chan teaches us to live in the present and shoulder our responsibilities, which can be seen as a different view of time management. Let us now ask Master Sheng Yen to guide us in learning to apply this philosophy of living in the present.

Master Sheng Yen: In modern society there is an overwhelming amount of information, and all sorts of situations crop up one after another. There are more and more new things out there. We feel that time is becoming shorter and shorter; our environment seems to be shrinking, and our areas of involvement ever more complicated. So, while people two or three centuries ago felt that a lifetime

of a few decades was quite long, nowadays, we feel a few decades to be too short. Because there are so many things we want to see, things we want to learn, things we want to know, places we want to go, and we have too little time to do them all. Furthermore, because we receive too much information, our mental activity becomes extremely complicated. In the past, people's brains had a limited set of impressions. If you were an intellectual, you knew ancient history. If you weren't, you knew about a few local issues.

It's not so easy nowadays. Newspapers, television, radio – all tell us what's going on in the whole world! And the whole lot goes into our brains and enters our sphere of knowledge. Because of this, we can't keep up; our mind is continuously filled by an endless array of people, events, and things unrelated to what we really want to do, think, and say. Even if it's unrelated to us, it still interferes, and we waste lot time. So we find it difficult to make choices, too confused to make decisions. One would think that the more we know, the sharper are our powers of observation, and the more objective is our judgment. But in fact, it works out the opposite way – because we know so much, we don't know what to do. Especially when it comes to managing for ourselves, we never know which choice is the best. Choosing a career, choosing a partner, even choosing the food we eat and the things we buy, all often just makes our heads spin. We don't know what to do. All we can say is, “Okay, let's

just try our luck. Let's just see what happens." But luck is not very reliable. And that's what happens when we don't know what to do.

So, to make best use of your time, it is best to be very economical. I have a saying for this, a sort of concept that could be the basis for a new movement. It is: "The busy make the best use of time." Nowadays almost everyone is busy; every day is full of work, and even people with nothing to do are busy. They're busy watching movies and TV, going grocery shopping, eating. And after they've eaten, there are so many other things they want to do. So, people without all these things, people without occupations, people without jobs, are also very busy. By which I mean, in conducting their lives, they are physically busy and their brains are busy, so busy they can't even keep up. Do people like this have enough time for their business? They don't. What we're talking about right now, when I say that a busy person makes the best use of time, is that we should use our time to the best of our ability, in the most efficient way, and not waste it. This is very important.

From morning to night, make the most of your time but watch how you do it. You sit in your car, you get stuck in traffic jams – how do you make the most of it then? Whatever you do is of no use – your car is stuck there. Nonetheless, you should be able to make some space in your own mind; you can use that time to get a good rest, let your brain take a

break, let your body relax. In any case, you're stuck in that car, and getting stressed is of no use. Some people who are stuck like that waste a lot of energy; they get all anxious, and then they get angry. What's the point in that? This is an example of not using time well. We have to take best advantage of the time we're stuck in traffic jams. When we are using all the time that we are able to use, then this is the time that you're busiest – but you have to make best use of it.

We talk about living in the present, as the present is the best time of all. You have to appreciate the present, and make the most of the present moment. When you enjoy it, and make use of it, that's most advantageous for you. You don't want to eat while your mind wanders, thinking of other things. Or while reading a book, you let your mind think about a movie. When you're in a theatre watching a good movie, you enjoy it greatly. But when you're talking to someone, and they say something, and you don't hear it because your mind is on the movie, then this person says it a second time, and you say, "Could you repeat that, please? I didn't quite catch that." Well, here you're harming the other person. You're wasting his or her time, and you're wasting your own time. So, we have to seize the moment. We live in the present because the Buddha is in the present. Then our minds will be very clear. This doesn't mean keeping so busy you can't even rest. When we are busy, rest is necessary, and we have to find time to rest. Otherwise, wouldn't we all be

dead of exhaustion? Only in this way, can we live quality lives, very significant lives, and we will feel that we have plenty of time.

Summary: Make the most of all the time that you have, and live in this busy present moment. Then you will realize that a busy person makes the greatest use of time.

Busy but Happy, Tired yet Joyful

November 20, 1995

Ms. Chen: Greetings, everyone, and welcome to another segment of Great Dharma Drum. Today, we would like to talk about how we can be busy yet happy, and tired but joyful. Master Sheng Yen has a famous saying that goes: “Busy and still busier, I feel so happy; tired and still more tired, I am full of joy.” However, most people only feel strong mental pressure when they’re swamped with work and very busy, and when tired, they become annoyed and impatient. How can we enjoy being busy, and be tired joyously? Let’s now ask Master Sheng Yen for his guidance.

Master Sheng Yen: It all depends on what you’re busy with, and why you are tired. That’s very important indeed. If you’re tired and bored, and annoyed with being busy, then you’ll definitely suffer terribly from being busy and still busier, and feel like dying from being tired and still more tired. There’s no doubt about that. We have realized that our lives are limited, and that our time is very precious. The resources we have are too few, and yet our need to grow is so great. Therefore, we must use our limited lives to achieve unlimited merit. That’s why we have to be busy.

There is a verse in the sutras that goes: “Our life is diminished with this passing day; like fish with a little water,

what joy is there for us?” A more colloquial version would be: “Another day has come and gone, and we have one day less to live. We’re like fish that have only very little water left, so what’s there to be happy about?” Fish in a pond with very little, shallow water are prepared to die at any moment, so how could they be happy? Our lives are certainly limited, too. I still remember when I was just a little kid, yet now I’m already an old man, and soon I will... When people ask me how old I am, I’ll say: “Soon, soon, very soon.” What does that mean? It means soon I’m going to die. This year, 1995, I’m 66 years old. I’m not dead yet, and I don’t know when I’m going to die. I’m sure I won’t live another 66 years, that’s impossible. If I had another 66 years to live, I wouldn’t want to live that long. It would be too tiring, too exhausting, and too arduous; it’s too tiring to live on when one is already so old. Life is very short, very limited, and even if you want to keep on living, you can’t.

Therefore, we must make very good use of our lives. We must build up our wisdom and build up our merit. That’s very important. That’s because we Buddhists believe that this life is a result of our past lives, and that after this lifetime expires, there’ll be future lives. This life is hard enough, and we have enough troubles. We hope our future life will be better than the present. It’s like hoping that when we’re old we’ll have enough money to retire. So when we’re still young, we have to work hard to make more money and

save it. The more we save, the more money we'll have after retirement and the more security we'll have.

Since we have been born as human beings in this life – something that doesn't come easily—we should make good use of our human life to store up the assets of merit and wisdom. This is the benefit we receive. So we must make the best use of our time to help ourselves, and to give of ourselves to serve and help others, to take care of others and to care for our society. That's why I often say: "A busy person has a satisfying time, and a diligent person has good health." If we want to be healthy and live a happy life, we should keep busy.

If we wish to accumulate assets in the course of this present life, we have to keep busy. These assets we store up for our own good. What is it we should accumulate? We should store up merit and wisdom, and for this, we must keep busy. When we're busy it seems like it's not for ourselves, which is why people often say: For whom am I toiling, for whom am I so busy? As if being so busy wasn't worth our while, as if being busy doesn't pay off, as if all our efforts are in vain, and we don't know whom we're toiling for.

Asking "Whom am I busy for?" is the wrong idea; it's not a Buddhist concept. In Buddhism, we're busy for ourselves, so even if we've gotten nothing else in this life, we'll still have gained merit, we'll have obtained the benefit of wisdom and the benefit of karmic blessings. This means

that we have grown, which is not useless or worthless at all. If we live by this concept, we will certainly be very busy. If you have this attitude, then how will you feel when you're busy? You'll enjoy being busy. And when you're tired, how will you feel? You'll feel tired but very happy. To have this opportunity to be busy, to toil and be tired is wonderful.

If we want to do farming and we obtain a field to till, we should thank the person who gave us that land. And if you have already earned enough money, have a big enough car to drive, own a big, tall house, can afford a foreign maid, and everything is going very smoothly, then you might as well come to Dharma Drum Mountain as a volunteer. Clean up our environment, make visits for us, and help us to care for other people. That will also keep you busy, busy in a very happy way, and joyously tired.

Summary: If we work hard to give of ourselves, we will benefit from storing up the assets of wisdom and merit for our future lives. With this in mind, we will greatly enjoy being busy and tired.

Topic Eight



Right Understanding of Chan Practice

Cultivating Firm Determination: Choose One Method and Stay with It

June 28, 1995

Ms. Chen: Greetings, everyone, and welcome to another segment of Great Dharma Drum. Today we'll talk about the importance of cultivating firm determination. Some people will practice one Dharma method today, another one tomorrow, and the day after, yet another method. Such people lack constancy and don't have a firm determination for the Path. Not only will they not be successful in their practice, but they may blindly fall into external temptation and go astray. We must have constancy if we are to avoid being tempted whenever we see something new. Otherwise we'll run around and tire ourselves out without accomplishing a thing. So let us ask Master Sheng Yen to teach us how to cultivate constancy.

Master Sheng Yen: This issue may seem to be pertinent only to spiritual practice, but this is actually not the case. The function and role of spiritual practice is to help us better conduct ourselves in our everyday life, and get along in the world. Only thus can the Buddhadharma be truly useful. Some people say this constancy is firm determination. They will say so-and-so lacks firm determination, while another person has great firm determination. A firm mind

is not necessarily the same as determination in meditation. When an old monk enters into meditation – this is called meditative determination. There are two kinds of meditative determination: one is when you sit motionless in one place and your mind does not move; the other kind is exercised during everyday life when you are not subject to any kind of influence, including threats and temptations. In this second type, your mind is always as immobile as a mountain; nothing will affect you or sap your will power. This is called “firm determination.”

The question today seems to deal only with spiritual practice. Some people practice one Dharma method today, another Dharma method tomorrow, and the day after, yet another. The essential point of the example is that we shouldn't switch whenever we see something new, and shouldn't constantly change our mind. This is constancy or steadiness, and is also called firm determination. Many people think that they are in the worst situation, that their job is not as good as someone else's. They think their food is not as tasty as someone else's. This is quite common, but it is not a good attitude. We should realize that what we have now is the best. What we have now in our hand and are using currently is really the best, and represents the best fortune and the best blessings.

For instance, you gentlemen who are married, you should say, “My wife is the best.” Then you will certainly

love your wife, and will certainly take very good care of your family. But if after you've married your wife, you see that someone else's wife is better than yours, you will certainly get into trouble. You will certainly not be very loyal to your family. And your family will certainly have problems.

The Dharma methods we practice may be one of the following: reciting the Buddha's name in the Pure Land School, or working on Chan intuitively in the Chan School, or reciting mantras in the Esoteric School. However, upon hearing of some gurus or living buddhas who are very efficacious, you may run to see them in hopes of immediately becoming a buddha. Then you may hear that a certain Chan master has spiritual powers, and you hurry off to see him. Then you hear that practicing Chan will neither help you attain liberation nor let you be reborn in the Western Paradise, but if you just recite the name of Amitabha Buddha once, you can be reborn in the Western Paradise, so you quickly start reciting the name of Amitabha. But then another great master or living buddha comes along, and he guarantees that you can become enlightened in three hours, or a dozen minutes, or right away, and that you can immediately achieve liberation. So you go see this master without delay. Sometimes people get taken in this way. Or if they don't get taken in, they become captivated. We are no longer in control in this kind of situation, and are no longer using our judgment. This problem will come up when we do

business, pursue studies, make friends, or conduct ourselves in our everyday life.

The great thinker, Hu Shihzhi, had a principle for engaging in scholarship. He said scholarship should be like a pyramid: your professional achievement should be high and profound, while your general knowledge should be vast and extensive. Your learning must be both broad and profound. Broad means that you should know a bit about other professions. But the most important thing is that you cannot neglect your own profession. Like myself: I've read all sorts of books, but the most important thing for me is Buddhist studies. I'm certainly not as learned as some in other fields. I just have a smattering of general knowledge, but Buddhism is my specialty. So when I lecture in this field, I'm never afraid. When I see people, see a big audience, I'm certainly not going to get cold feet because I have confidence – I understand my own field. I know that no matter what, this is something I understand, that I am not speaking as an amateur. You also know this; you sense that what I say is correct. I have confidence. If I just learned a little bit about everything and was shoddy at every line of work, then that would be a sorry situation.

