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## A Tentative Exploration into the Development of Master Sheng Yen's Chan Teachings

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### **Abstract**

In 2006 the late Master Shengyen Huikong 聖嚴慧空 (1930-2009) (hereafter, Sheng Yen) established a new Chan Buddhist school called the Dharma Drum Lineage (Fagu zong 法鼓宗), which unites the two lineages of Linji 臨濟 and Caodong 曹洞 that Sheng Yen was heir to. Sheng Yen's creation of a new Chan school was a momentous historical development in Chinese Buddhism. This article aims to historicize the process of Sheng Yen's formation of the Dharma Drum Lineage and how his own teachings have evolved over time in response to different conditions. It argues that Sheng Yen Chan teachings does not constitute a stagnant, premeditated set of doctrines, but was a product of his own life experiences, interpretations of early Buddhism, and appropriations of the Japanese Buddhist response to modernity. Sheng Yen's Chan was unique in that he synthesized the early Buddhist *Āgama* teachings with the teachings embodied in the *Platform Scripture*. His formulation of Chan as a form of "Buddhist education" was uniquely modern, but at the same time not out of line with the adaptive nature of Chan in Chinese history. He took a critical stance against contemporary representations of Chan as antinomian and spontaneous, ungrounded in Buddhist doctrine, and appropriated, reinterpreted, and reinvigorated traditional teachings, especially in a time when these values and teachings had already lost much of their ideological vigor to meet the needs of modern times and revive Chinese Buddhism.

### **Keywords:**

Chan, *Huatou*, *Mozhao*, *Platform Scripture*, Sheng Yen

## 初探聖嚴法師禪法之演化

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### 摘要

在兩千零六年，聖嚴慧空法師新成立了「中華禪法鼓宗」。法鼓宗的成立結合了禪宗臨濟與曹洞兩脈，同時也在漢傳佛教史上開發了一個新的局面。這篇文章旨在對聖嚴法師建立中華禪法鼓宗的歷程，以及他的禪法如何隨著時代演變，以回應種種狀況做歷史的論述。文中主張聖嚴法師的禪法並非一套停滯不變、預先構想好的教理，而是結合了法師自己的生活體驗與對原始佛教的詮釋，並參考日本佛教對現代社會的回應而產生的。聖嚴法師的禪法之所以獨特，在於他將《阿含經》的原始佛教教法與《六祖壇經》所闡揚的教法予以融合。他將禪法建構為一種「佛教教育」的形式，不但具有現代性，同時也與中國歷史上禪宗極具適應性、包容性的特質相呼應。今日的世界，特別在西方，將禪宗呈現為揚棄戒律、灑脫自在、輕視佛法教理基礎的宗派。法師對此一觀點，持不同看法，他對傳統教法提出新的詮釋，賦予全新的活力。這樣的作法，在當前傳統價值觀與教法已喪失引領思潮的活力，不僅無法滿足現代社會需求，亦不足以擔當復興漢傳佛教的任務之際，法師的努力，顯得別具意義。

關鍵字：禪、話頭、默照、《六祖壇經》、聖嚴

## Introduction

In 2006 the late Master Shengyen Huikong 聖嚴慧空 (1930-2009) (hereafter, Sheng Yen) established a new Chan Buddhist school called the Dharma Drum Lineage (Fagu zong 法鼓宗), which unites the two lineages of Linji 臨濟 and Caodong 曹洞 that Sheng Yen was heir to. Sheng Yen's creation of a new Chan school was a momentous historical development in Chinese Buddhism. Centuries have passed since the creation of a new lineage within Chinese Chan Buddhism. This article aims to historicize the process of Sheng Yen's formation of the Dharma Drum Lineage and how his own teachings have evolved over time in response to different conditions. It argues that Sheng Yen Chan teachings does not constitute a stagnant, premeditated set of doctrines, but was a product of his own life experiences, interpretations of early Buddhism, and appropriations of the Japanese Buddhist response to modernity. Sheng Yen's Chan was unique in that he synthesized the early Buddhist *Āgama* teachings with the teachings embodied in the *Platform Scripture*. His formulation of Chan as a form of "Buddhist education" was uniquely modern, but at the same time not out of line with the adaptive nature of Chan in Chinese history. He took a critical stance against contemporary representations of Chan as antinomian and spontaneous, ungrounded in Buddhist doctrine, and appropriated, reinterpreted, and reinvigorated traditional teachings, especially in a time when these values and teachings had already lost much of their ideological vigor to meet the needs of modern times and revive Chinese Buddhism.

### Some Conditions that Contributed to the Formation of Sheng Yen's Thought

In order to appreciate Sheng Yen's Chan teachings, it is essential to examine some of the conditions that fostered and shaped his understanding of Buddhadharma. What follows is not a teleological generalization of how his thought has evolved or came to be. Rather, it tries to articulate certain shifts in Sheng Yen's thinking by examining his own writings in the context of his time. It would be easy to attribute his dual emphasis on doctrine and practice in his Chan teachings as stemming from his formative years of studying early Buddhism, or state that his modernization of Chinese Buddhism mimics the trends of post-Meiji Japanese Buddhism. His story is much more complex. What follows is a summary of this complexity, and my attempt to discern some general phases of his development.<sup>1</sup> These phases evolved over a span of some sixty years, and, as we will see, his Chan teachings evolved through trial and error.

Early writings from 1961-1969 (age 31 to 39) show Sheng Yen developing an understanding of Buddhism based almost exclusively on the *Āgamas* and the Buddhist vinaya. I characterize

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1. Elsewhere I have begun to elaborate on the threefold phase of his teachings; see Jimmy Yu, "Venerable Sheng Yen's Scholarship on Late Ming Buddhism", 2010. I have expanded on these three stages here to account for the evolution of his Chan teachings in the later part of his life.

this period as the Early Formation of his intellectual development. During these thirteen years, he published 11 books, two of which are works on comparative religion (comparing Buddhism and Christianity, published in 1956 and 1967). He stated that he wrote these comparative works to counter Christianity's criticism of Buddhism.<sup>2</sup> Part of what Sheng Yen was trying to do during this period is to respond to popular criticisms of Buddhism. But the majority of his writings were his own reflections and discoveries of the foundational teachings of Buddhism, which were developed from close readings and studies of the *Āgamas*. He produced two of his most influential works based on his studies of the *Āgamas* during this period, both were published in 1965: *Jielu xue gangyao* 戒律學綱要 (*Essentials of Monastic Precepts and Regulations*) and *Zhengxin de fojiao* 正信的佛教 (*Orthodox Chinese Buddhism*). Arguably, these two books represent the foundation of his understanding of Buddhist doctrine.

His purpose in writing these books was not to produce scholarly studies, but was partly to weed out what he perceived as deviant or heterodox teachings in Buddhism. He studied the *Āgamas* as an example of early Buddhist teachings in the hope of finding answers that would allow him to critique Taiwanese folkloric beliefs and misconceptions of Buddhism. *Zhengxin de fojiao* is a collection of seventy topics that respond to popular and mostly mistaken understandings of Buddhism. Master Sheng Yen formulated these topics by consulting the works of two Buddhist monks: Taixu 太虛 (1889-1947)<sup>3</sup> and his student, Yinshun 印順 (1905-2005),<sup>4</sup> two of the most influential figures who critiqued and change modern Chinese Buddhism.<sup>5</sup> In his 2007 preface to the English translation of *Zhengxin de fojiao*, Sheng Yen reflects, "Given the vague, confusing semblance of Buddhism which prevailed in Taiwanese society at that time and which had long been prevalent among ordinary Chinese laypeople, my efforts were directed at explaining and clarifying what Buddhism *really is*" (emphasis mine).<sup>6</sup> What is important to note is that Sheng Yen's early writings already exhibited a reformist attitude toward contemporary Chinese Buddhists. His polemical writings aimed at correcting misunderstandings of Buddhism and perverse practices. However, he was only in his thirties, and his own thought was still in the process of formulation.

His reformist attitude was no doubt influenced by Taixu, Yinshun, and, to certain extent, his own teacher, Dongchu 東初 (1908-1977). Taixu himself was viewed by many Buddhist contemporaries as dangerously rash. In retrospect, however, he forged a socially engaged form of Buddhism that continues to shape aspects of a revitalized Chinese Buddhism. Taixu's program for "Buddhist revolution" (*fojiao geming* 佛教革命) and his efforts to reformulate

2 See Sheng Yen, *Jidujiao zhi yanjiu* 基督教之研究 (1967, 1-2).

3 The most comprehensive study of Taixu is by Pittman (2001).

4 For Yinshun, see Bingenheimer (2009, 10:255-290) and (1998).

5 Sheng Yen states in the original preface of this book that he consulted these two figures works to formulate his questions; see Sheng Yen, *Zhengxin de fojiao* 正信的佛教 (1965, 3-4). *Zhengxin de fojiao* was originally a collection of essays published in a Taiwanese journal entitled, *Puti* 菩提 beginning in 1963. See Lin (2000, 1060).

6 See Sheng Yen, *Orthodox Chinese Buddhism* (2007, 9).

the saṅgha in his creation of “new monks” (*xinseng* 新僧) correlated with the general political, intellectual, and revolutionary atmosphere of the time. His reformulation involved broad structural (*zuzhi geming* 組織革命), intellectual (*xueli geming* 學歷革命), economical reforms (*caichan geming* 財產革命) that brought the monastics and the laity closer.<sup>7</sup> These endeavors correlated with his vision for a globalized form of Buddhism that emphasizes education and social activism that will eventually result in a new utopian civilization that will constitute a “pure land in the human realm” (*jianshe renjian jingtu* 建設人間淨土), the vision of which he advanced in 1930.<sup>8</sup>

This is not the place to fully explicate the relationship between the reformist ideals of Taixu and Sheng Yen. However, it is important to point out that while Sheng Yen recognized Taixu's important role in the formation of modern Buddhism, he also criticized Taixu for his inability to implement his reformist ideals.<sup>9</sup> He was also ambivalent toward Taixu's organization of Buddhism based on “traditional” or theological developments, as oppose to its historically oriented understanding using modern educational systems.<sup>10</sup> Sheng Yen was a practical man who sought ways to implement his visions. This was, perhaps, one of the key reasons that prompted Sheng Yen to personally to go deeper into the study and practice of Buddhism. This exploration led him to one of the deepest experiences in his life when at age 28 he met Chan Master Linyuan.<sup>11</sup> Sheng Yen wanted to deepen his experience, so he entered into a six-year solitary retreat, during which he focused on meditation practice and the reading and studying of vinaya and the *Āgamas*. His subsequent pursuit of a Ph.D. in Buddhist Literature at Rissho University can also be understood as a response to traditional ways of understanding Buddhism and a practical solution to his sense of crisis in Chinese Buddhism.

