

## Interview with Master Sheng-yen

*Michael Liebenson Grady: We have heard you make the distinction between buddhadharma and Buddhism. Could you say more about that?*

**Master Sheng-yen:** In buddhadharma, there is only one taste, the taste of liberation. That is the one dharma. Buddhism, on the other hand, is a manifestation of causes and conditions according to the changing environment that the buddhadharma encounters and the disposition of its practitioners. According to varying conditions and changing times, there arises what is known as Buddhism.

Buddhadharma is not only the taste of liberation. It is also the way of the bodhisattva. Moreover, buddhadharma has various levels and types of teachings to respond to the various dispositions of sentient beings. Sometimes this includes a graded path of Buddhism, but all of the gradations, systems and different ways to organize the Buddhist teachings point to liberation.

Furthermore, buddhadharma can be divided into two categories. First, it can be understood through words. Secondly, it can be understood without words or language. According to the various dispositions of sentient beings, they will receive the taste of liberation either through words or through the wordless teaching.

Buddhadharma can also be divided into the dharma of the teachings and the dharma of the mind. The actual recorded words of Shakyamuni are the dharma of the teachings. The essence of the Buddha's teachings is the dharma of the mind, for its whole purpose is to liberate the mind, which includes liberating oneself as well as liberating sentient beings. The Buddha expounded numerous teachings to sentient beings throughout the whole of his life precisely to liberate the mind. He proclaimed the mind dharma, which includes various methods and guiding concepts for practitioners to tread the path of liberation.

One can only achieve liberation through the three seals of dharma, which are: all formations are impermanent; all dharmas are without self; nirvana is quiescent. These seals are not only the means to liberation but liberation itself, which is the full-fledged realization of these three aspects of reality. Shakyamuni Buddha expounded guiding

concepts and methods to attain the full realization of these three dharma seals, such as the four noble truths, the eightfold path and the thirty-seven aids to enlightenment. All of these flow out of the three dharma seals. They are of one taste because no matter what approach one takes, as long as the three principles are present, they all return to the taste of liberation.

Taken together, all of the Buddha's teachings constitute the buddhadharma, which spreads to various places in various time periods and to various people depending on their dispositions. This phenomenon dates all the way back to Shakyamuni Buddha's time. Because of the different dispositions of the Buddha's disciples, there were already divisions of his teachings.

The teachings spread first in two main directions, creating the Southern tradition and the Northern tradition. Because of the various civilizations and cultural differences, the indigenous beliefs and religions, and the dispositions of people in these two main regions, all sorts of Buddhist practices developed. We call this phenomenon Buddhism. The varying types of Buddhist practice all adhere to the dharma of liberation, however. If a particular type of Buddhist practice is missing any one of the three dharma seals, it is no longer Buddhism; it is non-Buddhist practice.

Within the Northern tradition, there is a distinction between the Tibetan form of Buddhist practice and the Chinese form of Buddhist practice. The Chinese form of Buddhist practice gave rise to the Korean form and the Japanese form. Within Chinese Buddhist practice itself, there are ten different schools, and Ch'an Buddhism is merely one of these. Then within Ch'an there is a further division into "The Five Houses of Ch'an" and the "Seven Sects of Ch'an." In Japan there are approximately thirty different sects of Zen Buddhism. In Tibetan Buddhism, there is also a variety of schools. There are divisions within the divisions of the dharma.

All of these differences arise out of the dispositions of sentient beings, their time and their place. In other words, the different schools arise from historical changes. Despite these changes, the various schools do not depart from the dharma of liberation. The West will also have its own form of Buddhism; it cannot be characterized particularly as Tibetan or Chinese or from the Southern tradition, because the West has its own civilization, culture and history.

*Within all these forms of Buddhism, how would you describe the spirit of Ch'an? What distinguishes it from the others?*

First of all, there is no such thing as Ch'an. It is merely the way of liberation, free from fixations. The origin of Ch'an as a school, however, can be dated back to Bodhidharma, who came from India. Bodhidharma was not a dharma master in the sense that he gave discourses on the teachings, like the great arhats Subhuti and Shariputra. Rather, he was a great yogi. He brought with him to China one scripture, the *Lankavatara Sutra*, which revolves around the teaching of buddhanature, *tathagathagarbha*. On the basis of this principle, he taught the sudden approach to directly experiencing liberation.

There is a saying in the *Lankavatara Sutra* itself, which goes something like this: "All the words of the Buddha evolve around the mind as its axis."