If, when engaging in spiritual practice, a person practices many Dharma methods at the same time, and hopes that each method will help him, the result will be...well, let me give an analogy. We each have two hands and two

feet. If one hand grasps one boat and the other hand grasps another boat... as for the feet, if the left foot is standing in one boat and the right foot in another, then where will our body be? Our body will definitely not be in a boat. And if one of the boats starts moving, we will fall into the sea. This is therefore the most dangerous situation to be in. Though we may consider it safest, it's actually the most dangerous situation. So it's very important to choose one method and stay with it. This applies to whatever profession that may be. And it certainly also applies to Dharma cultivation. This discussion has been mainly from the perspective of Dharma cultivation. It's very important that we, as human beings, also have a firm footing in life.

Summary: Like one's learning, one's spiritual practice should be broad and profound. The best way to cultivate firm determination is to set your mind on a single method and investigate it in depth.

Enlightenment and Buddhahood

March 17, 1995

Ms. Chen: Greetings everyone, and welcome to another segment of Great Dharma Drum. Today we will discuss whether enlightenment is equivalent to buddhahood. From the time of the Buddha to the present day individuals have pursued the Path in order to achieve enlightenment. Seeing as most of those involved in religion are in search of something, the pursuit of enlightenment can be considered very normal. Enlightenment is a part of orthodox Buddhism, but we cannot become obsessed with pursuing enlightenment. What does this mean? Let us invite Master Sheng Yen to clear up this confusion.

Master Sheng Yen: When Shakyamuni Buddha became enlightened, he achieved buddhahood. He then preached the Dharma in order to save sentient beings, enabling many disciples to reach the first, second, and third fruitions, all the way up to the fourth fruition of arhatship. All these fruitions are called enlightenment. Since the Buddha entered final nirvana, the Buddhadharma has been passed on from one generation to the next, right up to the present. What has the Buddha contributed to this world? The answer is enlightenment. This word “enlightenment” sounds very mysterious, but really there is no mystery behind it.

Originally one is bathed in ignorance but after hearing the Dharma, one's mindset changes which, in turn, changes one's way of thinking and acting. Originally one is very closed off, isolated from one's feelings and flooded with vexation, but through hearing the Dharma, one comes to understand the true way of the world. Once one understands what factors lead to pleasure and suffering, they are free from obsessions and remain detached when facing vicissitudes. This is also enlightenment.

Therefore, enlightenment is also called "awakening." Hearing the Dharma when confused, or experiencing the Buddhadharma personally, we change ourselves accordingly, and that is actually a kind of enlightenment. So enlightenment is not some mystic experience. But, at the same time it could be a mystic experience. So-called enlightenment in the form of mystic experience occurs while meditating, chanting mantras, making prostrations or reciting the scriptures, we see a light, we hear a sound, make contact with something, or have some kind of feeling or experience. Our mindset will change because we see something with our own eyes, we experienced something ourselves, that we have neither experienced nor seen before. We will feel certain of the reality of this experience. As a result, our faith will be affected and affirmed. This can also be considered enlightenment.

But according to the true Buddhadharma, that is simply a kind of experience. As for true enlightenment –

whether it is lesser or thorough enlightenment – it is possible to experience it over and over until one loses count. And each time will be more or less the same. Some achieve a deeper level of realization each time, until they achieve a great and thorough enlightenment. Yet, they are not necessarily a buddha. Thorough enlightenment only means that one's degree of wisdom gradually comes to be like that of the Buddha, but that does not equal buddhahood. It's just like water: the water in a drinking glass is water; the water in the oceans is water as well. When drinking water you are partaking of its essence, two atoms of hydrogen and one of oxygen. But drinking from the ocean and drinking a glass of water are definitely different experiences. However, some people only get a taste and then stop upon seeing their buddha-nature. This can also be considered enlightenment, but does one still experience vexation after realizing one's nature? Yes, one's vexations are still there. Sometimes one will not experience vexations for a time but after a while the vexations comes back. So, one must continue to devote oneself to practice.

One who is truly enlightened will cease to feel arrogant, inferior, angry, or greedy. So when people say they have achieved great enlightenment, but they still drink, eat meat, lust for women, money, fame, social standing, and quarrel out of jealousy or envy, are they truly enlightened? If so, there is something wrong. From the standpoint of the

Buddhadharma, you can say, at the very least, they aren't enlightened. They might have had some mystical experience from chanting mantras, or through the empowerment of a master, but this is not enlightenment. Yet, after having this mystical experience their faith begins to grow.

Every religion has people that have had some type of mystical experience and the faith of that person in that religion will grow as a result. If a master or a teacher helps you to have a mystical experience, you will feel the deepest reverence for him, you will never forget his help your whole life and you will always feel grateful to him. He is like a second father to you. Why? Because you've never experienced anything like it before; he has presented this mystical experience so that you will establish faith. It is true that religions are able to endure and attract followers by relying on these mystical experiences. But let me say again that a mystical experience does not equal enlightenment. There are also levels of enlightenment, which are not necessarily equivalent to buddhahood. Becoming a buddha means one is completely enlightened with both perfect merit and perfect wisdom. *That* is buddhahood.

Chen: Enlightenment is like a glass of water, while buddhahood is an everlasting spring.

The Three Stages Chan Practitioners Undergo

January 21, 1997

Ms. Chen: Greetings, everyone, and welcome to another segment of Great Dharma Drum. People say that learning to paint has three stages: first, seeing mountains as mountains, then mountains not as mountains, then in the end, mountains as mountains again. People say that sitting meditation has the same three stages. Only in the last stage does the self no longer exist. Now we'd like to ask Master Sheng Yen how Chan practitioners experience things in each of the three stages. Let us ask the Master to shed light on this.

Master Sheng Yen: I don't know if painters really have such experiences. But I do know the process that Chan practitioners go through. At first, they are average people – fathers are fathers, mothers are mothers, wives are wives, husbands are husbands. They bother each other and love each other. Also, it seems that every family has its fair share of trouble. Of course, some families do quite well; they are happy almost every day. But there can't be many families like this. Most families have their troubles.

Next is a higher stage of practice, where “mountains are seen not as mountains.” Our family and the people we usually come in contact with now seem like strangers. We

are so deep into our practice that we look but do not see, listen but do not hear, eat but do not taste. It's like someone being so absorbed in listening to music, that if we tell him to give us his money, he might just say "Help yourself." But in fact he doesn't really know what is going on. After the music is over, he looks into his wallet and finds his money is gone, but he has no idea who took it. Is this possible? Yes.

When we are enjoying or studying something that interests us and we become completely absorbed in it, we'll naturally cease to notice the things around us. We are so intent on our work, that we don't notice what's happening. When people talk to us, we respond with "uh-huh," but we have no idea what they're talking about. We hear them but we don't know what they said. It's possible for Chan practitioners to act like this when they reach this level. Have they succeeded in spiritual cultivation? Not yet. Spiritual cultivation is a lengthy process.

When our faith is strong and our mind calm, we will encounter such situations after we've been reciting sutras or prostrating for a long while. This is especially true with meditation. Even average people encounter such situations when they concentrate like that. This is the state where "mountains aren't mountains." Next is the level where "mountains are mountains again." This happens when practitioners have completed one stage of cultivation and come out of extreme concentration. At this moment, the

world they see now is exactly the same as the old one.

However, now there's something different. For those who haven't been practicing deeply for a long time or haven't been enlightened, then if they take a break or rest for a while, everything is the same as before. When faced with a given situation, their emotional response is still the same. But if they have gone through deep cultivation where they completely throw themselves into their practice, and thus experienced "mountains aren't mountains," then their physical and mental responses are completely different. Their mental state is different. When they look around at this moment, flowers are still colorful and snow is still white and beautiful but their heart will be calm; they know that a beautiful woman is beautiful, but their heart doesn't palpitate with excitement. Perhaps they used to be very timid, but after going through deep cultivation, they won't be so scared when witnessing terrible things. They have settled the self, or even let go of it or dissolved it. At that time, mountains still are mountains but their mind is so calm and steady and unaffected. This is the third stage. Amitufo.

Summary: When you emerge from the absorbed, oblivious state after realizing no-self, mountains are mountains again: you see everything as before, but with a calm, undisturbed mind.

Meditative Concentration Explained

January 2, 1997

Ms. Chen: Greetings, everyone, and welcome to another segment of Great Dharma Drum. Buddhists often practice sitting meditation. It is said that if one sits well, he is very likely to enter meditative concentration. If a person practicing meditation enters concentration and cannot be awakened no matter how hard we try, what should we do? Will he die from the prolonged concentration, or become disabled or seriously ill? Let us ask Master Sheng Yen for his guidance.

Master Sheng Yen: This is a very good question, but to begin with, it's not easy to reach such a level of concentration. Therefore, it is even harder to remain in concentration so long that becoming disabled or dying is a concern. First, although it is not easy to enter this level of concentration, one who can attain it can certainly leave it. Let me explain first what concentration means. When all your scattered thoughts stop drifting, and your mind is fixed on a single point without thinking, this is meditative concentration, or samadhi. At this time, you only feel relaxed, comfortable, and free from burden or disturbance. You are in a very open, expansive and unconstrained state. You are aware of your own existence, but you feel very calm

and at ease, unburdened by body or mind.

There are different levels of samadhi. If it is shallow, you can still hear sounds, and sense your body a bit; you still have some subtle thoughts. You may not know what they are, but they're still there. However, if you reach deep samadhi, you won't hear or see anything, and you don't feel your body either. Mental activity completely stops. Your breath becomes so subtle, that you can't feel it passing through the nostrils. The eminent Master Xuyun once had an interesting experience meditating on a boat. He did not have the money for the ferry, so the boatman pushed him overboard into the river. He ended up drifting in the river, floating and sinking for more than a day, until a fisherman pulled him out of the water. Yet, he was still alive. This is an example of entering deep samadhi.

So, if someone in samadhi is buried, he will still survive. Nonetheless, such concentration is necessarily related to the body. If his body is still there, he will definitely emerge eventually. If the concentration is shallow, he'll emerge quickly. If it is deep, it will take longer. If the body is gone, the concentration will really last a long time. In deep concentration the meditator ascends through the four dhyana heavens of the form realm, one after another. At the fourth dhyana, the concentration will be truly long-lasting because [it is as if] one's body no longer exists. If the body still exists, he will definitely emerge from samadhi. So, don't

worry about dying from prolonged samadhi.

Once you begin sitting, if you're not sure how long it will be before you get up, but you need to get up on time to attend to business, before sitting you can ask someone to help you by ringing the hand-chime to rouse you. Hand-chimes are common in monasteries. Because your ears are still functioning, someone ringing the hand-chime will rouse you. If one tap is not enough, two or three taps will definitely rouse you. As long as the body exists, you can be awakened. Will prolonged samadhi result in disability? Absolutely not. When someone enters concentration, their *qi* channels are unobstructed, and their breath and *qi* circulate smoothly. If one can't enter samadhi, their body may have some obstructions. Someone who can attain concentration is definitely very healthy; their *qi* channels are unblocked and the *qi* flows freely. So, there is no need to worry about samadhi causing disability.

Therefore, if we know more about what happens in samadhi, we won't worry about it. But, if entering concentration is not easy, how can we do it? We must have the guidance of a teacher in order to attain the true meditative concentration of samadhi. Otherwise, it is probably not real concentration. It may seem like it but just be lethargy or a delusional state. All kinds of mental visions may appear in front of you, taking you on a tour of heavens and hells, traveling around various realms, and seeing the sights. These

are nothing but illusions. This is not real concentration. Such visions do not exist in real concentration. They might harm you both mentally and physically by leading you into a demonic state. So, you must rely on experienced teachers. They must follow the orthodox teachings of the Buddha. Only under the guidance of such teachers is this practice safe. Amitufo!

Summary: Extended concentration is an indication of good health, not a cause of physical problems. To avoid harmful hallucinatory states, practice under an experienced and qualified Buddhist teacher.

Meditative Concentration: What Does It Feel Like?

May 22, 1998

Ms. Chen: Hello, everyone, and welcome again to Great Dharma Drum. In our last program, Master said that practices such as sitting meditation, chanting the Buddha's name, reciting sutras, prostrating to the Buddha, and doing repentance prostration can all lead to concentration, or samadhi. Out of meditative concentration wisdom will emerge. What does it feel like? What kind of wisdom is generated? Let us continue to ask Master Sheng Yen.