During his doctoral studies in Japan, Sheng Yen witnessed firsthand how Buddhism was being reformulated and interpreted. I characterize this period as the Integrative Years of his intellectual development, from 1969-1975. Three things transpired: Modern Japanese Buddhism provided a template for his own desire to strengthen Chinese Buddhism through education; his understanding of Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism was changed by his in-depth study of Ouyi; he was exposed to other forms of Buddhism beyond what he had known. Even though he was keenly aware of Taixu's endeavors to establish Buddhist seminaries and modernize Chinese

7 See chapters 2-5 of Pittman (2001).

8 See Pittman (2001, 39); Sheng Yen also notes this article, “Jianshe renjian jingtu lun 建設人間淨土論” in Taixu's writings; see Sheng Yen, *Fagushan de fangxian* 法鼓山的方向 (2007, 496).

9 See Sheng Yen, *Fagushan de chuancheng: chengxian qihou de zhonghua Chan Fagu zong* 法鼓山的傳承：承先啓後的中華禪法鼓宗 (2006, 45-46). Hereafter, *Chengxian qihou*.

10 See Sheng Yen, *Liu ri jianwen* 留日見聞 (1999, 117). Originally published in *Putishi* 菩提樹 (1975).

11 This experience refers to his initial enlightenment and is accounted in various writings of Sheng Yen; see, for example, Sheng Yen (1982, 4-5). *Sheng Yen fashi xuesi lichen* 聖嚴法師學思歷程 (1993, 53-54).

Buddhism, this knowledge was nothing compared to actually witnessing well run seminaries in Japan. At the same time he realized the daunting task Chinese Buddhism faced in trying to integrate Buddhism with the modern educational system. He was determined to improve the educational level of Chinese Buddhists.

Sheng Yen's study in Japan shaped his doctrinal understanding of Chinese Buddhism and led him to consider how he could formulate Buddhist teachings for the modern age. His 1971 MA thesis on *Tiantai zhiguan famen* 天台止觀法門 (*A Study of the Calming and Contemplation Methods of Tiantai School*) was a study of how Huisi's synthesis of doctrine and practice — from the perspective of the Tathāgatagarbha system of thought — showed how to move from Buddhist theory to realization.<sup>12</sup> The impact of this thesis can be seen in Sheng Yen's later interpretation of Chan, which is doctrinally associated with Tathāgatagarbha thought. His Ph.D. dissertation on the thought of Ouyi Zhixu, *Minmatsu chūgoku bukkyō no kenkyū* 明末中國佛教の研究 (*A Study of Late Ming Chinese Buddhism*), published in 1975, also made a lasting impact on his thought. In particular, Sheng Yen saw Ouyi as responding to the same crisis in the deterioration of Buddhism. Ouyi sought ways to integrate and reinterpret various Buddhist doctrines, particularly the Tiantai teachings, to strengthen Chinese Buddhism vis-à-vis the sociopolitical challenges of the times. He responded vociferously to the challenges of those Buddhists and non-Buddhists who misinterpreted and misappropriated Buddhism. He was a defender of the faith in every sense of the word. His response to misappropriations of Chan teachings was particularly strong.<sup>13</sup> Because he saw various problems with Chan adepts, Ouyi distanced himself from any particular Chan lineage even though he himself practiced Chan his formative period. Through the works of Huisi and Ouyi, Sheng Yen understood and appreciated the Tiantai tradition's the wealth of materials. He states:

Tiantai is an extremely influential school that systematized both India Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna teachings, and evolved its doctrinal position around the *Lotus sūtra* and indigenous Chinese thought... Tiantai thought is meticulously systematized, structured, and hierarchical in nature. Whether it is doctrine or methods of practice, it is tightly organized.<sup>14</sup>

Elsewhere, Sheng Yen stated that master Ouyi's *Jiaoguan gangzong* 教觀綱宗 (*The Essence of [Tiantai] Doctrine and Practice*) influenced him greatly, especially in its doctrinal organization

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12 See Sheng Yen, *Tiantai zhiguan famen* 天台止觀法門 (1979, 125-158).

13 Ouyi Zhixu engaged in extreme self-inflicted violent practices, such as blood writing, to publicly criticize what he perceived as unorthodox Chan practice. Blood writing for him was a way to create boundaries because it demarcated authentic spiritual attainment from the potentially destabilizing disorder of heterodoxy. He called those false Chan teachers as “followers of wild-wisdom” (*kuanhui zhi tu* 狂慧之徒); see for example, Ouyi Zhixu 藕益智旭, *Lingfeng zong lun* 靈峰宗論 (2004, 791).

14 See Sheng Yen, *Chengxian qihou*, (2006, 41).

of Chinese Buddhism.<sup>15</sup> Sheng Yen's study and commentary of this work allowed him to appreciate the unity of doctrine and practice, or in Tiantai parlance, *jiao* 教 and *guan* 觀, and integrate it into his own understanding of Chan.

In Japan, Sheng Yen witnessed the vibrancy in academic studies of Buddhism. His other writings during this time show his historical understanding of Buddhism's — especially Chinese Buddhism's — response to socio-political challenges through doctrinal shifts and social programs. One work is the *Shijie fojiao tongshi* 世界佛教通史 (*A History of Buddhism in the World*), published in 1969. The other is a translation of a 1971 multi-authored book on the history of Chinese Buddhism, *Bukkyō shi gaisetsu. Chūgoku hen* 仏教史概説. 中国篇, which Sheng Yen entitled, *Zhongguo fojiao shi kaishuo* 中國佛教史概説 (*A Brief History of Chinese Buddhism*), published in 1972. These two books, particularly the second one, strengthened his historical awareness of the development of Chinese Buddhism.<sup>16</sup> This growing awareness was already lurking in the background of his study of the *Āgamas* and the vinaya, where he sought solutions that would adapt to the modern age. He states, “Those who study the vinaya are naturally inclined to pay attention to [Buddhist] history. The vinaya and history are inseparable. The vinaya consists of documentation of the livelihood and activities of the saṅgha and its continuation. This is precisely history... I am neither a vinaya master nor a historian. But because of the decline of modern Chinese Buddhism, I engaged in the study of Buddhist history in the hope of finding inspiration to develop Buddhism in the future.”<sup>17</sup>

On the level of practice, Sheng Yen saw how the Japanese reinterpreted and integrated different forms of Buddhism into their society. On the whole, Sheng Yen was both delighted and astonished to witness ways in which various new Buddhist schools “advocated integrating Buddhist teachings into contemporary society...they ran youth groups, women's groups, and other groups based on age, with special activities geared toward their members,” and he lamented that “traditional Buddhism didn't do that. The new schools proselytized like Christians, knocking on doors to try to get people to join them.”<sup>18</sup> Sheng Yen also openly criticized Chinese Buddhists' misunderstandings of Japanese Buddhism and praised Japanese Buddhists' advancement of Buddhist studies and practice, especially in their focus on producing talented young monastics.<sup>19</sup>

During his breaks from graduate studies, he went to a variety of Buddhist institutions to participate and observe their practice retreats. He did retreats with various schools, including Japanese Zen, Shingon, and Nichiren Shōshu. He even participated in and observed various activities of the Japanese “new religions” (*shinkō shūkyō*). In the end he stuck with the Zen

15 See Sheng Yen, *Tiantai xinyao: Jiaoguan gangzong guanzhu* 天台心鑰: 教觀綱宗貫註 (2002, 6).

16 See Sheng Yen, *Zhongguo fojiao shi kaishuo* 中國佛教史概説 (1972, iii).

17 See Sheng Yen, *Sheng Yen fashi xuesi licheng* 聖嚴法師學思歷程 (1993, 88-89). Hereafter, *Xuesi lichen*.

18 See Sheng Yen, *Footprints in the Snow* (2008, 141).

19 See Sheng Yen, *Xuesi lichen* (1993, 102-114).

teachings of Rōshi Ban Tetsugyu 伴鉄牛 (1910-1996).<sup>20</sup> Ban Tetsugyu was distantly associated with the newly formed Sanbōkyōdan lineage 三宝教団, literally “Three Treasures Religious Organization,” because he was also a student of Harada Daiun Sogaku 原田祖岳 (1871-1961). Harada’s other student Yasutani Haku’un 安谷白雲 founded the Sanbōkyōdan lineage in 1954. Scholars have highlighted the controversial nature of this new lineage;<sup>21</sup> but what is important to note here is the distinct feature of this school’s emphasis on the integration of both Rinzai and Sōtō methods of practice. Sectarian boundaries between different schools of Japanese Buddhism are strong, even among different lineages of Zen. For a lineage to combine the teachings of two distinct lineages of Zen is unheard of in Japan. I have not yet found direct statements by Sheng Yen on the influence of the Sanbōkyōdan on his own teachings, but, as we will read below, it is highly plausible that Sheng Yen’s own combination of the *huatou* and *mozhaō* methods of Chan stems from what he had learned from Ban Tetsugyu.

These experiences in Japan left an indelible mark on Sheng Yen’s understanding of the historical developments of Chinese Buddhism and its doctrinal richness. He was also inspired by the ways in which the Japanese articulated the educational, social, and spiritual roles of Buddhism in modern life. He absorbed everything he could. The impact of these experiences began to blossom in December 1975 when he accepted the invitation of Dr. C.T. Shen, founder of the Buddhist Association of the United States, to serve as the abbot at the Temple of Enlightenment in the Bronx, New York.<sup>22</sup> In the next phase of his life, which I call the Maturing Years of Sheng Yen’s thought, from 1976-2009 (age 46-79), he began a slow process of formulating and articulating a practice-oriented form of Chinese Buddhism adapted to his contemporaries. This process of formulation ultimately led to his founding of a new school: the Dharma Drum Lineage of Chan.

