

ATTAINING THE WAY

*A Guide to the Practice
of Chan Buddhism*



CHAN MASTER
Sheng Yen



SHAMBHALA
Boston & London
2006

will not carelessly let them go off. He will be most conscientious and careful about giving them transmission, and everything will be good fortune for the Chan school. If [the so-called master] destroys the guiding principles and neglects training and tempering his practitioners, then he will err by passing on the transmission indiscriminately to all and sundry. If the master is too cautious [about passing on his bequest], there is the worry that the transmission may be cut off. Both of these errors mean bad fortune for the Chan school.

Even so, the enlightened master enters into weeds [of ignorance and delusion] to look for people for the sake of the buddhas and patriarchs and to open the eye of enlightenment for humans and gods. It is better to be too cautious with the transmission than to give it indiscriminately [to all and sundry]. It is better to have a few genuine successors than many false ones, and not to let noxious weeds be mixed in among the good plants. If the master follows this course, then the life of wisdom is sure to be great and glorious forever.

It is for this reason that I have made the effort to set forth this account of training and tempering Chan practitioners and, as a final word, that I end it with an admonition to be careful with the transmission. Emphasizing the guiding principles, being diligent in training and tempering practitioners, and being conscientious and cautious with the transmission—in the contemporary world these three things are never heard of and difficult to practice.

PART THREE

THE
ESSENTIALS
OF CHAN
PRACTICE



by Master Xuyun (Empty Cloud)
(1839-1959)

Translated by Guogu

Prerequisites for Beginning Chan Practice

THE PURPOSE OF INVESTIGATING CHAN

THE PURPOSE OF INVESTIGATING CHAN is to illuminate the Mind and see your self-nature.¹ You must eradicate the mind's impurities so as to personally perceive the true face of your self-nature. The mind's impurities are wandering thoughts and attachments; self-nature is the wisdom and virtue of the Tathagata. Sentient beings are replete with the wisdom and virtue of buddhas; they are not two and not separated from one another. If you can leave behind wandering thoughts and attachments, then you will attain this wisdom and virtue that is within you. This is buddhahood. Otherwise you remain an ordinary sentient being.

It is because you and I have been, for limitless *kalpas*, wallowing in birth and death, defiled for a long time, and unable to immediately cast off wandering thoughts that we cannot perceive our intrinsic nature. For these reasons, the first prerequisite of investigating Chan is to eradicate wandering thoughts.

How do we eradicate wandering thoughts? Shakyamuni Buddha taught much on this subject. His simplest and most direct teaching is the word *stop*, from the expression "Stopping is *bodhi*." From the time when Bodhidharma transmitted Chan teachings to our Eastern Land, after the Sixth Patriarch [Huineng], the winds of Chan have blown far and wide, shaking and illuminating the world. Among the many things that Bodhidharma and the Sixth Patriarch taught to those who came to study with them, none is more valuable than the saying "Put down the myriad entangling conditions; let not one thought arise." Putting down the myriad entangling

conditions simply means to put down *all* conditions. So this phrase “Put down all conditions and let not one thought arise” is actually the foremost prerequisite of a Chan practitioner. If you cannot fulfill this requirement, then not only will you fail to attain the ultimate goal of Chan practice but you will not even be able to enter the gate of Chan. How can you speak of practicing Chan if you are entangled by worldly phenomena, wallowing in the arising and passing of your thoughts?

PUT DOWN THE MYRIAD ENTANGLING CONDITIONS

“Put down all conditions and let not one thought arise” is a prerequisite for the practice of investigating Chan. Now that we know this, how do we accomplish it? The best practitioner, one of superior abilities, can in an instant put to rest all [deluded] thoughts forever, arrive directly at the realization of the unborn, and instantly experience *bodhi*, without being entangled by anything.

The next best kind of practitioner uses principle to rid himself of phenomenal appearance and realizes that self-nature is originally pure; vexation and *bodhi*, samsara and nirvana—all are false names that have nothing to do with self-nature; all affairs and things are dreams and illusions, like bubbles or reflections.²

My physical body that is composed of the four elements, the mountains, rivers, and [all that exists on] this great earth—these are all contained within my self-nature, like bubbles on the surface of the ocean, arising and disappearing, yet never obstructing the [ocean’s] fundamental essence. Do not be captivated by the arising, abiding, changing, and passing away of illusory phenomena that give rise to pleasure and aversion, grasping and rejecting. Give up your whole body as if you were dead, and the six sense faculties, [six] sense objects, and [six] sense consciousnesses will naturally disperse. Greed, hatred, ignorance, and craving for affection will be

destroyed. All the physical sensations of pain, itchiness, agony, and pleasure—hunger, cold, satiation, warmth, glory, insult, birth and death, calamity, prosperity, good and bad luck, praise, blame, gain and loss, safety and danger—will no longer be your concern. Only this can be considered true “putting down [of all conditions].” When you put everything down forever, this is what is meant by “Put down all conditions.”