Master, sometimes when I meditate I feel a flash of inspiration. It's not like the experiences of the wise but is something I personally experience. For example, I've said before that sometimes the harder you pursue something, the harder it is to get it. But once you stop your pursuit, it comes to you. When I was producing programs before, as long as there was no thought of "me," if I produced a program or worked on a project without any self-centered thoughts, then it would all go very well. But if my selfish thoughts entered into it, it was pretty hard to get things done. Is this some kind of wisdom? Is this the wisdom obtained from meditative concentration? Or is it just worldly knowledge?

Master Sheng Yen: When our mind is quiet and

tranquil, our line of thinking becomes clear. So when we can't figure things out, we should first calm ourselves down. Go to the mountains for a rest or contemplate and meditate as you sit there. Let your mind relax. Unexpected wisdom will come to you suddenly. We can't say this is not wisdom; it *is* wisdom but from a Western philosophical perspective. Unexpected inspirations come when we contemplate, but these are often linked to observational ability, to our psychological response, our organizational and thinking skills. Also, it depends on the degree of acuteness in the imagination, which does not come out of nowhere; it has its basis – one's experience, and knowledge. One must read a lot, observe thoroughly and carefully, so some stress the importance of traveling widely. Or one examines, investigates, observes and considers everything very carefully. This person may not necessarily read a lot, but thinks a lot, so he or she may possess an unexpected creativity.

In Western philosophy it could be called wisdom, but from Buddhist standpoint, it is merely mundane wisdom, or worldly wisdom; it is not liberating wisdom. Buddhist wisdom corresponds with liberation. In the past few programs I've already mentioned that liberating wisdom should be free of attachment to self-centeredness. Do not consider from the standpoint of self-centeredness. That is wisdom. Otherwise, it is merely knowledge or mundane wisdom. Take for example, some creative artists, scientists, or philosophers

who are attached to their own ideas and findings; they value their creations immensely because attachment allows them to create unique work. Without attachment, they wouldn't have their own unique style. We often say, "This is in the style of so-and-so." People can tell his character from his style; from his character, people realize his self. We can't deny this is wisdom; however, it is worldly wisdom.

Chen: What does meditative concentration feel like?

MSY: Meditative concentration means simplicity, awareness, stability, and practicality. There are no wandering thoughts; any thoughts are very straightforward. The mind stays on just one or two thoughts or the two thoughts alternate. That is meditative concentration. Take this flower arrangement here. You can appreciate it as representing the beauty of the universe; in fact, the universe in its entirety. You can see that in a blade of grass. A grain of sand contains an infinite world too. So it's just some simple leaves, flowers, and a few lines. It's very simple. Yet it contains infinite life and unlimited stability. From simplicity, we see its power and the beauty in the arranged lines. It is arranged from a Chan perspective.

Chen: So did the person who arranged it practice Chan?

MSY: It's hard to say. It could be that their teacher has sample arrangements. The teacher shows them the sample.

The teacher arranges it this way so they arrange in the same manner. Maybe they don't have Chan experience and simply follow their teacher's way of arranging flowers. If they can apply their mind to its fullest, even with a few flowers and simple materials, they can arrange flowers with the Chan spirit. Then we might say he or she knows a bit about Chan. In addition, they give it much thought, ingenuity. It's not just picking up flowers and putting in just like that. No. They spend a long time thinking and observing. During the process, their thinking follows the ideas of Chan. But it is not Chan in itself.

Chen: Thank you Master for your explanation. What exactly is Chan? What is the experience of meditative concentration? What kind of state of mind is it? Please join us in our next program to share the wisdom of Dharma.

Summary: We can practice Chan by first calming ourselves down internally, keeping our mind simple and free of wandering thoughts and focusing it on just one thought.

**Adversity is Not Demonic:
It's a Force that Helps Us Make Progress**

September 4, 1995

Ms. Chen: Greetings, everyone, and welcome to another segment of Great Dharma Drum. As a popular saying goes, “When the Path grows a foot, the demons grow a yard.” When you are cultivating, the more you put effort into your cultivation, the easier it is to encounter obstacles and tests. For example, stray thoughts become unusually active when you meditate. Or it is hard to focus when you recite the Buddha’s name. Sometimes one may also fall into demonic mental states. What is the reason? Let us ask Master Sheng Yen how to make our progress along the path of cultivation smoother and steadier.

Master Sheng Yen: Resistance means we are going forward; tiredness means we have been working; encountering frustration means we are succeeding. Success comes in stages. We feel tired after walking a long distance because we have put out effort. So it’s not right to think of obstructions in practice as demonic. For people who don’t know how to cultivate, who don’t understand Buddhadharma, anything can be a demon. For people who know how to cultivate the Buddhadharma, who grasp its principles, demons are also bodhisattvas who come to help us. When

you encounter adversity, don't always suppose it is a demon. Adversity is fundamentally a kind of training.

Once in America some young people taught me how to row a boat. I was already old, and they asked me to row with them. I couldn't out-row them, and I soon tired. After I went to sleep that night, every bone in my body hurt. Was this a demon? No, it wasn't. It was because I had seldom done any strenuous exercise like that. So after rowing, my arms hurt, my back hurt, and all the muscles in my body hurt, too. This was not a demon; we can't say it was a demon. It was a kind of training, a kind of discipline. We will certainly encounter situations like this whenever we go through some kind of training. We can't say it is a frustration, we can't call it a blow against us, and we can't call it a defeat. It is something we inevitably have to go through when we are making progress.

So people who understand cultivation and the Buddhadharma will not encounter demons, but those who cultivate blindly certainly will run into demonic obstacles. What kinds of demons? They are primarily demons of their own mind; their own disoriented mind is causing mischief for them. Or they are indulging in idle thinking, or have created an external demon. People often say Master, "It seems like a ghost is following me." So I ask them what kind of ghost – female or male, big or small? They say they don't know, but there seems to be a ghost. I tell them it is in their own mind,

to just disregard it. It is a mental reaction and won't have any consequences. I say, "If you listen to me and believe me, the ghost won't come back. But if you don't believe what I say, your ghosts will grow in number, and will give you more and more trouble. Eventually you will become mentally ill. And this, I tell you, means you really have fallen into a demonic mental state."

In this kind of situation, can we say that the demons are growing faster than the Path? No. We shouldn't say that. It is better to say that the more effort we put into cultivation, the more tests we will encounter, and the harder they will be. This is normal. It has to be this way. Suppose we want to study some subject, to achieve great results and become a world-famous scholar. This would not be an easy task. People used to say it took ten years by a cold window to make a scholar, but ten years is not enough nowadays. I myself spent more than ten years studying. It takes more than ten years, and there are many tests and hurdles in front of us. We call these obstacles "tigers guarding the road." There are many, many tigers guarding the road. This means that, when we want to pass, obstacles will appear in front of us. Difficulty after difficulty will appear. But after we pass them we will succeed. These are not demons. They are just tests or trials that we must get through. We can't say that a demon has come when we have a test at school. The teacher will give us tests, there will be a test at the end of the term, and

we will be given quizzes. If we say a demon has come when the teacher gives us an exam, we are being unconscionable. The teacher is actually helping us. How can we say that our teacher is a demon?

The same principle applies to cultivation. We shouldn't always be saying, "There is a demon, there is a demon!" when we are cultivating. While some religions say there are demonic tests, that demons will test us during cultivation, we definitely don't encourage this way of speaking. When we say this kind of thing, then there will indeed be a demon in our mind. These are chiefly demons of the mind, since external demons are very rare. External demons do exist, but some are actually people and not demons. They are tangible. Some are intangible, and some we call heavenly demons. It is very rare for heavenly demons to make mischief, but some spiritual entities may enter our body. This is because we have become neurotic and have imaginary fears due to suspicion.

Demons may also come when someone wants to get something for nothing. This is why it is said when the Path grows a foot, the demons grow a yard. My view is that, when we are cultivating and an obstructing force appears, that is very good. We shouldn't say it is a demon; it is basically a force that helps us make progress, one that propels us forward. So if we are Buddhist, or are practicing the way of a bodhisattva, we should see all people as bodhisattvas

who have come to help us succeed. Even if someone causes mischief, and makes a lot of trouble for us, we should still see that person as a bodhisattva helping us. If we think in this way, we won't have any affliction, we won't have any suffering, and we will be full of confidence. We will pass one barrier after another, one after another, and in the end we will have the greatest accomplishment.

Summary: No matter what we want to do, there will be tests, trials, and barriers. Adversity is just a kind of training, and shouldn't be seen as a demonic obstacle. We will enjoy success when we pass a test.

Confirming Experience vs. Miraculous Experience

April 20, 1998

Ms. Chen: Hello, everyone. Welcome again to Great Dharma Drum. In our previous programs, the Master discussed the difference between a miraculous and a confirming experience. How can we tell we've had a miraculous or a confirming experience? What about people who claim to be psychic or have supernormal powers? Have they achieved some kind of attainment? Let's ask the Master to explain.

Master, in previous programs you mentioned that a miraculous experience is very valuable too. Many people become devout believers after going through some miraculous experience. So, could you tell us how we can determine whether we've only had a miraculous experience or some kind of confirming experience?

Master Sheng Yen: It's very difficult to determine on our own whether we have had a miraculous or a confirming experience. But it can be determined from an objective standpoint. So, if we feel we have had some verifying experience or some other experience, it's best to ask for guidance from an accomplished practitioner. By that we mean someone with actual experience. Besides, this has

to be the right person. If we find the wrong person, someone who's more or less on the same level as we, it will be useless. So, it will be hard to determine from our own perspective whether we've had a confirming or miraculous experience, because there is a very fine line between the two.

As I see it, the so-called miraculous experience comes not from within oneself, but from an outside force – a deity, a buddha, a bodhisattva, or some other kind of spirit or spiritual influence. This is a miraculous experience, and doesn't necessarily result from one's own practice. A person's strong faith or physical condition can act like a "conductor" that makes it easy for external spirits to attach to that person, making it likely that a miraculous experience will happen. Such a person may be able to see, hear, or do certain things on his own. A spirit may manifest by making the person see or hear something, or say certain things through their mouths. It may have to do with the person's spiritual practice, or may just result from strong faith, or maybe they possess the physical quality of a medium. But these are just miraculous experiences, not confirming experiences.

A confirming experience comes from within oneself. We have to rely on our own efforts and spiritual practice. Spiritual practice leads to different levels of confirming experience. At the most basic level, if we practice meditation or prostrate to the Buddha, our body will experience some physiological adjustments, of certain physiological functions

or internal systems. Our body will self-adjust as a result; our cerebral neurons will experience certain reactions too. This is because when we're meditating, prostrating, walking, or chanting a mantra with a mind that's very focused, or reciting a sutra very sincerely, physiological reactions may simply arise.

Chen: That's true. Master, I always feel that if I meditate in the morning, I will feel I'm prettier all day. Does this count?

MSY: Not enlightenment, more a physical reaction. A practitioner who has never experienced any reaction will probably hope for some miraculous experience. People experiencing bodily or mental reactions will have the incentive to continue to practice, and will not give up. What about the next level, the level of confirming experience? In previous programs, we've talked about the level besides and beyond bodily reactions. That is, it's not just the physical body, but also developing one's spirituality. Developing one's spirituality goes beyond simple psychological adjustments. Psychological adjustments only serve to calm one's emotions. We've discussed issues such as EQ and IQ before. These have to do with reactions and thinking based on one's emotions or intellect. Spiritual practice can also help us fine-tune these reactions. If we constantly adjust ourselves, if we learn to always look on the bright side

rather than the dark side, then we can gradually improve our character and personality. If we always look on the negative side, and think negatively our health will suffer, too. If our mind is always filled with poison, negative thinking and dark thoughts, we will lack compassion towards others.

If we look on the bright side, we won't give rise to malice, anger, or hatred towards others. Whatever may happen in the world, it's not so bad when viewed differently. On the surface, we might find someone detestable; from a different angle, he may not be all that bad when we apply this attitude, or feel compassion towards him. So, this can also be brought about in the process of our practice. This is also confirming experience. We might not have become enlightened or have eliminated all our troubles, or attained buddhahood; we don't necessarily have to achieve all these. It is great if we achieve enlightenment, but even if we don't, we may still feel less clumsy, both physically and mentally, less perplexed, and more cultivated. That's a kind of confirming experience, too. Amitufofo.