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20 Ban Tetsugyu 伴鉄牛 was born in Hanamaki city (Iwate prefecture) June 4, 1910. He was ordained as a Sōtō Zen monk by Fuchizawa Chimyo Rōshi July 9, 1917, and received Dharma transmission (*inka*) from him. From 1931 till 1938, he practiced in Hosshinji temple. He became a student at a Sōtō Zen university, Komazawa University, in 1938 and graduated in 1941. After the war he became a tanto or head monk at Hosshinji in 1947, and also a tanto at Hoonji (Iwate prefecture) in 1948, and became a master of Toshōji. He also received Dharma transmission from Harada Daiun Sogaku Rōshi 原田祖岳 (1871-1961). Ban Tetsugyu established two temples in Japan, Kannonji (Iwate) and Tetsugyuji (Oita). On May 10, 1992 he retired from Toshōji and passed away on January 21, 1996. He was 86 years old. Ban Tetsugyu was known to be an extremely strict Zen teacher. For his teachings in Japanese, see Tetsugyu (1980) and (1983). There is also a three volume autobiography; see Tetsugyu (1976-1981).

21 For a discussion of the controversies of this lineage, see Sharf (1995, 22:3-4). The Sanbōkyōdan official webpage can be found here: [http://homepage2.nifty.com/sanbo\\_zen/top\\_e.html](http://homepage2.nifty.com/sanbo_zen/top_e.html).

22 For a brief background of C.T. Shen, see Sheng Yen, *Footprints in the Snow* (2008, 146).

## Sheng Yen's Career as a Chan Master

Sheng Yen's career as a Chan master began in America and kept on evolving until his death. In retrospect, his promotion of Chan and founding of a new school can be understood as his desire to reform Chinese Buddhism from when he was a young man. From this perspective, Chan Buddhism was merely a gateway front for him to reconstruct a more effective form of Chinese Buddhism for the modern world.

Unforeseen causes and conditions contributed to Sheng Yen's transformation into a "Chan Master." He originally came to America because many clerics in Taiwanese Buddhist circle viewed him suspiciously. In his twenties, Sheng Yen was a vociferous critic of traditional forms of Chinese Buddhism. Perhaps for this reason, once Sheng Yen left to study in Japan, the monasteries didn't want him to return. Most clerics were content with the way things were in Taiwan.<sup>23</sup> Soon after receiving his doctorate, Sheng Yen returned to Taiwan for a conference. There, he felt "Like a person who has just gotten a driver's license, but with no vehicle to drive."<sup>24</sup> When he returned to Japan after the conference, he received the invitation from C. T. Shen in 1975 to teach Buddhism in America. On December 10<sup>th</sup>, Sheng Yen arrived in New York, thus beginning the next chapter of his life.

Prompted by several young Americans, Sheng Yen began to teach Chan. His career as a Chan master began in early 1976 when he led his first intensive Chan retreats. Later, beginning in 1978, he started to also lead retreats in Taiwan. Within ten years, he was leading intensive Chan retreats in Europe and other parts of the world. His teachings, however, kept evolving through trial and error. In retrospect, he stated, "Americans are concerned with practical results. The most effective way [to teach them about Buddhadharma] is to teach *dhāraṇīs* or Chan meditation. . . I began to teach Americans the theories and methods of Chan practice based on the methods of practice that I have personally used in China and Taiwan. Only the format of my teachings comes from what I observed in Japan. It was just this quickly that I transformed from a recent doctor of literature into a Chan Master transmitting the teaching of Chan. Such a speedy transformation was not something I could have ever imagined."<sup>25</sup>

The evolution of his Chan can be divided into four periods: the Initial Period of Chan Teachings; the Period of Experimentation; the Period of Refining the Two Methods of Chan; and the Final Teaching of Chan as Education. During the last phase, he began to apply his Chan teachings to other areas of interest such as Buddhist education, social and philanthropic programs for Taiwan, and the practical and social issues of contemporary life. The last phase of his teaching of Chan as Education appropriated the discourse of "Establishing a Pure Land on Earth" (*jianshe renjian jingtu* 建設人間淨土). What follows is a general outline of this process; it is by no means an exhaustive study. Further research is required to refine these stages

23 See Sheng Yen, *Footprints in the Snow* (2008, 148).

24 See Sheng Yen, *Xuesi licheng* (1993, 151).

25 *Ibid.*, 155.

of his Chan development. I will attempt to contextualize Sheng Yen's reinterpretations of Chan and the various historical circumstances he was responding to in the process of outlining the different phases of his teachings.

## Initial Period of Chan Teachings

Sheng Yen's career as a Chan Master began in the United States. His first American students were a mixture of graduate students, artists, teachers, and people interested in martial arts. The first meditation class, which he called "Special Chan Class," was held on May 3, 1976 and the method taught was counting the breath.<sup>26</sup> There were only four students,<sup>27</sup> but within a year, Sheng Yen had a group of close to twenty students and they were already doing seven-day retreats at Bodhi House on Long Island.<sup>28</sup> They were open to anything he taught, and Sheng Yen drew on his experience gleaned from his solitary retreat in the mountains of Taiwan. He derived his retreat format from what he had observed under Ban Tetsugyu in Japan. Examples of this may be seen in his adoption of the signals and formalities involved with the beginning and ending of each period of sitting, how to enter the interview room, slow and fast walking meditation, etc. I suspect his teaching style was also influenced by what he had witnessed in Japan.

During this early period, Sheng Yen often used impromptu and extemporaneous methods to teach his students. However, Sheng Yen's Chan was both traditional and innovative. It was traditional in that he employed the typical Chan methods of sudden enlightenment, such as the "critical phrase" or *huatou* 話頭 and "silent illumination" or *mozhao* 默照 methods. However, it was also not traditional in the sense that, unlike the idealized type of Chan supposedly taught by pre-Song dynasty lineage masters (*zushi chan* 祖師禪), where there are no discussions of stages (*buluo jieji* 不落階級) or methods, he provided a clear path of practice based on an inseparability of precepts, meditation, and wisdom — the basic tenets of Buddhism that derived from texts such as the *Āgamas*. In other words, he incorporated what he perceived as "orthodox" (*zhengxin* 正信) Buddhism into Chan methods.

In one of his first "Special Chan Classes," he proclaimed to his students, "The type of Chan meditation that I teach now is different from that which is now taught in Japanese Zendo and practiced in Chinese monasteries. I call it 'Chan' simply to conform to the current American use of the term, but in fact I am transmitting the method of cultivation taught by the Buddha. This is the Mahāyāna Dharma Gate which enables you to become enlightened to the wisdom of the Buddha."<sup>29</sup> What Sheng Yen taught was an integrative, systematic, and practical approach

26 See Sheng Yen, *Footprint in the Snow* (2008, 157).

27 See *Chan Magazine* (1977, 1(1):2-3).

28 See *Chan Magazine* (1977, 1(2):4); Lin (2000, 1062).

29 See *Chan Magazine* (1977, 1(1):1-2).

which aimed at the realization of *śūnyatā*, or *wu* 無 (emptiness), as frequently mentioned in Chan discourse.<sup>30</sup> In his early retreat talks, Sheng Yen describes *wu* as:

[T]he supreme realization of the original nature of mind. It neither affirms nor negates any conceptual point of view; hence it does not need language for expression. One can exhaust the resource of language and still not express ultimate Chan. This is because Chan transcends knowledge, symbols — the entire apparatus of language. You may call Chan “emptiness,” but it is not emptiness in the nihilistic sense, of “there is nothing there.” You may call it “existence,” but it is not existence in the common sense, of “I see it, so it must be there.” It is existence which transcends the fiction of our sense impressions of the world: of sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and form. Yet this Chan is never apart from, is all of a piece with, our everyday world. It is indwelling in all beings, everywhere, at all times.<sup>31</sup>

Sheng Yen taught that Chan was neither separate from the world nor identical to ordinary existence. The essence of practice was not to seek some kind of enlightenment but to be free from the bondage of vexations (*fan'nao* 煩惱). When vexations are absent, the enlightened wisdom mind manifests naturally.

The rhetoric of nonduality and Chan's position of having no fixed teachings allowed Sheng Yen to present Chan as he saw fit. One of Sheng Yen's most radical teachings was his articulation of distinct stages in the process of self-cultivation. There is no precedence for this in the history of Chan. Yet, Sheng Yen articulated three specific stages that all practitioners must go through in order realize Chan. Ordinary people's minds, prior to practice, are usually scattered. Their sense of self is limited to and revolves around their bodies, viewpoints and ideas. After practice, one enters the first stage, where the body and mind are harmonized and stable. The second stage is the unification of subject and object. That is, the person achieves a unified and expanded sense of self that is one with the whole environment or universe. Some religions recognize this as the highest state of godhead, or union with god. The third stage is the letting go of even this unified self. Only when one has reached a unified mind will it be possible to experience the third stage, the state of *wu* or no-mind. This is the wisdom of no-self.<sup>32</sup> Sometimes Sheng Yen expands these three stages into four: scattered mind, concentrated mind, unified mind, and no-mind.<sup>33</sup>

30 See Sheng Yen, *Chan de tiyan chan de kaishi* 禪的體驗：禪的開示 (1980, 1).

31 See Sheng Yen, *Getting the Buddha Mind* (1982, i-ii).

32 Sheng Yen had articulated these stages on many different occasions in different times. The following are three examples at three different times, beginning with the earliest: see Sheng Yen, “Fojiao de xiuxing fangfa 佛教的修行方法” in *Fojiao rumen* 佛教入門 (1977, 188-189); this is from a 1977 talk; “Cong xiaowo dao wuwuo 從小我到無我”, in *Chan de tiyan: chan de kaishi*, (1980, 192-200); this chapter comes from a 1978 talk; *Getting the Buddha Mind*, (1982, 28), which comes from a 1979 talk.