This expresses the principle of the mind dharma, and Ch'an is therefore mind dharma—direct experience of one's self-nature, indeed, of one's buddhanature. It is not the dharma of words and language. One experiences this wisdom by directly letting go, relinquishing, putting down self-attachment, self-referentiality, the grasping that hinders us from liberation. Despite the fact that this teaching of directly putting down, letting go of self, can be traced to India, it was only in China that it evolved into the tradition as we know it today. In India the tradition mainly developed around a graded practice of meditation. However, this graded practice, as demonstrated in methods such as the four stages of mindfulness, requires one to have little involvement with the world, such as in the forest tradition. You also need a lot of time, a long process of cultivation.

Chinese society did not allow for this, even among professional practitioners such as the monks and nuns. In India there is a tradition of alms begging. You can beg for your food daily and the whole society will support you. Practitioners can then return to the forest and continue their practice. But in China, alms begging never took root. One had to rely on oneself. There were government-sponsored monasteries, where great and famous accomplished practitioners resided. But ordinary monastics needed to rely on themselves in their daily life. For their own survival in Chinese society, they needed to find means to tread the path of liberation and also to support their daily living. Therefore, Ch'an

evolved the idea that everyday living is Ch'an practice. The environment, the historical situation, was such that it forced practitioners to integrate their aspiration and practice toward liberation with all aspects of their life. As a primary example, the Sixth Patriarch, Huineng, achieved enlightenment while working.

The integration of life and practice has very deep roots. In fact, we say that sitting meditation itself cannot bring about enlightenment. Often we hear a Ch'an master say, "Meditation not only is not enlightenment; meditation does not lead to enlightenment." Enlightenment is the actuality of letting go of the self directly. That does not necessarily have anything to do with meditation. One puts down one's self-grasping through various methods.

For example, Wanan became enlightened upon hearing these lines from the *Diamond Sutra*: "The past mind is unattainable; the future mind is not attainable; the present mind is not attainable."

The meaning of these lines is that one should not be engrossed in the mind of virtue versus non-virtue, the mind of good versus bad. It is precisely these types of grasping mind that prevent us from realizing what is known as "original face," the state before, the state free from attachment, free from kleshas. In Ch'an we also call this *the dharma gate of formlessness*. In fact, the dharma gate of formlessness was the first approach that Huineng taught to his elder dharma brother, Huiming. Huineng said to him, "Neither think of good nor bad, at this time, what is your original face?" Upon hearing this, Huiming was enlightened.

It is very hard, however, for people to use the direct approach of Ch'an practice and realization, which says, "Nothing can go good; nothing can go evil," where good and evil refer to the grasping mind of good and the grasping mind of evil. Therefore, by the tenth and eleventh century, the Ch'an tradition evolved methods such as the investigation of *huato*, which is the essential phrase or word in any *gong'an* (Japanese, *koan*), and the practice of *mozhao*, or "silent illumination." The *huato* method is associated with the *Linji* tradition and the silent illumination approach with the *Caodong* tradition.

Although certain schools are associated with certain types of method, we shouldn't be fooled by that. All Linji do not necessarily practice in such and such a way, nor do all Caodong practice in another fixed way. Even within one tradition, the master

of the North and the master of the South can be drastically different in their styles of teaching. One hundred Ch'an masters will have one hundred different styles. Even the disciple's style is different from the master's style. So which one is correct? All of them are correct. How should one approach the practice? Approach it based on your own causes and conditions. We can see this in Shakyamuni Buddha's time. He had ten great disciples, and each one had his own particular disposition, particular method of practice or approach to the one taste of liberation. In turn, their disciples gravitated to particular aspects of their teacher and so on, which gave rise to the many-fold manifestations of the dharma and its fluidity.

*Perhaps you could tell us how you came to be teaching silent illumination in the West, given that for a long time there weren't any Ch'an teachers teaching silent illumination.*

My initial experience of Ch'an was in practicing *huato* within the Linji tradition. When I was in my twenties, I had many doubts and questions, but there was one question that consumed all of the questions: Why am I like this now? All of my questions eventually returned to this one unresolved problem. Then in my twenty-eighth year, I met my future Linji master. I was fortunate enough that he could point out the way. I was able, during that encounter, to put down all of my burdens. The question was no more.

In my six years of solitary retreat practice, which I entered into a couple of years after that incident, I had no particular method of practice, because I had no more doubts. If one were to characterize my method, one may say I was practicing very simply putting down—putting down discursive thinking, and even putting down the experience of oneness, that the environment and the self are one.

After the retreat, I went to Japan and then the United States. I started teaching Ch'an. Even though I myself do not use the *huato* method, I thought the method was very good. So in the beginning, I taught it to my students. People seemed to benefit from it. So I searched through the discourse records of the Ch'an masters and the principles of Ch'an to find more ways to benefit my students.