Chen: Thank you, Master, for your guidance. From the Master's teachings today, we learned that enlightenment is the ultimate level of confirming experience, a state many people aspire to. But in the process of pursuing this goal, we'll still gain minor experiences and understanding, which are also very beneficial confirming experiences. We hope

you'll join us next time to share the wisdom of the Dharma again.

Summary: There are different levels of confirming experience: mental adjustment, spiritual development, and ultimate enlightenment. Even without enlightenment, one can still benefit from spiritual practice.

Topic Nine



Chan Meditation

The Basics of Chan Practice

February 16, 1995

Ms. Chen: Greetings, everyone, and welcome to another segment of Great Dharma Drum. Must Chan practice always involve sitting meditation? Some people complain that they cannot meditate because they are too impatient, thinking about this and that. Some people think meditation means sitting in a certain special way. In fact, standing, walking and lying down are all methods of Chan practice. We can practice Chan at any time. Thus, understanding the methods of practice is very important. Let us ask the Ven. Master Sheng-yen to explain this.

Master Sheng Yen: For Buddhists, practice is a way for training the mind; when the mind is troubled, it is not calm and feels restricted and tortured. If we allow our mind to be quiet, to be calm, and to be clean and pure, we are liberated from vexations; we change from being foolish and ignorant to a wise person. Many people do not understand the concept of practice, thinking that it is done through the body. The body is only a tool that helps our mind. In ancient India, practice generally involved sitting meditation, but Shakyamuni Buddha did not say for certain that practice must involve sitting meditation. Walking is also practicing, so is eating, talking, sleeping and even going to the bathroom.

When you go to the market, clean the house and cook in the kitchen, you can be practicing. It all depends on your state of our mind.

If the mind is in chaos, you will not be practicing no matter when it is. If the mind is full of afflictive emotions, jealousy, enmity and greed, even though you come inside our monastery, and you have the right sitting posture, it is just an appearance only; you will not be practicing. Some people live in a temple all their lives; they go to the Buddha Hall, observe the rituals, give devotions to the Buddha, recite sutras and chant mantras, but they still have vexations. Is this practicing? No, this is just going through life mindlessly; whatever everyone else is doing, they follow suit. This is not practice.

Chan practice begins with the mind. In India, “dhyana” (which became “Chan” in Chinese) means “meditative concentration.” Concentration means focusing one’s attention on a specific idea or object in order to settle the mind’s many delusive thoughts and vexations. Doing this repeatedly is practicing Chan.

Must this always involve sitting down? Sitting cross-legged on a meditating cushion is more stable, and when the body is not moving erratically, the mind may become calmer; so it is better to meditate in a sitting posture. This makes it easier to practice concentration. While sitting straight and stably, one can then use a correct method, such as counting

one's breathing, reciting the Buddha's name, or investigating a *hua* *tou*. All these are methods to achieve right mindfulness. As you continue in right mindfulness, your thoughts will become less chaotic, scattered or muddled, and you will have fewer absurd fantasies. This method of practice is the best; it should be like this.

If you cannot sit cross-legged because of illness, stiffness in the legs, and so on, you can sit upright on a chair, both legs straight down, looking straight ahead. That is still sitting meditation. If you can't even do this, leaning against the back of a chair is still sitting meditation. If you can't do that, you can lie down on a bed. If you feel discomfort after sitting or lying for a long time, you can get up and do walking meditation, using a strolling pace. During walking meditation, you can use any of the Chan methods.

In addition, when you are doing chores – laundry, sweeping the floor, wiping the table, washing dishes – if you keep a calm and orderly mind, you are also practicing. If you focus your mind on one thing at hand, then it is right mindfulness and it is Chan practice. Thus, those who can't do sitting meditation can still practice. Cross-legged sitting is important but you can still practice without this posture. You may also focus on chanting mantras or reciting sutras, and this is also practicing meditation or practicing wisdom.

So, Chan practice is very extensive; do not limit yourself to thinking that you have to sit down to practice

Chan. In this way, anyone can practice Chan. But if you practice Chan in a monastery, with guidance by masters and help from everyone, then by practicing in a group, the power of Chan is even stronger; you are less inclined to feel lethargic. Thus, I still encourage everyone to come to the monastery to practice together, and to set aside a stable and calm space at home where you can meditate properly.

Chen: Sitting meditation is not the only method for Chan practice but it is the best way to allow one's mind to calm down and achieve meditative concentration.

Meditating on Breath: Basic Principles

September 11, 1998

Ms. Chen: Hello, everyone, and welcome again to Great Dharma Drum. Last time Master told us that meditation and Chan practice can alleviate emotional fluctuations so that our mind will be more stable and at ease, and our wisdom will increase. How can we practice meditation in all situations in our daily life? What are the steps and methods for meditation? Let us ask Master Sheng Yen to explain.

Master Sheng Yen: The first step in meditation is to relax the body and the mind – this is essential. Secondly, we should aspire to the ultimate and supreme goal of enlightenment. On the way, we gain physical and mental health, or inner peace, and we also grow in wisdom. These are the steps towards enlightenment. Turning to methods, the simplest is to experience our breathing – inhaling and exhaling. Everyone knows how to do it, but few people actually enjoy breathing. Can breathing be an enjoyment? In fact, breathing is the greatest, most precious enjoyment in the world, but almost everyone forgets that breathing is so wonderful.

Breathing is the difference between life and death. Being able to breathe properly is a question of understanding, since many people don't know how to truly experience their

breath. To experience your breath, feel the cool sensation at the tip of your nose when air enters. This feeling is not limited to the tip of the nose – you also feel cool and refreshed in the sinuses and in the lungs. Your whole body will feel cool as well. That is when you truly experience breathing like fresh air through an open window. By inhaling and exhaling, inhaling and exhaling, we adjust the levels of oxygen and carbon dioxide in our body – oxygen in, carbon dioxide out. Too much carbon dioxide in the body is unhealthy, makes us uncomfortable, so the body needs to discharge it. Breathing in oxygen feels good, but after it's been consumed, carbon dioxide is produced as a waste product, and needs to be discharged. We inhale oxygen to make energy and exhale carbon dioxide as a waste product, so the body feels refreshed all the time, so happy, an extremely enjoyable sensation.

Chen: Master, as you just mentioned, I used to only feel coolness at my nose when I breathed in. As to the cool feeling you mentioned, I feel it in some places but not all the places you mentioned. Why is that?

MSY: That is because your breathing awareness is still coarse and unrefined. When your awareness becomes sufficiently subtle, you'll feel the air go in through the nostrils, spread to the sinuses, through the throat, and then to the lungs, pushing the diaphragm down toward the lower abdomen. This takes some time to learn. Without practice,

your attention is coarse and you won't be able to feel it. So, if you practice this breathing method well, breathing can be the most enjoyable thing in life. Besides enjoyment, what other benefits can proper breathing bring? Why is it the first step of meditation? Because paying attention to your breathing helps your mind to calm down. When you enjoy your breathing, your mind will definitely be stable.

We often say that our mind and our breath are related. With regular and smooth breathing, our heartbeat and pulse will be steady and even. When both heartbeat and breathing are steady and smooth, our mind will definitely be calm and stable. We won't be unsettled; and we won't feel agitated or uneasy. Therefore, when we feel afraid, worried, overly excited, or agitated by favorable or adverse situations or stimuli, if we can enjoy our breathing, our mind will calm down.

Chen: That's true. I remember I was so nervous during the university entrance exam. Our teacher told us to breathe deeply whenever we felt nervous. My hands shook so hard that I couldn't write. So I took some deep breaths. After a while, I could write again. Is this also a benefit gained by breathing? Deep breathing makes you calm?

MSY: That's right. Many people talk about deep breathing, but taking too many deep breaths can be bad. You feel you can't control the situation so you take a deep breath,

but if your mind is not in such tumult and you don't feel so nervous, there's no need to breathe deeply. If you are very nervous you can take some deep breaths, but deep breathing can itself cause tension so you are using tension to relieve your tension and calm your mind. Deep breathing is not the same as meditation, but it's not unrelated. This is called mindful breathing. Chan meditation starts with mindful breathing. If we practice mindful breathing well, at the very least we'll become healthy, and able to keep our mind calm at all times and places. This is the benefit of mindful breathing.

Chen: Thank you, Master. The Master told us that breathing itself is a great enjoyment. If we learn to breathe mindfully, our body will become healthy and our mind will calm down. Please join us next time as we discuss how to apply mindful breathing.

Summary: Breathing is most enjoyable. You can experience this joy easily: Just be mindful of your breathing, and your body and mind will naturally feel calm, stable and refreshed.

Meditating on Breath: Experience the Breath

September 14, 1998

Ms. Chen: Hello, everyone, and welcome again to Great Dharma Drum. In our last program, Master told us that to practice meditation, we first need to relax our body and mind. Second, we need to learn to experience our breathing. He told us that not only is breathing the greatest enjoyment but that with mindful breathing, our body will become healthy and our mind calm. How do we practice mindful breathing in our daily life? Let us ask Master Sheng Yen for guidance.

Master, breathing seems a very easy and natural thing to do. Babies can breathe as soon as they are born. How does mindful breathing differ from normal breathing? How can we practice it?

Master Sheng Yen: Mindful breathing is just ordinary breathing. You don't need to use any special technique; just observe your breathing; be aware you are breathing and enjoy it; this is the practice. There is no specific way for you to breathe. Often, when people practice mindful breathing, they forget how to breathe normally. They knew how to breathe before, but because now they're practicing, they try to control their breathing. Once they do this, they have difficulty breathing. We should breathe like we usually

do. Follow the tempo of your body and the pace of your breathing will adjust itself. When you move vigorously, your breathing will naturally speed up. If your body is in a state of calm, if you don't exert physical strength, your breathing will naturally be slow. So there's no need to control it; rather, just breathe naturally and be aware of your breathing – inhale and exhale, inhale and exhale. Do not depart from the feeling of breathing. This is what we call practice.

Chen: But, Master, I find it so difficult. Usually, either we don't notice breathing at all or, if we do pay attention to it, we end up trying to control it, to slow it down. For example, people say breathing slowly is better. There's also abdominal breathing. In yoga, you need to inhale all the way down to the abdomen. When you inhale like this, your breathing will slow down.

MSY: This method is also used in Daoism and in Hindu yoga. They do emphasize the length and depth of breathing and the pace of breathing, breathing fast or slow. This is all controlling the breath. Under the guidance of a teacher, it is all right to practice it, but the breathing method we teach is not complicated at all. All we have to do is breathe normally. Even so, often, when we start paying attention to it, we can't breathe normally anymore. So, enjoy your breaths, but don't pay particular attention to their length. Be aware of the sensations of inhaling and exhaling,

but don't pay attention to the length or depth of our breaths. Ignore it. Just be mindful of the comfortable sensation of breathing – so wonderful and miraculous. That's enough. Don't try to make our breaths longer, deeper, or slower. That would be controlling it. When we control our breathing, it will become short and fast. Trying to slow it down, we'll feel uncomfortable, like being suffocated. If we try to speed it up, we end up out of breath. This is both problematic and unhealthy.

The healthy way of breathing is just the way we normally breathe. Please do not pay attention to length, depth or subtlety. Ignore all of that. Simply focus on the sensations as we inhale and exhale. Feel the air coming in and going out. As it comes in and goes out. Don't control it. Let it happen by itself, naturally, as a spontaneous, physical activity. It's so natural. When we need to inhale, it will inhale naturally. Ever since infancy, since we left our mother's womb, we've been able to breathe. There's no need to control it.

Chen: But what is the difference between being aware and being unaware?

MSY: When we are unaware, our mind is disturbed, due to external influences and the thoughts in our head. Our mind will produce negative emotions or afflictions such as fear, anxiety, jealousy and pride, which revolve in our head. When we are aware of our breathing, and enjoy our

breathing, these vexations will be gone. We simply feel that breathing is so nice and wonderful. First, breathing itself is an enjoyable experience. Second, our brain is relaxed, free from burdens because it has stopped wandering. There's no more nervousness, distress or worry.

Chen: That's so true, even though I'm just a beginner. I've started doing regular morning practice and I meditate every day. I notice that I have experienced fewer negative emotions. I am emotionally calmer and feel happier each day. So I've been wondering what brought this change about. Maybe it's because of sitting meditation. I haven't done anything special when I meditate. So, I wonder why this miraculous change came about.