33 Sheng Yen had taught these stages in the beginning of his career in America, but in terms of published evidence, it was not until 1978 that he formally introduced the stage of “concentrated

The articulation of these three or four stages of Chan practice is not only unprecedented both in traditional Chan of the lineage masters but also in the teachings of Sheng Yen's contemporaries. No one had presented Chan in this way in modern times, certainly not Suzuki Daisetsu Teitarō 鈴木大拙貞太郎 (1870-1966), the most famous proponent of Zen in America at the time; Shunryu Suzuki 鈴木俊隆 (1904-1971), who founded the first Zen monastery in America; Hakuyū Taizan Maezumi 前角博雄 (1931-1995), whose lineage gave rise to many American Zen schools; or Philip Kapleau, arguably the most famous Zen teacher in the United States at the time. Kapleau, a student of Rōshi Yasutani, belonged to the Sanbōkyōdan lineage and taught a form of Zen that incorporated both Sōtō and Rinzai methods. However, in their system, there is no systematization of practice into stages.<sup>34</sup>

Sheng Yen was all too aware of the historical development of Buddhism and Chan. He knew that the Chan rhetorical self-presentation as something “separate from learning and doctrine” (*jiaowai biechuan* 教外別傳), which modern scholars argue stems from the later Song period, does not reveal the many different interpretations of and debates about what Chan is in premodern and modern China. Nor does it sufficiently disclose the manifold doctrinal theories to which Chan is affiliated. Chan had no fixed teachings, and historically Chan masters responded to the needs of their students. In China, Chan masters were vinaya masters and exegetes of Tiantai or Huayan traditions. Sheng Yen's own formulation of stages of practice, though radical, can be justified by the historical development of the tradition.

Sheng Yen's employment of stages was a reaction against the kind of Zen promoted in the twentieth-century, characterized by a one dimensional portrayal of the tradition as a separate transmission apart from doctrinal learning. Recent scholarly studies of Chan have complicated this portrayal as an invention of Song dynasty masters in response to other traditions, most notably the Tiantai.<sup>35</sup> Yet, the modern propagation of this image of Chan can be traced back to the formation of Japanese Buddhism and modern Japanese sectarian scholarship (*shūgaku* 宗學). The main thrust of this representation is the division between doctrine and practice. The genesis of this phenomenon is complex, beyond the scope of this article, but evidence can be found in many post-Meiji Zen writings. For example in the works of Yamamoto Genpō 山本玄峰 (1866-1961), who is often considered by Rinzai Zen to be the second coming of the famous master, Hakuin Ekaku 白隠慧鶴 (1685-1768), it is stated that for a Zen monk the most important requirement is the mind for the way (*dōshin* 道心), and that engaging in “learning” (*gakumon* 學問) is unnecessary.<sup>36</sup> In other words, practice and doctrinal learning

mind” in the context of teaching the gong'an or huatou methods; see “First Lecture on Kung-ans,” in *Chan Magazine*, 1978-9, 1(7):20. By 1980, this system is already well in place in his training and he publically discoursed on it; see “The Practice of Chan,” in *Chan Magazine* (1981, 2(4):31-36). This article is a transcription of a public talk at Columbia University on November 6, 1980.

34 See Kapleau (1965).

35 See Foulk (1999, 220-294).

36 See “Famous Statements by Yamamoto Genpō” at <http://www.marino.ne.jp/~rendaico/>

are incompatible or at least unrelated to one another. This form of Zen was in fact what Sheng Yen witnessed in Japan during his Ph.D. years in Japan.

In one of the earliest teachings given in America, Sheng Yen introduces several Chan masters' works to his American students. He states, "My purpose... is to show that they [i.e., Chan masters] were not only highly accomplished practitioners, they were also well-versed in literature, history, and Buddhist scholarship. In their poems we can discern references to Chinese philosophical, religious, and literary history, as well as to the roots and theories of Indian Buddhism."<sup>37</sup> Here, Sheng Yen highlights the fact that most Chan masters were well-versed in not only Buddhist doctrine, but also secular learning. This image of the Chan master is, of course, very different than the received image of Chan masters eschewing words and language or that learning is unnecessary.

The aim of Sheng Yen's teaching to his American students is clear: Chan is not as antinomian and iconoclastic as we have been led to believe. Countering the skewed notions of Chan, Sheng Yen states, "There are no anthologies of Chan poetry in Chinese, Japanese, or English which detail the methods of practice and the experiences of Chan masters... On the other hand, there are numerous books in English that relate the episodes of *gong'ans* (Jp. *kōans*). The prevailing view that comes from reading these stories is that the practice of Chan is methodless, and since there is no way to describe the experience of Chan, it is suggested that we just go ahead and [ritually] practice by studying the *gong'ans*." Sheng Yen continues, "The purpose of these poems is different in that they specifically show you how to practice, what attitudes to cultivate and what pitfalls to beware of. Finally, they attempt to describe the ineffable experience of Chan itself."<sup>38</sup>

In these passages, we see that Sheng Yen's agenda is to balance out the lopsided presentation of Chan and Zen in America, a presentation that is largely filtered through Japanese Zen, which lacks stages of practice or any explicit doctrinal theories. Western conceptions of Chan and Zen are indebted to the writings of the Zen proselytizer, Daisetsu Teitaro Suzuki who elevated the "Zen experience" to its heights and divorced it from Buddhism. Suzuki advanced the notion that Zen eschews all doctrine, all ritual, and all institutions. In the final analysis, what he seems to be promoting was not a religion at all, but pure experience.

While modern scholars have certainly criticized this romanticized portrayal of Zen, they themselves have been working within the same paradigm set forth by Japanese sectarian scholarship. For example, Robert Sharf claims that the Chan and Zen rhetoric of enlightenment was never about experience, but ritualization. He clumps together Chan and Zen as a single

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kuromakuron/genpo.htm (accessed September 7, 2009). His exact words are: "学問はいくらでもせい。しかし学問を鼻にかけちゃいかんせ、坊主で何より肝腎なのは、道心じゃ。これに学問があれば鬼に金棒さ。"

37 The edited transcript of this talk can be found in Sheng Yen, *The Poetry of Enlightenment: Poems by Ancient Chan Masters* (1987, 2-3).

38 Ibid., 3.

entity — itself an irresponsible maneuver in terms of history and methodology — and claims that the Chan discourse of enlightenment is no more than ritual reenactment and rhetorical and political ploy, and that in examining Chan/Zen our own Cartesian paradigms have been projected onto Asian realities. He concludes ultimately that “enlightenment” is an empty claim — there is no valid way to assess any of Chan/Zen claim to an unmediated experience, just like, as he puts it, “there is no way to validate claims of UFO abduction accounts.” There is simply no phenomenological reality behind Chan awakening experience. For him, enlightenment is akin to, in Wittgenstein’s term, a “language game.”<sup>39</sup> Even though Sharf’s correction of Suzuki’s ahistorical characterization of enlightenment as some kind of “pure experience” is to be lauded, his radical reductionism of Chan to mere ritualism is deeply problematic. Like a man looking at an image of himself in a mirror; whether he rejects the image as himself or believes what he sees as himself, both conclusions are problematic because his subjectivity is inevitably founded on the relationship to the mirror. In this sense, Sharf’s rejection of Suzuki’s portrayal of Zen has actually made him heir to Suzuki’s legacy.

Sheng Yen distanced himself from the type of Zen prevalent in America. He was exceedingly aware of the limitations of Zen sectarian scholarship and its impact on modern representations of Chan and Zen as divorced from Buddhist doctrine. Sheng Yen sought ways to integrate both doctrine and methods in his teachings. The problematic portrayal of “doctrinal learning” as opposing “practice” fails to recognize that in Chan the union of the two was and is much more normative than we have been led to believe. If Chan truly eschews all verbal and conceptual formulations of truth in favor of direct, unmediated experiences, and if it thereby stands apart from the rich textual and doctrinal heritage of the rest of “Buddhism,” claiming not to need it, then the elaborate formulations of the path by Chan clerics of the past that fill the libraries of Buddhism — including both the diverse and intricate methods of cultivation accumulated over centuries and the theoretical implications thereof codified in subtle systems of doctrine — must be the result of our own imaginations or as Sharf puts it, our own “Cartesian projections.” But clearly this is not the case. The bifurcation of doctrine and method, or learning and practice, is an extreme interpretation of Chan. Nevertheless, it is one that has been proposed seriously by the Japanese and imbibed wholesale by modern scholars and western practitioners who fail to resist the lure of this normative paradigm.

Sheng Yen has noted in many places that despite Chan’s own rhetoric about its tradition, Chan masters have left us with the most extensive quantity of texts in the Buddhist canon. Sheng Yen observes that, “discourse records also testify that these Chan masters were well-versed not only in Buddhist teachings, but also in secular learning. Their claim of not establishing words and language is merely a preemptive measure for Chan practitioners not to attach to their teachings, lest the practitioners’ minds become ensnared. The Chan masters’ admonition also served the purpose of critiquing those Buddhist teachers who only know how to do research in and write commentaries on the Buddhadharma.”<sup>40</sup> Sheng Yen took the *Platform Scripture*

39 See Sharf (1998).

40 See Sheng Yen, *Chengxian qihou* (2006, 48-49).

as the main representative Chan text, which explicitly and implicitly cites numerous Buddhist scriptures to establish its legitimacy.<sup>41</sup> One of the core messages of this text is the need “to penetrate preaching and to penetrate the mind” (*shuotong ji xintong* 說通及心通). That is, to be fully conversant with doctrine and at the same time to have deep realizations into the nature of reality. From this perspective, Sheng Yen's insistence of the union of doctrine and practice is in accordance with the teaching espoused in the *Platform Scripture*.

Sheng Yen's focus on the *Platform Scripture* is evident in his collected works. The text, for example, was his very first teaching in America.<sup>42</sup> However, it is clear that he understands the text through the work of Heze Shenhui 荷澤神會 (668-760), one of Huineng's key disciples who purportedly promoted the former's teaching on sudden enlightenment. Sheng Yen saw Shenhui as a link from Huineng's teachings to future generations of Chan practitioners:

Chan master Shenhui plays the role of someone who *inherits the wisdom of the past and inspires the future generation* of Chan practitioners. After Huineng passed away, even though he had quite a number of disciples, no one can compare with Shenhui. He was fully conversant with both practice and doctrine, and well read in Confucian and Daoist works. Moreover, he was fully immersed in the collections of Buddhist scriptures, commentaries, and monastic codes, and at the same time socially and politically enthusiastic about the welfare of the nation (emphasis mine).<sup>43</sup>

In modern scholarship, Shenhui plays an ambivalent and polemical role as a proselytizer in Chan Buddhism.<sup>44</sup> However, Sheng Yen saw him as an exemplar, not only in his dual emphasis in doctrine and practice, but also in his ability to translate his understanding of Buddhadharma into social action. Shenhui, for Sheng Yen, was a defender of the Chan orthodoxy.