Among the works I looked at were those of Yongjia Xuanjue, who lived in the seventh and eighth centuries and was a student of the Sixth Patriarch, Huineng. In *The*

*Song of Mind*, he talks about not relinquishing delusion nor seeking the truth. In *The Song of Shamatha*, he says that if one is truly utilizing the mind in practice, there is no such mind to be used. I also looked at the teachings of Dongshan, one of the founders of the Caodong tradition, and those of Shitou Xian, who teaches about the *two entrances* mentioned by Bodhidharma: entering dharma through principles and entering through phenomena. In each case, the works I looked at were linked by the single strand of letting go, which is the core principle of silent illumination.

When I started to teach my disciples, many of them came from doing practices like the four foundations of mindfulness. Through working with my disciples and understanding how they practiced, in particular the mindfulness of the body and the mindfulness of sensation, I discovered that the principle of silent illumination was also at work there—not exactly the same principle but there was a continuity and a connection. In Japan, I was exposed to shikantaza. Although one cannot say that shikantaza is the same as silent illumination, nor can one say that the four foundations of mindfulness is the practice of silent illumination, there are no contradictions between them. However, I base my teachings of silent illumination on the Ch’an tradition, and specifically on the discourse records of master Hongzhi [1091–1157], who composed the famous *Song of Silent Illumination*.

*Simply put, what is silent illumination?*

**Master Sheng-yen:** In speaking of silent illumination, I should mention its correlation with shamatha-vipashyana. They are of the same family. In the Tiantai tradition, there is the practice of the great shamatha and vipashyana, sometimes translated as “the great cessation” and “the great contemplation.” The Tiantai school’s teaching of the *maha-shamatha-vipashyana* includes the progressive practice of the ten stages of shamatha-vipashyana, with the highest stage referred to as the first stage. Those people with strong karmic roots, great affinity, can directly approach the very first stage, called *the inconceivable realm*. This realm is free from mind, discrimination and consciousness. *Mind* here refers to the original mind, pure mind. Yes, we have to leave behind pure mind and let go of our attachment even to purity. *Discrimination* refers to our faculty to

distinguish between this and that, and it is tainted by grasping. *Consciousness* refers to that which transmigrates from one life to the next. This state of inconceivability is precisely what is spoken about in the Ch'an tradition as formlessness. To be free from mind, discrimination and consciousness means to leave behind words, language, sentences, phrases and conceptuality.

If one is not successful in attaining this first stage, one would resort to the second stage, and if not successful with the second, then the third and so on, all the way to the tenth stage. Silent illumination as expounded by Ch'an master Hongzhi does not involve stages. However, because I have background and understanding in the Tiantai tradition, when I present silent illumination, I present it in a fashion that has stages, so that it is easily accessible to all types of practitioners.

*I recall silent illumination starting with the relaxation of the body and mind.*

That is just the very basic foundation, the prerequisite. When I lead a retreat, relaxing the body and the mind must come first, beginning with mindfulness of breath. Eventually, one's awareness expands to the totality of the body. As one proceeds with this practice, the body may start to dissolve. The felt sense of the body will start to be so subtle that it will hardly be perceived. After that, even the body disappears, but the external environment is still present and one's field of awareness expands to include the immediate surroundings of the meditator. Then, the external environment can also be dissolved. The mind's awareness becomes expansive and is not focused on particulars in the external environment. Gradually, the mind becomes unified with the external environment. At this time, this unified self, taking in all things in the environment, is doing the sitting. But even this unification, this stage of oneness, must be let go of, put down. When this oneness—the identity of the external environment with oneself—is put down, the great self is also dropped away. When the self drops away, that is precisely the first stage or the highest stage of Tiantai *maha-shamatha-vipashyana*, the inconceivable realm.

If one can directly contemplate silent illumination from this formless stage point of view, that is good. However, people usually have to start from the basics and

progressively work towards this eventual realization. Silent illumination practice is, in the ultimate sense, a realization of the nonduality of samadhi and prajna, as spoken about in the *Platform Sutra* of the Sixth Patriarch. In the Tiantai system, this is the simultaneity of shamatha and vipashyana.