MSY: What you are experiencing is the effect of meditation. When we meditate, we are adjusting our emotions, and state of mind, therefore we've gained calm. That's why we feel at peace all day. We get ourselves ready in the morning by calming our mind. It's like ironing our clothes before we put them on. Our clothes are crisp when we leave home. After we come home, perhaps we have taken the bus and our clothes are wrinkled, so we iron them again. So, it's best to do evening practice as well. Doing evening practice is like ironing our clothes again. It's the same with our mind. When we meditate, it's like ironing our clothes to make them crisp and smooth. We make our mind even,

smooth, and crisp and then go to work, so we naturally feel calm and stable. When we encounter a setback, though we may still be bothered by major setbacks, minor ones won't be a big deal.

Chen: Master, can we count our breath when we observe our breathing?

MSY: Yes, that is one method to practice mindful breathing. We'll talk about this next time.

Chen: Thank you, Master, for your guidance. Please join us next time as we continue to share the wisdom of the Buddhadharma.

Summary: Mindful breathing simply requires us to be aware of our breathing without controlling it, and will naturally bring forth a clear and calm mind.

Meditating on Breath: Counting the Breath

September 15, 1998

Ms. Chen: Hello everyone. Welcome again to Great Dharma Drum. In our last program, Master told us that the most important thing in mindful breathing is to observe and experience it. However, we should never try to control our breath. Do not worry about the depth, pace, or length of our breaths. Master also said we can [count our breath as a method of mindful breathing]. Let us ask Master Sheng Yen for guidance.

Master, in our last program, we talked about whether or not we should count our breath when practicing mindful breathing. You said we should. So, how and why?

Master Sheng Yen: First, when we're enjoying our breathing without wandering thoughts, we might easily get drowsy. This is because our mind is like a monkey, always jumping about. When things get too simple and there's nothing to do, we slacken and start to feel sleepy. This is not practicing. Secondly, when people have been enjoying their breathing for a while, scattered thoughts often appear; their mind starts to wander. Once we become drowsy or scattered, it may be a bit troublesome to simply experience our breathing again. So, at this time, we can bring in another element: counting the breath. The purpose is to give our

mind something to do. Otherwise, it feels too simple, too monotonous, and boring; we'll doze off or think about something else because we have nothing to do. So, this is something to keep your mind busy. The method just involves counting your exhalations from 1 through 10, and repeating the cycle.

Basically, we count on the exhalation rather than on the inhalation, because generally exhaling takes longer than inhaling. So, we count on the exhalation, and the inhalation follows naturally. It works like this: as I breathe out I am aware of exhaling, and mentally count a number. By doing so, my thought is not on the breath but on that number. I count starting with "one" and stay with it. As I inhale, it's still "one." I do not count the inhalation, and stay with the same number until I exhale again. Then count the next number, not paying attention to breathing, only to the number. I am aware of counting: I am counting the current number. I am counting "one"; when I breathe out again, I count "two." And next time I count "three." Breathe out, breathe in and count a number. Breathe out, breathe in and count a number. We keep counting until "ten," and then start all over, beginning with "one."

However, for some people their inhalations are longer than their exhalations. Generally, exhaling faster than inhaling is unhealthy. When the air flows into our lungs, we must keep it there and then let it out slowly. It's healthier that

way. If we breathe too rapidly, or if we inhale slowly and exhale rapidly, that's bad for us. Rushing both inhalations and exhalations is harmful to both our lungs and energy. It's best if we exhale steadily and slowly, and inhale a bit faster, but not too fast, just a little bit faster than we exhale.

Also, do not inhale as much as your lungs can hold. That would be breathing too deeply; instead, 80% full is enough. The same applies to exhalation; do not push all the air out until there's no air in your lungs, as if holding your breath. Leave a little bit of air inside your lungs. Breathe out; breathe in; breathe out; breathe in. When you breathe out, the carbon dioxide is expelled naturally; you won't have any leftover carbon dioxide just sitting in our lungs. It will adjust itself naturally – in and out, in and out. Do not breathe in completely or out completely.

Chen: But if someone is used to long inhalations and short exhalations, can they count the same number on both the inhalation and exhalation?

MSY: Yes, because counting the same number twice – on the exhale and the inhale – is just as simple. It does not matter. If you are used to it and it works well, there's no need to change. Otherwise you'll only disturb yourself. Actually, the whole point of counting our breath is to keep our mind calm. Breathing mindfully, breathing properly, we'll be healthier, because we get abundant oxygen and discharge

carbon dioxide thoroughly. Also, how we sit matters. If we sit improperly when doing mindful breathing, it leads to problems. Shall we talk about posture next time?

Chen: Yes. Thank you, Master for your explanation. Please join us next time for more on how to enjoy breathing.

Summary: Counting each breath helps keep the mind from wandering and scattering. By breathing properly, our body is healthier, making efficient use of the lungs.

Ideal Posture for Sitting Meditation

September 16, 1998

Ms. Chen: Hello, everyone, and welcome again to Great Dharma Drum. Over several programs, we have been discussing how to experience and enjoy our breathing. The Master told us that when we focus on breathing, our mind will be calm and free from wandering thoughts. I gave it a try and did feel joy of a kind we may never experience in ordinary life. Now we'll discuss how we adjust our posture. Let us ask Master Sheng Yen to explain.

Master, last time you talked about enjoying breathing and counting breaths as a method of practice. And you said that posture was important too. In addition to relaxing, we should also pay attention to posture. Can you explain more about this?

Master Sheng Yen: The key is the spine. Keep the spine aligned with the head, with the chin tucked in. Keep the spine straight, aligned with the back of the head, like a tower soaring up against the sky. The head points up to the sky and the body rests squarely on the floor, forming a vertical line. This is the healthiest posture for the body. Even if you are not learning to meditate, sitting like this in everyday life also benefits your health. Of course, you shouldn't stiffen up; you should remain relaxed.

Chen: Am I sitting correctly now?

MSY: Yes. The point is to sit upright. Make sure the spine is straight. This is essential. But when you actually sit in meditation, things can be different. After sitting for a long while some people can't keep their spine straight. They just feel comfortable with their spine bent. They can't sit up straight, as it causes them great tension, pain and backache. But they can sit for a long time and feel stable and calm if their back is bent a little. If one's practice has reached a certain level it may happen that the body naturally straightens up.

Chen: Oh. So, you become healthy.

MSY: That's right; the spine straightens up naturally. We don't straighten up intentionally; the body straightens itself. But those who sit occasionally or for short periods of time should maintain a standard posture. That is good for our health, because if we slouch during 20 or 30 minutes of meditation, we won't stand a chance to straighten up. With breathing and sitting meditation, many people think of the cross-legged posture. Is the position a must? One benefit of the cross-legged position is that our *qi* (energy) will flow through the interlocked legs, directly. Blood cannot flow this way, but *qi* can flow through without obstruction. This is good for our body; it's beneficial.

Also, the *qi* is saved not released; the *qi* is not escaping. In our present sitting posture (on chair) *qi* may

escape from the feet, or the toes. If we sit cross-legged the *qi* is not discharged. Yet many people will say, “Well, however I try I just can’t get myself into that position.” Can they sit in a half cross-legged or the royal ease posture (with one leg upright)? It’s best to sit in the full cross-legged (lotus) pose, which brings the best results. Otherwise, sit in the half cross-legged (half-lotus) pose. Or, you can just sit with your legs comfortably crossed. The important thing is to regulate your mind and to keep your body healthy. Those advanced in age especially don’t have soft and flexible legs and ligaments. Their legs might break if we force them to sit in a full cross-legged pose.

Chen: Also, many people find it hard to find a place to just sit cross-legged. Nowadays many people work in an office. Some find sitting up straight, experiencing their breathing for a while, works just as well. Work is tiring and it’s good to relax like this. What’s your view, Master?

MSY: It’s a good thing. It is meditation as well as a way to rest. If you are resting, you lean back like this (against the chair). Rest thoroughly. Let yourself be weightless. Put your weight all onto the chair. Your body’s free of burden now. That allows you to rest thoroughly. However, that is not meditation, but just resting. What about meditation? When meditating, you should sit in a proper posture. Sit properly and meditate. Sitting meditation does not necessarily require

sitting cross-legged. Just sit upright. You can also sit on a chair. But it is better not on stuffed chair but on a hard chair. Sofas are not good. Hard stools are better.

Chen: Some people say that when you meditate or observe your breath you should imagine yourself as a cloud. Is it what we call emptiness?

MSY: Imagining yourself as a cloud weightlessly suspended in the sky is all right, but it won't work for long. As you keep imagining, wandering thoughts will come up in your head. You feel like a cloud and sit there relaxed, but this is not spiritual practice. Practice is mindfully experiencing the body and the mind. This way, the mind is doing something; it is working, not resting; you are cultivating your mind. Trying to practice meditation if you are in a state of rest, you might end up in a state of "indeterminacy" or blankness. It's fine if you can really imagine being a cloud, but if you imagine a cloud and in the end there is nothing in your head, then you're not applying yourself.

Chen: Thank you, Master, for your explanation. Please join us next time to experience and enjoy the breath. Do join us next time to share with us more of the wisdom of the Buddhadharmā.

Summary: Sitting meditation facilitates equanimity

of mind. We can approach meditation with different postures, in which the full cross-legged position helps circulate our energy the best.

Best Time for Sitting Meditation

September 18, 1998

Ms. Chen: Hello everyone, and welcome again to Great Dharma Drum. Over the past few programs, the Master has taught us how to meditate. First, we relax body and mind. Second, we experience our breathing. The Master has talked about the breathing method and the postures for sitting meditation. Now we're going to discuss the best time to meditate, and whether meditation is suitable for everyone. Let us ask Master Sheng Yen for his views.

Master, you said that meditation is a great practice that can free us from wandering thoughts and it makes us healthy and wise. We find that very appealing. Yet, many people feel meditation is a real hardship. Master, do you think meditation is painful or joyful?

Master Sheng Yen: It depends on your mindset; if you meditate because you're interested, then it's enjoyable. But if you are not interested, if you are forced to meditate, then it's a hardship.

Chen: Master, I'd like to share my experience. Maybe you have forgotten what it is like, since you've been meditating for so long. When I first started sitting and went on a meditation retreat, I kept thinking how come the hand-

chime hasn't rung yet so I can stretch my legs. My legs hurt so much. After I returned home, I often thought, "I should sit," but as I sat down on the cushion, things people had told me, which normally I would never think of, all came back to me. All kinds of trivial things came back to me. So I felt so annoyed that I stopped sitting. For a long time, I simply couldn't sit long. But somehow, one day I just sat down meditating and settled down. After that, the more I meditated, the more I felt the benefit. I became eager to sit. Sometimes though I knew I was going to be late for work, I was reluctant to get up. What is the turning point from pain to joy?

MSY: Some people don't experience pain.

Chen: Really?

MSY: But most people are like you.

Chen: Why?

MSY: Because in the beginning they are not used to the physical sensation or the methods. Also, they just don't feel like it. Maybe their mind isn't used to it. They've never felt so peaceful before.

Chen: Right!

MSY: It's so peaceful that they get bored, really bored, so their mind starts to wander. Their body isn't used

to it. Usually, legs will hurt. I am old now and I have been meditating for decades, but my legs still hurt if I sit for a long time. Yet I know how to enjoy pain. When my legs hurt, I enjoy it. It's really comfortable.

Chen: Why?

MSY: Because the pain has turned to joy!

Chen: That's still beyond me. Master, last time we talked about counting breaths. Some will ask if reciting the Buddha's name is all right.

MSY: Sure. Some people are not used to counting breaths—the more they count, the more confused and annoyed they get, and end up confusing breathing with heartbeat. They are not counting breaths but heartbeats. This is a problem; if you mix up heartbeats, pulse, and breaths and count them together, your pulse will grow faster and faster or become tenser and tenser. That's very bad, when counting the breath ends up like this. Therefore some people, but not many, are not suited to counting breaths. Actually, they're not really unsuited to it; it's just that they haven't practiced, haven't grasped the idea or the principles. So they're not very good at counting breaths. For the time being, they have no interest or intention to count. If you ask them to count, they'd rather stop meditating altogether. So reciting the Buddha's name is an alternative that is also good. You recite "Amitufo" once

and count a number. Recite “Amitufo” and count a number. Count the Buddha’s name, not your breaths.

Chen: You recite Amitufo and count while breathing?

MSY: Exactly. Ignore the breathing; just recite “Amitufo.” Don’t combine breathing, “Amitufo,” and numbers.

Chen: I used to count one as I inhaled and recite “Amitufo” as I exhaled. Is that too much?