In terms of the actual Chan methods of practice, Sheng Yen advocated the “*Wu huatou*”<sup>45</sup> method the early retreats as a way to bring practitioners from the unified mind to experience a glimpse of this nature of reality. These methods were given on retreats to practitioners who

41 See “Liuzu tanjing li suo jian qita jingdian de sixiang 《六祖壇經》裡所見其他經典的思想” in Sheng Yen, *Chan yu wu* 禪與悟 (1991, 310-318).

42 See footnote 57.

43 See Sheng Yen, *Shenhui chanshi de wujing* 神會禪師的悟境 (2000, 4-5).

44 See McRae (1987, 227-278).

45 The “*Wu*” means no, lacking, or non-existence. The “*wu huatou*” refers to the first *gong'an* or public case in the *Gateless Gate* (*Wumen guan* 無門關), a classic collection of 48 *gong'an* cases edited by Wumen Huikai 無門慧開 (1183-1260) during the Song dynasty. For an English translation, see Cleary (1999, 65-112). The whole case involves a monk asking Chan Master Zhaozhou Congshen 趙州從諗 (778–897), “Does a dog have buddha-nature or not,” to which Zhaozhou replied “*Wu*” or “No.” The meaning of this reply and the use of this *huatou* is explained by Shengyen in *Getting the Buddha Mind*, (1982, 41-46). This particular *huatou* was later widely advocated by Chan Master Dahui Zonggao 大慧宗杲 (1089-1163). In the latter part of his career, Sheng Yen advocated the exclusive use of this particular *huatou* over others.

were sufficiently focused. The teaching on *huatou* was not taught publically, but individually in personal interview. The first retreat was held from May 12 to 19, 1977.<sup>46</sup> Retreatants used a variety of methods to first calm the mind, and then move on to the *huatou* practice. Everyone had a different *huatou*. Sheng Yen also used “extemporaneous encounters” (*jifeng* 機鋒) on an impromptu basis, during walking meditation, or suddenly calling a student out and requesting an answer to a meaningless question in order to challenge the student, pushing him or her to generate the “doubt sensation” (*yiqing* 疑情).

For Sheng Yen, a *huatou* is merely a tool. It is a critical phrase from a “public case” or *gong’an*, which is a record of an incident that usually involves a Chan awakening experience. Or, a *huatou* may stem from a real life situation. The point in meditating on a *huatou* or a *gong’an* is to generate an existential dilemma, a sense of wonderment, a yearning to resolve a question. The greater the sense of wonderment, or “doubt sensation,” the greater the break through into awakening. In a state of unification, when the doubt suddenly shatters, all attachments are let go of and the “self” vanishes. With no attachments whatsoever, this is the Buddhist experience of things as they are, without the coloration of self-referentiality.

However, Sheng Yen distinguishes the “live” *gong’an* or *huatou* from the dead one. A *huatou* “comes to life” only when it has become part of the practitioner’s life or arises from real life situations. Moreover, Sheng Yen also articulated different levels of *huatou*, from shallow to deep, so there are stages to one’s realization according to the use of different *huatous*. During the early retreats, he typically engaged his students with living situations to urge them on to insight into no-self.<sup>47</sup> Several retreat reports were published in the *Chan Magazine* and in his book, *Getting the Buddha Mind*. The testimonials detail the lively interactions between Sheng Yen and his students and the insights that the students gained.

One distinctive feature to note is that Sheng Yen did not teach the *huatou* method in the way the Japanese Zen masters taught the *wato* (Japanese pronunciation of *huatou*) and *kōan*, which is taught in a systematic manner. Due to the influence of Hakuin Ekaku — as mentioned above, who was the purported reviver of the Japanese Rinzai tradition — Zen practice became

46 The first group of retreat participants wrote retreat reports. Seven reports were published in *Chan Magazine* (1977, 1(3):1-13). The dating of this retreat comes from one of the retreatants, see Galgoczi (*Chan Magazine*, 1978, 1(6):12).

47 See Sheng Yen, “First Lecture on Kung-ans,” in *Chan Magazine* (1978-9, 1(7):16-20, especially 18-20); also in *Chan de tiyan*, (1980, 139-44). This talk was delivered on June 25 and July 2, 1978, see the news items in *Chan Magazine* (1988, 1(5):1). Sheng Yen distinguishes several levels of live *huatou* from examples of his students using the method. The earliest written document on Sheng Yen’s teaching on *gong’an* is June 1977, during his second talk on the *Platform Scripture*. The talk is appears in *Chan Magazine* (1977, 1(4):15-20). In 1983, the *Chan Newsletter* has a section on two distinct ways of working on the *huatou*, the peaceful and forceful ways, see *Chan Newsletter* (1993, 29); there is also a whole issue on *huatou* practice, see *Chan Newsletter* (1983, 30).

a curriculum consisting of a specific number of *kōans* which a Zen student must “pass” through in the curriculum.<sup>48</sup> Yet, a Zen student is typically taught “to be one” with the *kōan* he or she is working on in order to reach a unified state. Even today, there is little mention of giving rise to the “doubt sensation” from the practice of *wato* and *kōan* in the Japanese Rinzai or in the Sanbōkyōdan traditions. Sheng Yen drew inspiration elsewhere on the use of the *huatou* method. I suspect he must have drawn from his own personal experience in solitary retreat, from his experience with Chan Master Linyuan, and from his readings of Chinese Chan masters' works and Japanese scholarly studies concerning them.<sup>49</sup> Yet, it seems that by 1979, he was already formulating his own hierarchy of meditation practices, distinguishing them into three stages of “Worldly Chan”; “World Transcending Chan”; and the “Simultaneous Worldly and World Transcending Chan.”<sup>50</sup>

Sheng Yen also taught a host of other methods on early retreats. One retreatant says that he received a different method on each retreat he attended.<sup>51</sup> On the very first retreat that Sheng Yen ever led, the student in question received the method of “What is *wu*?” after his mind was sufficiently settled. On the second retreat, Sheng Yen told him to simply “observe” without giving rise to wandering thoughts, at all times and not focus on anything. This method had no name, but later on the student realized it was *mozhaō* 默照 or silent illumination. On the third retreat, he was asked to contemplate and visualize the white bones (*baigu guan* 白骨觀), which involves contemplating one's own body decomposing, rotting, and eventually turning into white bones. This is traditionally one of the methods in the five points of stilling the mind (*wu tingxin guan* 五停心觀). On the next retreat he was asked to use the method of contemplating sounds, the method associated with Avalokiteśvara or Guanyin (*guanyin famen* 觀音法門). All the while, during the retreats, Sheng Yen continued to extemporaneously engage students with “live *gong'ans*,” compelling them to answer and helping them to have break-through experiences.

In another way that differed from Japanese Zen, Sheng Yen presented Chan practice as inseparable from the three studies (*sanxue* 三學) of precepts, concentration, and wisdom in Buddhaharma.<sup>52</sup> This framework was established both during and outside the retreat setting. For example, the teaching on repentance during retreats was taught in the context of upholding precepts and moral principles. In his first “Special Chan Class,” he taught not only meditation but also basic Buddhaharma.<sup>53</sup> In his talks on the *Platform Scripture* on Sunday mornings, he

48 Hori (2003).

49 For his relationship and experience of enlightenment under Linyuan, see Sheng Yen, *Footprint in the Snow* (2008, 78-88, especially 85).

50 See Sheng Yen, *Xueshu kaolun* 學術論考 (2007, 57-61).

51 The following information comes from my October 2009 interview with Daniel B. Stevenson who was Sheng Yen's earliest students.

52 In 1979 Sheng Yen also founded the “Institute of Three Studies” at Nongchan Monastery, Taiwan; see Lin (2000, 333).

53 The contents of his Special Chan Class is not recorded anywhere, but I was able to confirm with

emphasized not just the iconoclastic behavior of Chan masters, but the theoretical underpinning of *samsāra*;<sup>54</sup> the importance of wisdom;<sup>55</sup> and the relationship between self-nature and vexations.<sup>56</sup> At the same time, Sheng Yen offered ten-week long beginner's meditation classes, covering the basics of Buddhist doctrine and meditation. During regular Sunday talks he gave formal commentaries on scriptures, such as the *Platform Scripture*, the *Heart sūtra*, and the *Sūtra of Complete Enlightenment*.<sup>57</sup>

In retreat Dharma talks, Sheng Yen emphasized the importance of meeting certain requirements, such as great faith (*da xinxin* 大信心) in oneself, the method, and the teacher; great vows (*da yuanxin* 大願心) to help all beings and the attainment of buddhahood; great, ferocious determination (*da jingjinxin* 大精進心) to offer oneself to the practice; and great doubt (*da yiqing* 大疑情) from the process of investigating one's *huatou*.<sup>58</sup> But these teachings were always carefully implemented within the context of the general Mahāyāna practice of benefitting sentient beings. He taught slow repentance prostration practice as a supporting method on the first retreat, which remains a uniquely consistent method throughout his Chan career. Such a method is not generally taught at other Zen centers and is absent in historical Chan records. This practice came from his own experience during his six-year solitary retreat in Taiwan.<sup>59</sup> Repentance prostration practice and making vows are historically associated with the liturgical tradition in Chinese Tiantai Buddhism. These ritual practices involve recitation of the liturgy in conjunction with carefully orchestrated prostrations to clear obstructions in intensive *samādhi* practices.<sup>60</sup> Sheng Yen himself engaged in repentance rituals in the beginning of his solitary retreat. Master Ouyi also advocated this practice. In similar ways, Sheng Yen taught repentance prostrations on Chan retreats as a way to clear the mind. Practitioners did not recite anything but only focused on a sense of contrition or humility by recognizing karmic obstacles acquired on the path. Sheng Yen often talked to the retreatants as they prostrated. He

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four participants of the very first two classes: Daniel B. Stevenson, Rikki Asher, Paul Kennedy, and Buffe Laffey. My conversations with them about the first Special Chan Class ranged from October 21 to the 28, 2009.