When the myriad conditions are renounced, wandering thoughts will disappear on their own accord, discrimination will not arise, and attachment is left far behind. In this instance of nothing arising in mind, the brightness and clarity of your self-nature manifests completely. Only at this time will you have fulfilled the necessary conditions for investigating Chan. Then, further hard work and sincere practice will enable you to illuminate the Mind and see into your true nature.

EVERYONE INSTANTLY BECOMES A BUDDHA

Many Chan practitioners ask questions about the Dharma. The Dharma that is spoken is originally not the true Dharma. As soon as you try to explain things, the true meaning is lost. If you realize that this Mind is originally the Buddha, then at that very instant there is nothing more to do. Everything manifests its perfected state. All talk about practice or attainment is demonic deception.

Bodhidharma’s “direct pointing at the Mind and seeing into one’s nature and thus attaining buddhahood” clearly instructs that all sentient beings are buddhas. Once pure self-nature is recognized, you can harmonize with the environment yet remain undefiled. The Mind will remain unified throughout the day, whether walking, standing, sitting, or lying down. This manifests the already perfected buddha. At this point there is no need to put forth effort and be diligent, let alone act in a certain way or be pretentious. Nor is there a need to bother with explanations or discursive thinking. Thus it is

said that to become a buddha is the easiest, most natural task. Moreover, it is something you can control, without seeking help from outside. All sentient beings in this vast land can instantly realize buddhahood if only they desire to avoid transmigration of four forms of birth and the six realms of existence in this long *kalpa*, tumbling in the sea of suffering without end. Buddhahood can be attained if you desire the four virtues of nirvana (eternity, joy, self, purity) and wholly believe in the sincere words of the Buddha and the patriarchs, renounce everything, and think neither of good nor bad. All buddhas, bodhisattvas, and patriarchs have vowed to exhaustively save all beings; this vow is not a boast, nor is it groundless, making some sort of grand vow or empty remark.

The Dharma is exactly such. It has been elucidated again and again by the Buddha and the patriarchs. They have exhorted us with the truth and do not deceive us. Unfortunately, sentient beings are confused, and for limitless *kalpas* they have been wallowing in birth and death in the ocean of suffering, reborn here and reborn there, without any control of their endless transmigration. Confused with inverted views, they turn their backs on awakening and embrace the worldly dust [of their senses], like pure gold in a cesspool. Because of the severity of the problem and the degree of their defilement, the Buddha compassionately, without any choice, expounded eighty-four thousand Dharma doors [methods] to accord with the varying karmic roots of sentient beings, so that sentient beings may use these methods to cure themselves of eighty-four thousand habits and illnesses, which include greed, hatred, ignorance, and craving for affection.

INVESTIGATING CHAN AND CONTEMPLATING MIND

Our sect focuses on investigating Chan. And the purpose of investigating Chan is to “illuminate the Mind and see one’s own self-

nature,” which means to thoroughly investigate and comprehend our original face. This investigation is also called “clearly realizing one’s Mind and thoroughly perceiving one’s intrinsic nature.”

Since the time when the Buddha held up a flower [and Mahakashyapa realized awakening] and Bodhidharma came to the East, the methods for entry into this Dharma door have continually evolved. Most Chan adepts before the Tang and Song dynasties became enlightened after hearing a word or phrase of the Dharma, and Dharma transmission from master to disciple was merely a convergence of Mind to Mind; there was no actual Dharma. Further, questions and answers in daily life were only extemporaneous occasions to untie entanglements, much like prescribing the right medicine for the right illness.

After the Song dynasty, however, people did not have such good karmic capacities as their predecessors. They could not carry out what had been said. For example, practitioners were taught to “put down everything” and “not think about good and evil,” but they could not put down everything; if they weren’t thinking about good, they were thinking about evil. Under these circumstances, the patriarchs had no choice but to use poison against poison, and taught practitioners to investigate gong’an [and huatou].³

When you begin observing a huatou, even if you must begin with a lifeless phrase, you must grasp it tightly, without letting go of it even for an instant, like a mouse trying to gnaw its way out of a coffin. The mouse must focus on one area and it must not stop until it gnaws through the coffin. In terms of huatou, the objective is to use a single thought to eradicate ten thousand thoughts. This method is really a last resort. Just as if someone had been severely poisoned and there was no other way to get the poison out and cure the patient except to open up the body.

The ancients had numerous gong’ans, but later on practitioners started using huatous. Some huatous are: “Who is observing this corpse?” “What is my original face before my parents gave birth