MSY: Too much. If you recite “Amitufo,” simply recite and ignore the breaths. And counting is counting, ignore the breaths.

Chen: Can people meditate anytime and anywhere?

MSY: I can meditate anywhere and anytime. But ideally, it’s best to meditate when you are full of energy and when your emotions are stable. It’s not good to meditate when you are tired or exhausted. It is when we wake up that we feel full of energy.

Chen: Exactly. I feel great when I meditate in the morning.

MSY: That’s right. Early morning is the best time. Early morning meditation makes you feel great all day long,

really comfortable. Yet you still can meditate in the evening. After coming home in the evening, you can take a bath or take a shower to relax your muscles and the nerves in the brain. Then take a rest. Relax your whole body. While others are watching sitcoms, you go and meditate.

Chen: Some people meditate before bedtime. Will that make us too wide awake to sleep or will we sleep better?

MSY: You should do some exercise after meditating. If you don't, you might not be able to sleep, since you are so full of energy. Exercise a bit to relax your body. Then you will fall asleep. Indeed, two reactions will occur after sitting meditation. One is getting even more tired and sleepy; that's because you're fatigued. The other is that the more you meditate, the more you want to meditate, without feeling sleepy then. But you still need to go to bed. You have to go to work the next day. So you do some exercise to loosen up your body and then go to bed.

Many people would rather meditate than sleep, thinking that meditating works better than sleeping. That's not true. Sleep is sleep. I don't think there's anyone who can just meditate without sleeping. Of course, some people don't sleep lying on a bed; instead, they sit on the meditation platform. Those people sleep mostly on the platform. So, a required amount of sleep is still necessary.

Chen: That's true. Thank you, Master, for your explanation. Amitufo! Have you ever experienced such joy in meditation? Please join us next time as we continue to share the wisdom of the Dharma.

Summary: You can meditate counting your breath or reciting the Buddha's name. The best time to meditate is when you are energetic and emotionally stable, ideally in the early morning.

Things to Know Before Meditating: Prerequisites and Limitations

September 21, 1998

Ms. Chen: Hello everyone, and welcome again to Great Dharma Drum. During the last few programs, the Master has taught us the postures, methods, and steps for sitting meditation. Have you started to experience meditation yourself yet? Can anybody meditate? Are there any prerequisites? Let us ask Master Sheng Yen to explain.

Master, I believe some of our audience might want to start to experience mindful breathing and meditating after watching our program. Can anybody do sitting meditation? Are there any prerequisites or limitations to meditation?

Master Sheng Yen: Anybody can try the methods we've introduced recently, especially mindful breathing. It's beneficial emotionally and physically. The sitting posture is beneficial to one's health. Even if we are not meditating, sitting upright is good for us. But if we want to make it a habit to do sitting meditation every day, then it's better to learn with a teacher. It's not safe to learn it from TV, radio, or books that offer only partial knowledge. We may start meditating thinking we know it all. Then it depends on luck. If we are not in a sound mental state, or we don't know if our physical condition is suited to it, we will not know what

to do when there are mental and physical problems. So it's better and safer to learn with a teacher. We attend classes and the teacher will explain what problems may occur and how to deal with them. Sometimes it varies from person to person. Not everybody encounters the same problems. Teachers instruct us according to our own situation.

Let me speak more clearly. If you attend meditation classes on TV as if they were real classes, that would become distance learning. Would that be safe? No, it wouldn't, because the teacher does not see the students. The teacher has no way of knowing how you are doing. So it's better not to meditate without personal instruction. But as I just mentioned, the mindful breathing and sitting postures we previously introduced should be no problem. You can give them a try. You can. You can experience and learn it.

Some people ask if there are age limits. For example, can senior citizens and children meditate? Is there any age limit? Children should not meditate more than 15 minutes. Two or three minutes up to 15 minutes are all right, no longer, as they can't remain calm and stable after that. Meditation itself is OK; what matters is the length of time. Children are not mature and their minds haven't settled yet; they'll find long sitting unbearable. It's not good. They will get scared.

Do senior citizens encounter such problems too? For senior citizens it's ok as long as they are in good health. But if they are frail they can't meditate. If they meditate, they'll

doze off. If their legs are too stiff to sit with their legs folded, it's ok for them to sit on a chair. They can sit on a chair to practice and experience mindful breathing. But there are people in their 80s and 90s coming to me to learn meditation, and they're fine.

Chen: Is meditation similar to running or other energetic exercise, which doctors suggest patients with heart disease or high blood pressure should avoid? Does meditation carry any such restrictions?

MSY: Well, if our nervous system, spine, lower back or joints have been injured, whatever the injury is, we must be careful with sitting meditation. In correcting the posture, we may feel some pain afterwards. With chronic conditions, like heart disease, diabetes and weak nerves, meditation helps a lot. It serves as cure; it makes the *qi* circulate well, benefiting our bodies. For people with heart disease, it is OK for them to meditate in the manner of enjoying the breath. But if they count the breath based on the heartbeat, there'll be problems.

Also, pregnant women may wonder if it's good for them to meditate. It's better for them to examine first if the fetus is healthy. It's beneficial to meditate if the fetus is healthy. They can continue up to the time they deliver the baby. It's not meditation itself that is bad for the fetus; it is good for the fetus. However, some people, when doing

meditation, may suffer a sprain while sitting down, getting up, or during the process. This should be avoided. Still, most pregnant women can meditate until the seventh or eighth month. You meditated when you were pregnant, didn't you?

Chen: I did, while I was pregnant. I felt great both before and after childbirth, and my babies were so healthy. I don't know if it had anything to do with meditation.

MSY: Oh yes!

Chen: And they have pleasant personalities too.

MSY: If you feel peaceful when you are pregnant, your babies will be influenced by it.

Chen: Thank you, Master, for your explanation. From what the Master told us, we know that meditation benefits us greatly. It brings a healthy body and a stable mind, and also helps develop wisdom. We hope you can all experience the joy of meditation further. Please join us next time for more of the wisdom of the Dharma.

Summary: Anyone can meditate and benefit mentally and physically. Work within our physical limits and under a teacher who can help us through our individual difficulties.

Topic Ten



Chan in Everyday Life

Meaningful Everyday Life with Contentment, Humility and Repentance

October 22, 1996

Ms. Chen: Hello, everyone, and welcome to another segment of Great Dharma Drum. After attending a retreat led by Master Sheng Yen, many people say that in a few short days their views on life, lifestyles, and attitudes changed. A once passive, negative person lacking emotional balance has made a 180° change for the better. What makes them change so dramatically? After returning to their original living environment, can they keep up the good work? Let us ask Master Sheng Yen for his views.

Master Sheng Yen: Chan practice is more than sitting in meditation. Practitioners must also seek conceptual guidance and establish the correct mindset towards life. Otherwise, practicing meditation only benefits one's body. It's just *qigong* ("chee-goong"); it cannot change one's character, mentality, and view of life. In a seven-day Chan retreat, in addition to methods to cultivate a peaceful mind and body, I emphasize a proper attitude towards life. Students need to clearly and thoroughly understand the meaning of life. Only when one grasps these two important issues can one benefit from practice. Otherwise one is not necessarily a Buddhist, nor is one properly using the methods of Chan.

Many people teach meditation nowadays, but what they teach is not necessarily Chan or Buddhist, though they might call it that.

So on what do we base our views of life, its meaning and value? There are a few concepts that are very useful, important, and to the point; they are contentment, humility; and repentance. Only by making these parts of one's practice will peace and happiness come. When we know contentment, humility and repentance, then we'll be peaceful and happy. Knowing contentment begins with having few desires; that doesn't mean we want nothing. Rather, if we need something in order to live, such as survival needs, then it's all right to seek, produce, or acquire it. But beyond necessities, things like luxuries, objects of vanity, and adornments, are unnecessary.

However, what is necessary varies from person to person; we may need a car to get to work, reading glasses, and so on. Different people have different needs; people in different positions have different needs, too. For some people taking the bus is fine, others need a car. Some need or want a fairly high-class car. These are all considered "necessities." But something that is improper and unnecessary should never be pursued. This is being content and having few desires; this way, many vexations disappear.

Along with being contented, we should be humble. Very often we feel proud, jealous, or inferior. These all

come from not knowing humility. What is humility? It is an awareness of our shortcomings, how we have let down others and ourselves, what we could have done better, how we could have treated others better. Humility is feeling that, no matter how good or hard-working we are, we have not yet reached the highest and best level. Therefore, we should always feel humble and remind ourselves to keep improving and working hard.

We need to learn repentance. We make mistakes all the time, big and small; we say something wrong, do something wrong, have wrong ideas. We misunderstand and hurt people; we do a lot of wrong things. These things happen almost daily, so we need to repent. Repentance is not simply regret; it is also shouldering responsibility – we admit our mistakes, take responsibility, and resolve never to make them again. If we do wrong again, we must repent again. We are willing to take responsibility and make reparations or amends, if possible. If we cannot, just keep a mind of repentance, keep it in our heart, and wait for chances to make amends. After repenting, we feel joyful, because then, we will have a clear conscience and feel at ease.

In this way our mind can remain calm, because we have nothing weighing on our conscience that we have not confessed. This does not always happen, I will admit. If we do something wrong or let someone down, we should take responsibility and make amends. If we can act like this, then

we are a model Buddhist. Our view of life, the meaning and value of our life, are fully manifest. Whether in seven-day retreats or in our everyday life, we must constantly remind ourselves to know contentment, humility, and repentance. Only when we repent can we feel joy. Amitufofo!

Summary: Make our life meaningful by having few desires, knowing humility, and making repentance. These three allow us to lead a happy and peaceful life and remind us to continue to work to improve ourselves.

Living in the Present Moment

March 11, 1997

Ms. Chen: Hello, everyone, and welcome to another segment of Great Dharma Drum program. Chan teaches us to always live in the present. But if someone really lives in every present moment, some say they won't have time to reflect on the past. Does this also mean they won't have time to plan for the future? Will they end up where "failure to worry about trouble tomorrow brings trouble today"? Let us ask Master Sheng Yen to shed light on this.

Master Sheng Yen: This attitude is a failure to understand what it means to live in the present. I do not always teach people to live in the present. So why do we talk about living in the present moment? Living in the present moment doesn't mean that we should get rid of our memories; nor does it ask us not to plan for the future, not to look ahead. It also does not ask us not to look back or reflect on things past. That's not what living in the present means. To live in every present moment means that whatever we are doing now, we focus all our attention on that. If we are eating, focus on eating; don't let our thoughts wander. Don't play cards while we are eating; don't watch a movie; don't chat. Usually when we are eating, we are also thinking, reading the newspaper, or watching TV at the same time.

This is not very good for our digestion; we will lose a lot of nutrition. When we are young, when our body is strong, our stomach works well and this isn't a problem for us yet. But, once we get older, once we grow weaker, our digestion is not as good, and we can no longer eat like that.

So, I suggest that when you go to bed, focus on sleeping. Don't let your thoughts wander, otherwise, you may have nightmares and toss and turn all night. When working, think of nothing but work; otherwise you won't get your job done properly. Here's an example: if you are out with a boyfriend or girlfriend, and one of you is not focused on being present with the other, but has another person in mind, your behavior and expressions may make the other person feel betrayed. So, be true to what you are doing right now; give your full attention to whatever you are doing now. That is the best way to live, soundest and healthy thing to do. Especially in relation to the people and events in our lives, it is the most wholesome, appropriate, and proper way of living.

So, this is the meaning of living in the present. This does not ask us to forget everything in the past, and to think of nothing. Nor does it stop us from planning, and making estimates or evaluations for the future. It's not like that. When it's time to make estimates or evaluations, that's what we do. This is still the present moment, isn't it? When we look back and review our past, we're still doing it

in the present moment, aren't we? If we remember and reflect right here and now, we are still in the present. However, if, when we remember and reflect, we are absent-minded, and our mind wanders like willow catkins dangling in the breeze, then how can we concentrate on our reflections? How can our memory be clear? How can our plans or expectations for the future be accurate? That would be problematic.