54 See *Chan Magazine* (1977, 1(3):18). The talk itself dates to June, 1977.

55 See *Chan Magazine* (1977, 1(3):20; 1977, 1(4):17-18). The talk itself dates to June, 1977.

56 See *Chan Magazine* (1978, 1(5):16-17). The talk itself dates to July, 1977.

57 For the *Platform Scripture*, see *Chan Magazine* (1977, 1(3):14-20). This is the first of a series of talks on the *Platform Scripture*, which is dated to June 19, 1977. For the talks on the *Heart Sūtra*, see *Chan Magazine* (1980, 2(1):20-26). The first talk actually began in November 1979. He began talking on the *Sūtra of Complete Enlightenment* from 1982-1985; see Sheng Yen, *Complete Enlightenment* (1997, 6).

58 See *Chan Magazine* (1982, 2(9):30-36; 1983, 2(10):25-30). These talks were later edited into the book, *Getting the Buddha Mind*.

59 See Sheng Yen, *Footprint in the Snow* (2008, 121-122).

60 See Daniel B. Stevenson, "The Four Kinds of Samādhi in Early T'ien-t'ai Buddhism" in Gregory (1986, 45-97).

spoke about the incongruity of one's words and actions and how they harm other people. Many would be brought to tears. As a result retreatants would be left with a very settled mind.<sup>61</sup> Later on, Sheng Yen also stratified this method into stages, from the shallower level of repentance to a deeper level of unification or meditative absorption, which fits his four-stage scheme of mental cultivation.

## The Period of Experimentation

The intensive retreats in the 70s were more spontaneous. Beginning in 1980, however, Sheng Yen began to lead four regular retreats each year. He bought a building in Elmhurst, New York, but it was in poor condition. It was only in May, 1981, that the Chan Center was fully renovated. Sheng Yen was able to offer more classes to his students.<sup>62</sup> The more he taught, the more his teachings became clarified and structured. He also explored many other forms of meditation practice, in the hope of systematizing his own teachings.

In 1980 Sheng Yen's exploration of methods of practice led him to publish an anthology of teachings from Chan masters, beginning with Bodhidharma 菩提達摩 (ca. 6<sup>th</sup> century) and ending with the recent master, his own great grand master, Xuyun 虛雲 (1839-1959). In his preface, he refuted the mistaken interpretation that "Chan is not established in language." He pointed out the necessity to understand Chan as part of the framework of the three studies of precepts, concentration, and wisdom.<sup>63</sup> In 1984 he expanded the definition of "Chan" to meditation in general and edited an anthology of masters whose teachings represent the contemplative tradition of Chinese Buddhism. Both non-Chan and Chan masters are included in this volume. This book collects all canonical references of the 111 meditation masters. It shows the shifting values and thought of what these teachers conceived of as practice.<sup>64</sup> In 1987 a selection of Chan masters' writings from the first book, entitled *Poetry of Enlightenment*, was published in English.<sup>65</sup>

The understanding and purpose behind these works is the same: Sheng Yen wanted to balance what he perceived as the lopsided form of Zen taught by some of his contemporaries, which overemphasized studying old *kōans* and seeking enlightenment without a foundation in the three aforementioned studies. Instead, he stressed a more variegated side to Chan by selecting these 111 masters; he showed that there are no fixed Chan teachings or approaches to practice. At the same time all practices are not separate from the cultivation of correct understanding, attitudes, and methods that are grounded in Buddhadharma. In the *Poetry of Enlightenment*, he stated, "the prevailing view is that there is no way to describe the experience

61 These descriptions come from my conversations with early retreatants in October, 2009.

62 See Lin (2000, 335-337); *Chan Newsletter* (1981, 13).

63 See *Chanmen xiuzheng zhiyao* 禪門修證指要 (1980, 1-4).

64 See *Chanmen lishu ji* 禪門驪珠集 (1984).

65 See Sheng Yen, *Poetry of Enlightenment* (1987).

of Chan, it is suggested that we just go ahead and practice by studying the *kung-ans*. The purpose of these poems is different in that they specifically show you how to practice, what attitudes to cultivate, and what pitfalls to be aware of. Finally, they describe the ineffable experience of Chan itself.<sup>66</sup>

Indeed, Sheng Yen did not shy away from articulating and presenting conceptual formulations of Chan practice to his students. Correct view is more important than misguided practice. He was a prolific writer. He also encouraged his students to articulate their experiences in words and publish them in the *Chan Magazine*. Within a year of arrival in America in 1976, he started *Chan Magazine*, which incorporated the edited transcripts of his teachings and reports by his students, the *Chan Newsletter* in 1979, which included edited transcripts of his teachings and news items and upcoming events, and other Chan works which were previously only accessible in Chinese. He continued to write in Chinese on various aspects of Buddhadharma. Sheng Yen showed that Chan was not separate at all from the rich textual and doctrinal heritage of Buddhism. He elaborated formulations of the path, the diverse and intricate methods of cultivation, and the theoretical implications codified in subtle systems of doctrine. For him, “Chan does not have any fixed methods of practice; as long as there is proper guidance by a good teacher, all methods can be included into Chan.”<sup>67</sup> As he taught and wrote, he began to systemize his teachings.

Sheng Yen taught many different methods privately on retreats, but during the late 80s, he broadened the scope of what would typically be considered to be “Chan” methods. He introduced to his students the wealth of teachings from the Buddhist canon. During this time, Sheng Yen began to offer to his students in New York “Wednesday Special Chan Intermediate Classes” on meditation, wherein he introduced various meditation and contemplation (*guan* 觀) methods described in the scriptures and Chan discourse records. They included the silent illumination method (*mozhao* 默照),<sup>68</sup> which he had already taught before, contemplating mind (*guanxin* 觀心),<sup>69</sup> the method of relinquishing (*she* 捨),<sup>70</sup> and compassionate contemplation (*cibei guan* 慈悲觀).<sup>71</sup> By 1998, he was teaching a whole host of methods derived from the scriptures, and methods included in the intermediate class were the bright moon *samādhi* (*mingyue sanmei* 明月三昧) and ocean-seal *samādhi* (*haiyin sanmei* 海印三昧) to name a few.

66 See Sheng Yen, *Poetry of Enlightenment* (1987, 3).

67 See Sheng Yen, *Chanmen xiuzheng zhiyao* (1980, 4). The first time Sheng Yen led retreats exclusively devoted to these methods was in New York Chan Meditation Center.

68 For silent illumination, see *Getting the Buddha Mind*, (1982, 75-88).

69 The analogy he gave was like a cat watching for mouse to appear. The mind is alert and open, every so wakeful. If a mouse were to appear, referring to a thought, the cat or mind would instantly be aware of it.

70 This method of “relinquishing” everything was drawn from Hanshan Deqing’s discourse records; see *Chan Newsletter* (1982, 24).

71 For compassionate contemplation, see *Chan Newsletter* (1983, 27). The talk was given in May 1982.

Not all of these talks were edited and published. His continued to present his basic teachings on meditating on the breath.

The method of “ocean-seal *samādhi*,” for example, was a popular method that many people used and liked. The “ocean-seal” is an enlightened realization that all phenomena mutually interpenetrate and do not obstruct one another. It is a state that contains all dharmas or phenomena.<sup>72</sup> Medieval Buddhist masters of the Huayan tradition used the ocean-seal *samādhi* as a central symbol illustrating the essential meaning of the Buddha's enlightened awareness. Fazang asserts that the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* was preached while the Buddha was still absorbed in this *samādhi*.<sup>73</sup> While there are various commentaries or explanations of its meaning, as a meditation method, however, the canonical references are scarce. The only reference of anyone who actually practiced this method in the entire Buddhist canon is a 13<sup>th</sup> century master named Mengshan Deyi 蒙山德異 (1232-?), and still the method per se is not described.<sup>74</sup> Sheng Yen must have taught this method based on his own understanding based on commentaries on the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*. He explained this method as a form of contemplation (*guan* 觀), wherein the self along with external phenomena (for example problems one may encounter) should be perceived as bubbles on the surface of a vast infinite ocean. From the perspective of the ocean, these “bubbles” are only temporary manifestations of Buddha-nature and poses no problems at all. He particularly stressed the applicability of this method in daily life when encountering difficulties.<sup>75</sup>

These and other methods represent an experimental phase in Sheng Yen's Chan teachings. Sometimes they were given as methods during retreats, while other times they were given as perspectives that one can adopt especially when encountering difficulties. However, by mid-90s, no one was really using these methods anymore. One of the reasons is that Sheng Yen began to encourage his students to focus exclusively on *mozhao* and *huatou* methods.

## Period of Refining the Two Methods of Chan

Changes in Sheng Yen's teachings are the result of many different factors. First, Sheng Yen responded to the lack of structure in traditional Chan teachings. He began to realize the problems that arose in students who focused too much on the strange behaviors of Chan masters in *gong'ans*. Second, he was requested by his student John Crook to lead “Sōtō-like”

72 See, for example, Fazang's 法藏 (643-712) *Huayan youxin fajie ji* 華嚴遊心法界記 (T 1877, 646b24).

73 See Gregory (1991, 154-157).

74 See *Changuan cejin* 禪關策進 (T 2024, 1099a-1099c26) by master Zhuhong 株宏 (1535-1615).

75 See *Chan Magazine* (1992, 7-8). My dating of the teaching of this method is much earlier than 1992. It was probably 1988 or 1989. This is based on my own memory of when this method was taught, in conversation with Harry Miller, another student who attended the Wednesday Special Chan Intermediate Class.

retreats in England beginning in 1989. John Crook had been practicing the Tibetan Mahamudra (*da shouyin* 大手印) and Japanese Shikantaza (*zhiguan dazuo* 只管打坐) methods prior to practicing Chan with Sheng Yen. Many of John's students also practiced Shikantaza. Thus beginning with the second retreat in England, Sheng Yen focused on the teachings of *mozhao* for the retreatants. His close monastic attendant's experiences with *mozhao* during this time also contributed to his frequent teaching of this method.<sup>76</sup> As a result, by the mid-90s, the method of *mozhao* began to be more systematized.