In one of Hongzhi's discourses, he said that the essential point of the realization of all the Buddhas and lineage masters is that the mind does not encounter things, yet it knows. It does not impose conditions, yet it illuminates. Knowing refers to the complete clarity of mind. There is not a single trace of a particular position or view that one upholds. There is not a single thing that has anything to do with oneself. One does not know things by filtering them through one's sense of self. As for illumination, it is an absolute form of understanding. It has no opposites. Usually we think there is the person and then there is something that the person understands, an opposite. In Hongzhi's teaching we call that *opposing conditions*. Illumination, an absolute type of understanding, has no object of understanding, no opposing conditions. This is the state of nonduality, in which there is no single condition in opposition to oneself. This is prajna, the wisdom of no self, no subjectivity, no grasping.

How does one jump from the unified state of self and environment I mentioned earlier to this highest state? Through practice. That is, in all situations, do not take some thing as an opposite to oneself, and also do not project your own subjectivity into your involvement with things or people.

In the opening lines of the *Song of Silent Illumination*, Hongzhi says, "Silently and serenely, all words are forgotten. In clarity and luminosity, all things appear as is."

The first line does not literally mean that the person forgets all words. It is just that in the mind of the practitioner, there is no attachment to labeling and descriptions, false conceptual understanding of the external world. In the full realization of silent illumination, the practitioner does not project what he has learned and accumulated onto the external environment. The second line indicates that the practitioner perceives things as they are, free from concepts. Things exist in and of themselves and this is clearly perceived.

In the stage of silent illumination where self and environment are unified, which I mentioned earlier, it is possible to enter into samadhi, where the existence of time and

space cease. The true practitioner of silent illumination will not allow the mind to enter into samadhi, but will rather ground the mind in the reality of the environment, yet maintain continuous clarity. The cessation of time and space is indeed a form of serenity, of silence. But the realization of silent illumination does not refer to the cessation of time and space; it refers to the cessation of self-attachment. Just because self-attachment is gone does not mean that one does not know what is happening outside. One interacts with the external environment—people, things, events, affairs—dealing with them according to what needs to be done, but with no protection of self.

Why shouldn't one enter into samadhi? Because samadhi is not liberation. Since it is not in accordance with the one taste of liberation, it is not the ultimate path. It is not necessarily the Buddhist path, despite the fact that in samadhi, there may be no vexations of the mind. It also is not in accordance with the spirit of Ch'an. Living is Ch'an. It is the dynamic, lively quality of everyday living that reveals the spirit of Ch'an. If a practitioner sits in samadhi all day long, not only is he not in accordance with Ch'an, he will also experience problems in daily life. In both the Linji and Caodong traditions, we have a saying: "The Dao is manifested in everyday life."

In *The Diamond Sutra*, it says: "Without abiding anywhere, give rise to mind." *Without abiding anywhere* is silence; *give rise to mind* is the functioning of wisdom. Silence is the silencing, or ceasing, of self-grasping. Illumination is the functioning of wisdom. The functioning of wisdom can only be demonstrated through interaction with people, affairs and things. Through interaction one witnesses the wonder of wisdom.

*What has it been like for you to teach in the West and how do you feel Western practitioners relate to buddhadharma?*

From my perspective, human beings are human beings, whether they are in the East or West, the past or the present. When I come to the West, I don't have the idea in mind that I am from the East. The intrinsic nature of all beings is the same. Although cultural backgrounds are different, dharma has only one taste. There is no East or West from that perspective.

I would not claim that the silent illumination I teach is exactly that of Hongzhi. Rather I teach based on my experience and understanding of the practice of silent illumination, in response to people's needs, although I have organized it based on Hongzhi's teachings and those of the lineage masters within Ch'an whom I mentioned earlier. Although I have adapted it, it is not my own creation, because I am teaching based on the spirit of Ch'an. This is living Ch'an and it is how to connect the practice to people's lives.

I am exposed to all the traditions of Buddhism—the Theravada tradition, the Tibetan tradition, the Chinese tradition—and their respective practices, and I incorporate them in my presentation. But all of the teachings I give never depart from the one taste of liberation and the spirit of Ch'an.

As for why I came to the West, you may ask, "Why did Bodhidharma come to the West?" Why was Buddhism brought from India to China? The dharma goes wherever it is needed. Bodhidharma himself was an Indian; he came to China to bring the dharma. So, why do I come? I come for all of you.

*Master Sheng-yen is abbot of the Nung Ch'an monastery in Taiwan and founder of Dharma Drum Mountain, which includes the Ch'an Meditation Center in New York City and Dharma Drum Retreat Center in Pine Brush, New York. The interview was conducted during a ten-day silent illumination retreat led by Master Sheng-yen. The interviewer was Michael Liebenson Grady, a guiding teacher at the Cambridge Insight Meditation Center who has been studying with Master Sheng-yen for the past five years. The translator was Jimmy Yu.*

**Buddhadharma**, Fall 2003