Therefore, the Chan teaching of living in every present moment tells us to live as if it mattered, to live a solidly grounded life. Every step we make is firm and steady. Let me put other things aside and take walking as an example. When we are walking, if we don't mind our step, and let our mind wander, what will happen to us? If we are in the street, we risk being hit by a bicycle or a motorcycle. Or more embarrassing, we may bump into a telephone pole or a wall. This is very possible. When we bump into a telephone pole, we think, "Ouch! Why did the pole bump into me?" But really it's not the pole's fault; we ran into it. And this is because we were walking absent-mindedly. We did not concentrate on walking but had other things on our mind. We even thought that the pole was to blame, and gave it a slap, "Strange! That pole jumped right out at us." Similar situations may happen to us from time to time. This is definitely not a healthy way to live.

Therefore Chan requires us to live as if it mattered moment after moment. Don't worry about saying, "This is

it. My memory is gone; my reasoning ability has withered,” or “This is it; in another two years I will not recognize my father.” We may also say, “I have not seen mother for two years; I will not recognize her.” That’s not the way it works. If it were, it would turn us into idiots and it would have been impossible for Chan to survive and pass on its methods. Amitufofo!

Summary: To live in the present is not to disregard the future or the past, but to focus on whatever we’re doing right now. Living in the present, we are firmly grounded and renewed each moment.

Straightforward Mind is the Site of Cultivation

(Date unknown)

Ms. Chen: Greetings, everyone, and welcome to another segment of Great Dharma Drum. The *Platform Sutra* of Sixth Patriarch Huineng says, “Straightforward mind is the site of cultivation.” What is straightforward mind? Let’s ask Master Sheng Yen to explain.

Master Sheng Yen: That line is originally from the *Vimalakirti Sutra*, which was translated from Sanskrit to Chinese. It was quoted in the *Platform Sutra*, the discourse record of Huineng, who lived during the Tang dynasty. The line, “A straightforward mind is the site of cultivation,” doesn’t refer to frankness, nor is it any kind of generalized, blunt, or ignorant outspokenness. Rather, it means speaking without guile, trickery, cajoling, or beating around the bush. Depending on whom you’re dealing with, you decide what’s most fitting to tell them; you put yourself in their shoes first, and find out what kind of advice will do them good, what will benefit them fundamentally and lastingly. It’s not indulging them, blindly giving them whatever they want. Rather, it’s to assess their needs and provide for them accordingly. Whatever kind of guidance is the most suitable, helpful, beneficial, and useful to them in the long term, is what you will give them. This is to act with a “straightforward mind.”

Now, the “site of cultivation” connotes the site for one’s spiritual practice, its formalities, patterns, and methods of cultivation. Many people think the formalities, patterns, and sites for practice must follow religious prescriptions and be held at monasteries. And that one must dress formally in robes like what I’m wearing, and burn incense in front of bodhisattva and Buddha images. Further, that one should bathe and fast before engaging in recitation, meditation, repentance rituals, or other methods of spiritual practice. In fact, the *Vimalakirti Sutra* tells us that if we want to practice, we can do it anywhere – any place is the right place to practice; any time is a good time to practice. If the mind is to a great extent, clear of distorted thoughts and views, clear of ruses, worries, fear, suspicion, envy, and other vexations, and as long as it is full of integrity and right views in appropriate measure – without reluctance, laxity, and crookedness – then this is straightforward mind. It is the mind of compassion and wisdom, as well as selflessness and unselfishness. It is not self-consideration, not judging others, not dealing in the spirit of personal gain and loss, not speaking with subjectivity. In the meantime, we can still reason, think, speak, and move, but everything is done for the sake of others, for *their* good. We adapt, attune ourselves, and respond to others’ needs. What is it like? It is as if our own self did not exist. We are like a mirror, originally without any image, but if someone stands in front of it, it produces a reflection. This is the

straightforward mind.

That is, whatever you see, hear, or feel is not colored by self-interest and calculations of personal gain and loss. It transcends subjectivity, and even objectivity; you do whatever you have to do now, and say whatever you have to say now, without passing judgment based on your personal values. This is very difficult. It's hard to act this way. Ordinary people can only say, "I'll think about it and try to be neutral." But, they're actually thinking from their own position; they're biased to one side. Many doctors hesitate to treat their own relatives because their emotions would be involved, meaning they would have difficulty helping with a straightforward and neutral mind. So, straightforward mind is an ordinary mind that is capable of going beyond self-centeredness. When that happens we are able to solve problems appropriately. Amitufo.

Summary: If we have few vexations and distorted views, we have a straightforward mind. Like a mirror, empty but reflecting all, we'll be wise and free of self-centeredness, and give others guidance and help adapted to their needs.

Cultivating a Peaceful Mind

June 16, 1995

Ms. Chen: Hello, everyone, and welcome to another segment of Great Dharma Drum. Today we'll talk about having a peaceful mind. Every day, we have contact with many other people – colleagues, neighbors, friends, or relatives. Even strangers on the bus or people we brush past in the streets, are part of this constant contact with others. During these frequent encounters with people, how can we avoid friction and conflict? How can we avoid having external matters affect our state of mind? This is something that requires profound understanding. Let us ask Master Sheng Yen to talk on this subject.

Master Sheng Yen: It is rather difficult to attain a peaceful, undisturbed state of mind. This peace of mind is similar to a mind that is pure and free of defilement, but it's not entirely the same. To be undefiled means that one is not affected by the environment in a way that would make one's mind impure; whereas peacefulness is relative to fluctuations. When our mind is influenced by our environment, stimulated by external objects, subjected to temptations; when we struggle with conflicting thoughts and ideas, feel physical discomfort or want to satisfy our physical needs, then fluctuation or agitation may develop in our mind.

A peaceful state of mind is like a body of water. When no wind is blowing, the water is calm; but as soon as the wind blows, it will cause ripples on the water. When there is just a very gentle breeze, it will only slightly ripple the surface of the water. The stronger the wind, the bigger the ripples, even waves. Similarly, there are different degrees of peacefulness in our mind. To be peaceful is not easy because our mind is like a pool of water, and our environment is like the wind. We call this the “wind of environment.” Altogether, there are “eight worldly winds.” Each of them has the capacity to stimulate or tempt us, thus exciting and disturbing our mind, making it impossible to remain peaceful. That’s why we first have to realize if our mind is that restless, if we are that frivolous, that fickle-minded.

To those who practice under my guidance, I often say: “You are too fickle.” Many will reply, “Master, I’m not fickle at all!” I tell them, “Though it doesn’t show very much in your actions, your mind is very fickle, very volatile. As easily disturbed as grasses in a breeze, your mind is disturbed. Doesn’t that mean you’re fickle? You shouldn’t let your mind be disturbed by external influences.” How can we remain unaffected by our environment? The environment is the environment, and we are who we are. Whenever we are annoyed or upset, or even when we feel satisfied, proud, smug and pleased with ourselves, we should keep a calm mind. That’s why in Chan Buddhism keeping a

calm mind is very important. With a calm mind, whatever our surroundings – be it ugly or beautiful, right or wrong, or whatever – we discern it easily, we are clearly aware of it, yet it does not affect us. We won't lose our calm because of these external influences; we won't become emotionally involved or let the environment affect our mind. We have a very clear understanding of who we are.

For example, if somebody scolds us, we should think it was because from their point of view, we deserved it. Or when someone praises us, should we think that under the circumstances we are worthy of praise? When we do the things we should be doing and others praise us, then that's their own business. Why would we need their praise? But if we do something we shouldn't and are rebuked, then there's nothing wrong with that. We should be reprimanded, but whether rebuked or not we should mend our ways. When we are being justly criticized, we should be grateful. When we are being unjustly reprimanded, when somebody accuses us wrongly, why be angry? After all, it's their mistake, not ours. We have no regrets at heart; why should we be influenced and become agitated?

So we should keep a calm mind, remaining unperturbed at all times. Whatever or whomever we encounter, whatever happens to us, we keep a calm mind. We keep in mind what we should and shouldn't do, think, or say, and are clearly aware of it all. If we say something

we should say, then we don't actually need any praise. If we do things we shouldn't do, yet nobody reprimands us for it, we should still correct our mistakes. And if we did the right thing, yet people still reprimand us, then that doesn't really concern us. Others may criticize as they like; that's just their point of view. This way, we are not influenced by our environment or by others, and we can keep a tranquil mind. This is what it means to have a calm mind. If we can keep a calm mind, it will be peaceful; this doesn't mean our mind doesn't react or respond, doesn't make distinctions or has no activity. We still function normally but we are less moody, less irritable – our state of mind is not easily perturbed by others. That's what we call a peaceful mind. I believe that after understanding this concept, after grasping this basic principle, we can at least try to learn how to keep a calm mind. The more we practice, the higher our achievement. The longer we practice, the better we get. Attaining a calm mind is not that difficult. Amitufo!

Summary: Amidst the eight worldly winds, we must cultivate calm mind, remaining clearly aware of our environment yet not influenced by it.

Benefits of Practicing Chan in Daily Life

September 10, 1998

Ms. Chen: Hello, everyone, and welcome again to Great Dharma Drum. For quite a period of time we've been talking about how to purify our mind through Buddhist teachings so that we can feel serenity in our hectic urban lives. Today we'll talk about Chan practice and meditation. On this program the Master has shared with us many times the joy of meditation. We also know that the practice of meditation is becoming increasingly popular both at home and abroad. In the US many people in performing arts love to meditate. Why is that? Let us ask Master Sheng Yen to explain. Master, can you first tell us in what ways meditation will benefit us in our daily lives?

Master Sheng Yen: In India, Burma, Thailand or Sri Lanka, Buddhist practice usually means meditating in monasteries or in the mountains. But beyond a certain point, such practices can't really be incorporated into daily life. Chan Buddhism, however, teaches us to mindfully experience whatever we do in daily life, without our minds fluctuating due to external or internal disturbances. That is Chan. Someone who is not influenced by external or internal disturbances and is free from emotional fluctuations will live a joyful life. All troubles or distress result from emotional

fluctuations. The more our emotions fluctuate, the more unstable we are, and the more insecure we feel. On the other hand, the more emotionally stable we are, the nobler our character. Does Chan practice require sitting meditation? Generally speaking, sitting meditation is a foundation practice; without it, it's hard to suddenly stop our mind from fluctuating. Therefore, as a foundation practice to keep our mind from fluctuating, we need to practice meditation.

Chen: Every morning, I spend a little time doing early-morning practice and then sit in meditation for maybe ten minutes. Does this count as Chan practice?

MSY: Yes, it does. When you concentrate on something without other wandering thoughts, or, despite a few stray thoughts, you work on something calmly and peacefully, this is also Chan practice. At work we'll be using our brains; while we talk we may be thinking. But, when you do prostrations or recite sutras or mantras, you don't actually need to think or to be concerned about anything. Your mind is calm. With a calm and devoted mind, that is Chan practice.

Chen: Many people often say, "I don't have that much time. I'm busy working every day and also have to take care of my family. I don't even get enough sleep, so how can I find time for spiritual practice?" I remember once when I was on a three-day Chan retreat, you taught us to concentrate when eating and walking. Is eating and walking

with concentration and without wandering thoughts a kind of Chan practice?

MSY: It's very hard to achieve. Although we emphasize concentration or mindfulness – while eating, walking, or even when playing mahjong – it's still hard to do it. It's easier with simple actions, but it's harder with something more complicated. Eating is a fairly simple action, as is walking. So, since the activity is simple, your mind won't have such complicated thoughts or ideas popping up. We can call it a kind of Chan practice. However, if we talk about concentration, there could also be a problem when concentration becomes tension. That is not Chan practice. Concentration is not practiced with tension; instead, it's about experiencing something attentively. While I eat, I chew the rice or vegetables; I am aware of the grains of rice and each piece of vegetable, and so on. I am clearly aware I am biting and chewing; I know clearly how it tastes; I am enjoying and experiencing it. This is Chan practice. But if I am very hungry and worry that others may snatch away the food on the plates, and I rush to take a second helping, this is not Chan practice, because there are other thoughts on my mind. If we can appreciate we are eating, walking, and drinking, really feel and appreciate it without many wandering thoughts, then it is Chan practice. This is a life of Chan practice.

Chen: So, even though we are busy in our daily

lives, we can actually find time for Chan practice, is that it?

MSY: No problem. We all need to eat, drink, and walk. If when our hands move, we are aware of our hands moving, that is also Chan practice. Take our conversation for example. We simply talk to each other, without being distracted by other thoughts. We're aware we are talking to each other. You listen to what I say and I listen to what you say. We're not talking unnaturally, or tensely. This is also Chan practice.