There is a vast difference in the way Sheng Yen taught in the early years and in the late 80s and 90s. In the early years, each student practiced his or her own method. There were no public discussions of methods on retreats.<sup>77</sup> However, by the early 90s everyone began with the breath method, and once the mind was sufficiently settled, retreatants were given either the *huatou* or the *mozhao* method. Sometimes they were given one of the methods taught in the "Wednesday Special Chan Intermediate Class." This would typically happen on the fourth day of the retreat. This format lasted until the end of 1997 when Sheng Yen began to lead distinct "*mozhao* retreats" and "*huatou* retreats" at the request of his students.<sup>78</sup> The students felt that it would be better if each retreat was devoted solely to one method of practice so they can get deeper into the practice. Otherwise, by the time students began using *huatou* or *mozhao* on the fourth day, the retreat would end in a few days.

As stated above, Sheng Yen first introduced the method of *mozhao* or silent illumination on one of his earliest retreats in the States.<sup>79</sup> *Mozhao* was taught by Hongzhi Zhengjue 宏智正覺 (1091-1157) in the Song dynasty but was a method that disappeared into obscurity in the Chinese Chan tradition after several generations. Sheng Yen is known as a reviver of this method. It was one of the methods that he discovered and practiced in his solitary retreat. He once said that he simply sat, without a method, without abiding anywhere, yet let the mind to be clear of everything. Then when he had read Hongzhi's teachings, he realized what he had been practicing.<sup>80</sup> This was the way Sheng Yen first taught *mozhao*, without stages:

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76 His attendant monk of this time, Guogu 果谷, was one of the first monastics who practiced this method beginning in the late 80s. Guogu often received instructions privately from Sheng Yen.

77 This was clarified with Daniel Stevenson, who is one of the earliest retreatants Sheng Yen led in the States. Conversation on Oct. 22, 2009..

78 See Sheng Yen, *Liangqian nian xingjiao* 兩千年行腳 (2000, 253). Elsewhere it is stated that specific retreats dedicated to one method, either *mozhao* or *huatou* began in 1998, see *The preface of Sheng Yen fashi jiao huatou chan* 聖嚴法師教話頭禪 (2009, 3).

79 See *Chan Newsletter* (1980, 10).

80 This statement comes from a personal conversation with Sheng Yen sometime in the mid-90s. The conversation was recorded, Mickey Disend was the interviewer. I was the translator. However, the talk, to my knowledge, was never published.

Silent illumination is actually the most direct method, because Chan is not something that you can use your mind to think about. It's not something that you can use any words or form of language to describe. The method is simply to do away with any method of practice. Use no method as the method itself... The silent illumination method is when your mind simply doesn't have any thoughts. At that moment you just put down everything, and that is the state of Chan itself. Silent doesn't mean falling asleep. That's why we have to follow the word "silent" with the word "illumination," that is, your mind is very clear.<sup>81</sup>

Sheng Yen also warned about this method:

[I]n the beginning stage, people need to practice in a quiet and peaceful place. That's why most of the practitioners of the Caodong sect preferred to practice in the mountains, as far away from other people as possible. This has been the case in China as well as in Japan. For this reason this method of silent illumination may not be suitable for the majority of people, because in our modern society it would be quite difficult for every practitioner to go off into the mountains. So I personally don't often use this method to teach others, at least in the beginning stage. I would only tell a few to use this method. There is another defect of this method. If the practitioner is not using it right, his mind may be in a state of blankness, and he assumes that this is what is meant by "silent." If this is the case, he can never practice well.<sup>82</sup>

Sheng Yen stated that silent illumination or *mozhao* is an elusive method and for this reason it "may not be suitable for the majority of people." As seen in one student's recollection (see above), it was a formless method. The student was asked to be clear of whatever is going on without giving rise to any wandering. Interest in *mozhao* was generated when *Getting the Buddha Mind* was published in 1980, in which Sheng Yen comments on the *Inscription on Silent Illumination (Mozhao ming 默照銘)* by Hongzhi, the proponent of *mozhao* in the Song dynasty. On November of 1980, Sheng Yen was interviewed by Lex Hixon on WBAI radio station about *mozhao*.<sup>83</sup>

It is worth noting, however, that sometime in the late 80s, possibly during his Intermediate Chan Classes, he began to widely teach this method to many people by clarifying its subtle "stages" and concrete "methods" for practitioners to engage with when using this "methodless method." The first published English work on a systematized presentation of the *mozhao* method into three stages (of observing the body, observing the mind, and the state of enlightenment) is in 1993. However, this formulation kept on evolving from what he had taught before.<sup>84</sup> By

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81 See *Chan Newsletter* (1980, 10:1-2).

82 Ibid., p. 23.

83 See *Chan Magazine* (1980, 10).

84 For a more systematized presentation of *mozhao* in the mid 90s, see Sheng Yen, "Shikantaza and Silent Illumination," in *Chan Newsletter* (1995, 106); the talk dates to December 1993.

1995, he formulated a fourfold stage. The first stage is observing the body sitting; the second is a unified state of body, environment, and mind sitting; the third is the contemplation of emptiness. The fourth is the ineffable state of enlightenment.<sup>85</sup>

By the late 90s, Sheng Yen started to attract several *vipassana* teachers from the Insight Meditation Society in Boston. They came on retreats and invited Sheng Yen to give talks and lead shorter retreats in Massachusetts. As a result of these encounters, the stages of Sheng Yen's *mozhao* method changed again. This time, he sought to differentiate *mozhao* from *vipaśyanā*.<sup>86</sup> He clarified that while *mozhao* originated from the Indian Buddhist practice of "stillness" (*zhi* 止) and "discernment" (*guan* 觀) or *samatha* and *vipaśyanā*, it was thoroughly Chinese. *Mozhao* is rooted in Huineng's teaching that concentration (*ding* 定) and wisdom (*hui* 慧), or *samādhi* and *prajñā*, the fruition of *samatha* and *vipaśyanā*, were one and the same: the intrinsically still mind is the essence of wisdom, and wisdom is natural function of the still mind. *Mozhao*, then, is a method that simultaneously cultivates *samatha* and *vipaśyanā* and must be realized in the activity of daily life — not on the cushion. This is evinced in 1998 when, at the invitation of the Insight Meditation Center of Boston, he articulated a fivefold stage *mozhao*. The five stages are: relaxing the body and mind; observing the totality of the body; contemplating the environment as one's body; contemplating the vastness of the self and external environment; realizing the simultaneity of stillness and luminosity, *samādhi* and *prajñā* and the absence of self.<sup>87</sup> These stages are clearly stated in his 2008 book entitled, *The Method of No-Method*, which is based on two *mozhao* retreats in 1998 and 1999.<sup>88</sup>

Along with his teachings on *mozhao*, the *huatou* method also became standardized. Instead of the spontaneous *gong'ans* he used to present to his students on retreats, Sheng Yen formulated several stages to the practice of this method. By 1993, his formulation of the method began to imply stages of practice, but the teaching was not fully set. Basically, he taught that the practitioners must stay with one *huatou*, the practice of which he calls "investigating the *huatou*" (*can huatou* 參話頭) until the end of his or her life, even though there is no doubt sensation. However, he does indicate that some people merely "recite the *huatou*" (*nian huatou* 念話頭). But if one can truly investigate the *huatou*, until the point where nothing can interrupt practice, then this is the stage of "observing the *huatou*" (*kan huatou* 看話頭).<sup>89</sup> In his 2009 book on *huatou*, which is based upon four *huatou* retreat talks, Sheng Yen clarifies four stages of practice. The first stage is "reciting the *huatou*"; the second is "questioning the *huatou*"; the third is "investigating the *huatou*"; and last is "observing the *huatou*." This formulation differs

85 See Sheng Yen, *Illuminating Silence* (2002, x: 99-103).

86 Hereafter I will use the Romanized Sanskrit word, *vipaśyanā*, because Sheng Yen was primarily using the term in the Chinese context, which follows the Indian Buddhist usage as opposed to the modern American phenomenon of "insight meditation" that is based on the Theravāda tradition.

87 See Sheng Yen, *Liangqian nian xingjiao* 兩千年行腳 (2000, 90-1 and 98-114).

88 See Sheng Yen, *The Method of No-Method: The Chan Practice of Silent Illumination* (2008).

89 See Sheng Yen, *Chan de tiyan* (1980, 328-330).

from the 1993 version in that the former still considers observing the *huatou* as a stage before the initial break through experience of enlightenment. Whereas in the latter, Sheng Yen states that “before penetrating through the fundamental barrier (*bencan* 本參) [of ignorance] the stage is called investigating the *huatou*; after the fundamental barrier is broken through, that is the stage of observing the *huatou*.” Sheng Yen defines breaking through the fundamental barrier as seeing the “Buddha-nature or self-nature... a state where all vexations have stopped and dropped away.” However, because vexations will return, and that this is the only initial break through, one still need to continue to practice.<sup>90</sup>

## Final Teaching of Chan as Education

After the purchase of the mountain site in Taiwan in 1989, Sheng Yen's involvement increased dramatically in building what later became known as Dharma Drum Mountain. This project taxed his physical health. With this grand building project, he became busier and began to spend less time with retreat participants. This meant that he no longer used the extemporaneous, “pressuring” strategy on his students. Instead, he spent more time defining the two methods of *huatou* and *mozhaio* into stages in the hope that his students might follow his instructions and deepen their practice on their own. As a result, his Chan teachings were clarified and more accessible, and these teachings began to take the form of socially engaged moral education. He continued with his other interests in education and the vinaya as well.

The Chinese Buddhists' focus on education during the Republican era really stems from the traditional Chinese sense of self-cultivation or moral education that is deeply rooted in Confucian traditions. Historically the perpetuation and prosperity of Buddhism in China has always depended on the extent to which it was able to demonstrate itself as a viable intellectual and social institution vis-à-vis traditional Chinese values that were held to be essential in moral transformation. In the Confucian system of values, education has always meant much more than purely intellectual training and the development of skills. True Confucian education cannot be separated from the moral improvement of the individual as a social being. The term *xue* 學, “study” or “learning,” and *jiao* 教, “doctrine,” have had strong ethical implications. They refer to a number of areas of development: a total process of acquisition and interiorization of the norms of the right way of life; the study and memorization of texts that exemplify those norms; and, at the higher level of “study,” the creation of an elite whose members — either as local leaders or as administrators — will be qualified to further the application of these values.<sup>91</sup> Education had a comprehensive ideal of moral training and an ideological-pedagogical aim for the masses. In this sense, traditional Confucian “education” meant education for all levels of the population. Given this context, Sheng Yen's focus on education was warmly received in Taiwanese society and established as a viable means for improving modern Chinese society.