Chen: Thank you for your explanation, Master. The Master just said that Chan practice brings us stability and wisdom. It can also improve our character. In our everyday life, we can engage in Chan practice at all times. Please join us next time as we continue to share the wisdom of the Dharma.

Summary: Experiencing our daily actions mindfully and at ease is Chan practice. This can free us from emotional fluctuations and distress, enabling happiness and serenity.

Transforming Our Thoughts for a Happier Life

September 22, 1998

Ms. Chen: Hello, everyone, and welcome to another segment of Great Dharma Drum. Having talked so much about Chan practice and sitting meditation, we learned that its main purpose is to purify the mind, to help us turn a troubled mind into bodhi-mind, and thus develop wisdom. But how can we actually achieve such a state? Let us again ask Master Sheng Yen for his guidance.

Master, I read a book recently that talks about conceptual transformation. I think it is somewhat similar to the Dharma. The book says that psychologically speaking, it is essential that a person be able to change his way of thinking. For example, in a certain situation, a reasonable idea may arise in our mind and thus replace a previous concept; this then is what is called transformation of concepts, and this can change our behavior, too. Buddhism teaches us to develop wisdom by eliminating ignorance. Is this also a kind of conceptual transformation?

Master Sheng Yen: According to Buddhism, human beings suffer difficulties, trouble, and pain because they hold on to inverted (upside down) beliefs. What kind of inversion? Most of the worldly values and standards people believe in are actually wrong; they believe the wrong to be

right, and are thereby trapped, without realizing it, in deepest suffering. Since everyone is like this, it is called the inverted state of sentient beings.

Chen: The state of sentient beings is upside down.

MSY: That's right. Because they hold inverted views, sentient beings can use the Dharma to turn themselves right side up. That is to say, the Dharma looks at this world and its values from another point of view, thereby releasing us from suffering and vexations. This is liberation, rather than escaping from reality or retreating from the world. It transforms our thinking, enabling us to face up to reality, without feeling troubled by it. Very few people are completely untroubled, but we can apply the Dharma and its methods of practice to help ourselves to gradually turn our thinking around, to correct our thinking, thus eventually attaining absolute liberation.

Chen: Can we say that absolute liberation is tantamount to sudden enlightenment?

MSY: To experience sudden enlightenment is to experience an instantaneous change in thinking, but complete liberation is not necessarily attained through sudden enlightenment. Some can achieve it gradually. While Chinese Chan mentions sudden enlightenment, Buddhism doesn't merely discuss sudden enlightenment. We can also gradually

change our way of thinking and behavior, and thus become less and less troubled. Sudden enlightenment is changing one's concepts in an instant and thus being able to see things as directly, free of ego involvement, and clearly, without distortion. Even if an enlightened person occasionally holds inverted views, they can quickly correct themselves. So, one attains liberation either through sudden enlightenment, or by gradually reversing oneself, by repeated self-correction. Most sentient beings usually attain enlightenment gradually over a period of time by continuous renewal.

Chen: With this kind of continuous small changes, Master, what kind of results do you think that we could have?

MSY: With regard to concepts, small and big changes amount to the same. We need to be clear in our mind and know ourselves. Most of us can easily be mired like a rat trapped inside the hollow of a bull's horn and being pushed toward the pointed end. The harder we push, the more we suffer. If we can only take a step back and turn around toward the large end of the horn, then our problems will dissipate. This is what conceptual transformation means. Some people only change their concepts a little bit. What do we mean by a little bit? They know they make some mistakes but don't necessarily think it's that bad. They can accept their mistakes and believe themselves to be doing fine. When one is only slightly in error, and is still able to correct himself, it's still

better than doing nothing.

Chen: So, they might be able to elevate themselves considerably.

MSY: That's right, significantly.

Chen: Many people, including myself, think that this change of thinking is the greatest benefit the Dharma can bring. How can we actually practice the Buddhist concepts in our daily life? I mean, sometimes when we read about the Dharma, we might think to ourselves, "That's right!" However, we continue to deal with things in the same old way. How can this change of concepts be brought about effectively?

MSY: One way is through understanding. When we identify with some Buddhist teachings and know we should put them into practice, our old habits just stop us from doing this. So we probably will regress back to our old ways very quickly. However, we can change bit by bit. Whenever we are in pain and feel we should apply the Dharma but find ourselves stuck in the old rut again, we should say to ourselves, "We've got to change." Do this again and again and finally it will work.

Chen: But I feel that it will take a long time at the outset. For example, the time from when I started learning

about Buddhism up to when I actually started acting on it was a very long period. But now, having started applying it and finding it effective, I often utilize it and can change my concepts very quickly. So does it need a long incubation period?

MSY: That depends on a person's karmic roots. Some people can change their concepts very quickly.

Chen: Because they have good and deep karmic roots.

MSY: So once they accept a concept, they're able to change themselves immediately. But some people need to keep correcting themselves, again and again. So, spiritual cultivation takes practice – continuous practice, practice, and more practice.

Chen: Thank you for your guidance, Master. Changing one's concepts can greatly change one's life and so we hope that all of us can keep practicing. Please join us next time as we share more wisdom of the Dharma.

Summary: Inverted thinking causes suffering. For most people it takes much time and patience to transform such thinking. Once we can change our thoughts, we can live a happier life.

Everyday Chan and Meditative Concentration

May 25, 1998

Ms. Chen: Hello, everyone, and welcome again to Great Dharma Drum. In our last program, Master Sheng Yen explained to us the experience of meditative concentration, or samadhi. Today, we'll discuss how one enters such a state. Let us ask Master Sheng Yen to explain it to us.

Master, last time you pointed out that when arranging flowers, a person's state of mind can come close to the spirit of Chan. Master, in any form of artistic creation, masters or teachers will teach us the skills, but ultimately, we will enter a certain stage. We say someone's paintings have reached a sublime stage, meaning they have transcended mere skills. Can this level be viewed as samadhi? For example, during the process of creation, some people feel very calm. They and the painting are one. Is this an experience of meditative concentration?

Master Sheng Yen: If we talk about Chan or meditative concentration, we should distinguish the two. Chan is not necessarily about meditative concentration. However, without the foundations of concentration, Chan couldn't exist. Chan and concentration are in parallel, where Chan is pure wisdom. However, during the Song Dynasty (960-1279), the Chan School spread to Japan as Zen. The

Japanese believe that everything that is tranquil, stable, simple, and powerful is Zen. They call the art of archery, *kyudo*, the way of arrows; the art of wielding swords is *kendo*. Also, flower arranging is *kado*, the way of flowers. The tea ceremony is *chado*, the way of tea. Anything can be referred to as *do*, or the way. So, in this context, “way” is anything that is similar to Chan. The way is wisdom. This is how Chan culture has influenced, and become something applied to our daily lives. These are examples of Chan culture, Chan art and Chan life. They have become a living, or everyday Chan.

Is this meditative concentration? Well, there is definitely some connection. In the Japanese tea ceremony, the tea master’s dress, his or her every move is precise and measured; every movement is orderly, stable, and peaceful. Boiling the water, pouring it, brewing and serving the tea, even drinking it, all follow a ritual. If one does not follow the ritual, one is considered rude, ignorant of *chado*. When one joins a Japanese tea ceremony, it could be torture if one is not used to it – so many little rituals just to drink one cup of tea. But if one knows Japanese culture and enjoys tranquility, stability and peace, then one will find it enjoyable. In their teahouses, the surroundings are very simple and modest. The bowls used are also simple. They are not garishly decorated. This is Zen spirit and Zen culture.

Is this meditative concentration? Actually, it is not,

though it brings you tranquility. So does arranging flowers. When one is arranging flowers, one observes the flowers and the design attentively. One doesn't simply take some leaves and a flower and put them together. After profound consideration, and careful observation, the arrangement is formed slowly. Grabbing a bunch of flowers and putting them in the vase would be easy, but it wouldn't be *kado*, the art of flower arrangement. So the procedure and every step in the process is similar to Chan practice; it requires attention to details and concentration. A leaf is a leaf, a flower is a flower. One is aware of every finest movement, angle and line, clearly and precisely. One knows it clearly in one's mind; one has a clear impression. This could be called a form of Chan (or Zen) or a process of meditative concentration as expressed in daily life.

But these kinds of artistic activity are not necessarily true meditative concentration. True meditative concentration is without any other thoughts other than the one point or one thought of concentration in the mind. Chan speaks of the mind's "extended concentration," which means being clearly aware of your own movements. You know clearly what you are doing. This can be called living Chan; it may happen during spiritual practice, or it may also happen after one has left meditative concentration, where the mind is still tranquil. The concentration of art could be said to be related to meditative concentration, but it is not necessarily

meditative concentration.

Chen: Thank you Master for your explanation. From Master's detailed explanation we know that Chan is stability, peace, simplicity and tranquility, while meditative concentration is the unification of mind and thought. If we can create more Chan spirit in daily lives, just like the living Chan or Chan in life mentioned by Master, then we will live our lives more wisely and fully. Please join us next time as we share more wisdom of the Dharma.

Summary: The spirit of Chan is concentrating the mind on a single thought and cultivating awareness of our actions.

Chen: But I feel that it will take a long time at the outset. For example, the time from when I started learning about Buddhism up to when I actually started acting on it was a very long period. But now, having started applying it and finding it effective, I often utilize it and can change my concepts very quickly. So does it need a long incubation period?

MSY: That depends on a person's karmic roots. Some people can change their concepts very quickly.

Chen: Because they have good and deep karmic roots.

MSY: So once they accept a concept, they're able to change themselves immediately. But some people need to keep correcting themselves, again and again. So, spiritual cultivation takes practice – continuous practice, practice, and more practice.

Chen: Thank you for your guidance, Master. Changing one's concepts can greatly change one's life and so we hope that all of us can keep practicing. Please join us next time as we share more wisdom of the Dharma.

Summary: Inverted thinking causes suffering. For most people it takes much time and patience to transform such thinking. Once we can change our thoughts, we can live a happier life.

Other Books in English by Master Sheng Yen

(A partial listing)

Things Pertaining to Bodhi

The Thirty-Seven Aids to Enlightenment

Shambhala Publications 2010

Shattering the Great Doubt

The Chan Practice of Huatou

Shambhala Publications 2009

The Method of No-Method

The Chan Practice of Silent Illumination

Shambhala Publications 2008

Footprints in the Snow

The Autobiography of a Chinese Buddhist Monk

Doubleday 2008

Orthodox Chinese Buddhism

A Contemporary Chan Master's Answers to Common Questions

North Atlantic Books 2007

Attaining the Way

A Guide to the Practice of Chan Buddhism

Shambhala Publications 2006

Song of Mind

Wisdom from the Zen Classic Xin Ming

Shambhala Publications 2004

Hoofprint of the Ox

Principles of the Chan Buddhist Path

Oxford University Press 2001

There Is No Suffering

Commentary on the Heart Sutra

North Atlantic Books 2001

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Venerable Chan Master Sheng Yen (1930-2009) was one of the twentieth century's foremost Buddhist scholars and meditation masters, and was instrumental in the revival of Chinese Buddhism in modern times. Venerable Sheng Yen was born into a humble farming family near Shanghai in 1930; he became a novice Buddhist monk at the age of 13. During the Communist takeover of China in 1949, he escaped with the Nationalist army to Taiwan. At the age of 28, after 15 years of strenuous scriptural study and struggle in his meditation work, while sojourning at various monasteries in southern Taiwan, he had the deepest spiritual experience of his life. Soon after, he entered into a solitary six-year meditation retreat to deepen his realization. He later received formal lineage transmission in both the extant lines of Chan (Zen) Buddhism, making him the 57th generation master of the Linji line and the 52nd generation master of the Caodong line of Chan. In 1969 Venerable Sheng Yen went to Japan to attend graduate school, with the conviction that a strong education would be required to revive Chinese monasticism.



In six years he obtained Master's and Doctorate degrees in Buddhist Literature from Rissho University, becoming the first monk in Chinese Buddhist history to earn a doctorate.

For the last thirty years of his life, he tirelessly devoted all of his energy to advancing Buddhist education, reviving the tradition of rigorous education for monks and nuns, leading intensive Chan meditation retreats worldwide, engaging in interfaith outreach, and working on behalf of world peace, youth development, and gender equality.

Venerable Sheng Yen passed away peacefully on February 3rd, 2009. He was revered by tens of thousands of students around the world. His wisdom and compassion can be found in his books in Chinese, English, Japanese, and several other languages, and in the teachings of his students and Dharma heirs both in Asia and the West.