90 See Sheng Yen, *Sheng Yen fashi jiao huatou chan* 聖嚴法師教話頭禪 (2009, 34-35).

91 See Zurcher (1989, 19-56).

Buddhism in China has historically provided an alternative moral educational program for the Chinese and, at the same time, supported the existing Confucian institution in educating society.<sup>92</sup> However, in modern times with the declining influence of Confucianism as a viable tradition, Sheng Yen promoted education in the broad sense of moral cultivation which would act as a vehicle for promoting Buddhism. He attributed his work in education to his master, Dongchu. He states: “The reason we now have a mountain site called Dharma Drum Mountain is primarily because of my teacher, the late Master Dongchu. In his will, he expressed the hope that I would locate a natural hillside to establish an institute for Buddhist education. The details of this will are in my Chinese article ‘The Difficulty in Repaying One’s Gratitude to the Master’ . . . I share Master Dongchu’s vision that Buddhism has no future without Buddhist education.”<sup>93</sup>

The works of Taixu, Yinshun, and Dongchu were undeniably important in the development of Sheng Yen’s thinking, but his own vision of what education should be was directly derived from his own life experience and understanding of Buddhadharma and Chan. As mentioned above, his critique of Taixu and others lay in their inability to put their ideas into practice. For this reason, Sheng Yen strove to make his socially engaged educational vision into formal, teachable programs. Thus he institutionalized a new school of Chan — the Dharma Drum Lineage — to integrate the observations and methods of his predecessors as well as those of other Buddhist traditions. He stated: “I studied these two thinkers’ (i.e., Taixu and Yinshun) systematization from the perspective of someone within the Chan tradition living in the modern world. I hope to show that Indian Buddhism, as the wellspring of all later developments of Buddhism, later developed into the Northern and Southern transmissions.”<sup>94</sup> Sheng Yen strongly noted that he was driven by what he saw as a deep crisis (*weiji gan* 危機感) in the affairs of Chinese Buddhism.<sup>95</sup> Many Chinese practiced other forms of Buddhism — from Tibet or South Asia — rather than Chinese Buddhism. Shengyen believed that Chan was the core of the Buddha’s message, so it was imperative to establish a new school of Chan to bring this message to world.

Sheng Yen began to take a more active role in spreading the Dharma around the world, and he expanded his teachings to include ordinary people who might not be able practice Chan intensively. Sheng Yen emphasized the moral educational nature of Chan. He articulated a three-fold educational program of (1) extensive university education (*da xueyuan jiaoyu* 大學

92 Zurcher has demonstrated convincingly the social and educational functions of the Buddhist institutional in China beginning in the Tang times; see Zurcher (1989).

93 See Shengyen, *Chengxian qihou* (2006, 13); “Shi’en nanbao 師恩難報” was originally published as an article in *Zhongguo fojiao* 中國佛教; it is now included in the anthology entitled, “Diaonian, youhua 悼念・遊化”, in section 3 of the *Complete Collection of Dharma Drum* (2007, 9-36).

94 See Shengyen, *Chengxian qihou* (2006, 46).

95 *Ibid.*, 23-26.

院教育); (2) extensive universal education (*da puhua jiaoyu* 大普化教育); (3) and extensive caring education (*da guanhuai jiaoyu* 大關懷教育).

The first refers to education in the general sense of schooling and acquiring knowledge and professional skills. The second refers to the formal spiritual practice of Buddhadharmā, specifically Chan practice. The third refers to teaching Buddhist values through socially engaged activities, such as ritual services and disaster relief work.<sup>96</sup> These three fields of education represent a total process of social transformation of the individual. Shengyen regarded these educational programs as practical applications of Chan Buddhism. They gave equal emphasis to understanding and practice, the heart of Buddhadharmā and the cure for the suffering of the world.

While his aim to make Buddhism more relevant for modern time stems from his exposure to his predecessors and his own experience, the process of integrating moral education and Chan, culminating in the establishment of the Dharma Drum Lineage, evolved slowly. Already as early as 1986, we can find evidence of Sheng Yen's interpretation of Chan as a form of moral education. He states: "Chan practice is a continual process of mending [our actions of body, speech, and mind]; it is a form of education."<sup>97</sup> Chan as education can be seen as a way to move Chan from the retreat setting out into the world. Partly this was prompted to his increasing involvement with the building of Dharma Drum Mountain. He tirelessly worked to represent Dharma Drum Mountain as an educational complex for the study and actualization of Buddhist wisdom. This task took center stage at the expense of focusing exclusively on Chan retreats. In 1992 he began asking his students to interview retreatants on his behalf, at least for the first interview.<sup>98</sup> His health began to decline as his influence in Taiwan became strong. He spent more and more time reaching thousands of people in Taiwan by giving lectures on socially engaged Buddhism that employs Chan principles, and by promoting the vision of establishing a Pure Land on Earth that uses Buddhadharmā to purify people's minds.

After the purchase of Dharma Drum Mountain in 1989, Sheng Yen began to describe his teachings as "Buddhist education," including Chan practice and his interest in precepts.<sup>99</sup>

96 The first time Sheng Yen discoursed on these three fields of education is 1994; later the talk appeared in a small booklet, *Fagushan chuan fayin* 法鼓傳法音 (1994). The booklet is now incorporated in the *Complete Collection of Dharma Drum*, see Sheng Yen, *Fagushan de fangxiang* 法鼓山的方向 (2007, 79-80 and 130-136).

97 See Sheng Yen, *Nianhua weixiao* 拈花微笑 (1986, 236).

98 Although during this time Sheng Yen did conduct group interviews, sometimes up to five or six retreatants in the same interview room to resolve their questions or difficulties from practice. He began this in New York. Later he also let his disciples at Nongchan Monastery in Taiwan conduct interviews. For the dating of allowing his disciples interview, see Lin (2000, 683).

99 In 1991, he held the first transmission of the bodhisattva precepts at Chan Meditation Center in New York. The precepts he transmitted were a modified form based on the five precepts, ten virtues, and the four great vows. These are subsumed under the "three collective precepts" (*sanju*

He engaged in all of his Dharma activities under the banner of “Uplifting the Character of Humanity” (*tisheng ren de pinzhi* 提昇人的品質) and “Establishing a Pure Land on Earth” (*jianshe renjian jingtu* 建設人間淨土). These two slogans were the principle (*linian* 理念) of his vision for Buddhist education. However, Chan was the axis around which all of the Buddhist educational activities revolved, even as his teachings evolved into a more socially engaged form of Buddhist moral education. For example, in 1993 and 1994, he lectured six times at the Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall (Guofu jinian guan 國父紀念館) on “*Vimalakirtī Sūtra* and Daily Life” in order to promote the vision of building a Pure Land on Earth.<sup>100</sup> The *Vimalakirtī Sūtra*, of course, long favored by Chan practitioners, promotes the idea that pure lands of Buddhas are created by recognizing the intrinsic purity of one’s own mind.<sup>101</sup> Sheng Yen stated explicitly that his notion of “establishing a Pure Land” was based on this scripture.<sup>102</sup>

Sheng Yen also promoted many programs in his vision of building a Pure Land on Earth. One program is known as the “Four Fields of Cultivating Peace” (*sian* 四安), which involves developing peaceful mind, peaceful body, peaceful family, and peaceful activity. A peaceful mind lies at the core of Chan practice. Here was another way for Sheng Yen to promote Chan as moral education for the masses which aligned with his vision for “extensive caring education.”<sup>103</sup> Likewise, in promoting environmental concern, he stressed that these activities “must accord with the spirit, methods, and principles of Chan...these programs that we’re engaged in are ‘Chan in action.’”<sup>104</sup> This formulation of education is markedly different from other contemporary Buddhist organizations such as Foguang Shan 佛光山. Xingyun 星雲 (1927-), the founder, also promotes education and building a Pure Land, but his pedagogical formulation of education is oriented toward a generalized Buddhist etiquette and ritual conduct, not tied to any deep meditation experience, much less on the practice and experience of Chan.<sup>105</sup>

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*jing jie* 三聚淨戒) of a bodhisattva: To practice all virtues; to deliver all sentient beings; and to cultivate all precepts; see *Pusa jie zhiyao* 菩薩戒指要 (1995, 4). In 1990 and 1992, he hosted two international scholarly conferences on Buddhist ethics for the modern time. These efforts were ways for him to integrate precepts into his larger reconstruction of Chinese Buddhism for the modern age.

100 Sheng Yen gave a series of six lectures for an audience of 2000 to 3000 Taiwanese people; see Sheng Yen, *Weimo jing liujiang* 維摩經六講 (1995, 10-11).

101 See chapter one in the *Vimalakirtī sūtra*. For an English translation, see Watson (1997, 17-31).

102 See Sheng Yen, *Weimo jing liujiang* (1995, 9-10).

103 See Sheng Yen, *Fagu jiafeng* 法鼓家風 (2005, 12).

104 See *Fagushan de fangxian*, vol. 2 法鼓山的方向 II (2005, 110).

105 See Chandler (2004, 120-121).

## Conclusion

Sheng Yen's construction of Chan Buddhism evolved gradually and naturally as a reformulation of his predecessors' teaching and practice, and as a response to the currents of Buddhism in America and Taiwan. His Dharma Drum Lineage is firmly established in the dual emphasis of doctrine and practice, especially the teaching embodied in early Buddhism and the *Platform Scripture*. The later development of presenting Chan as a form of education stems from his perception that Chan is the most representative school of Chinese Buddhism and that to revive Chinese Buddhism,<sup>106</sup> Chan must be repackaged for an audience steeped in Chinese moral education. The way to do this was to institutionalize his teaching as a new Chan school, not unlike how modern Japanese Buddhist sects are institutionally tied to monasteries.

Sheng Yen's construction of Chan was in no way a rejection of Chan as a "special transmission outside of the doctrine learning, which does not establish or depend on words and language." He was a guardian of the kind of Chan orthodoxy that was inseparable from Buddhism and freely utilized doctrinal learning. It is important to recognize that today we are too familiar with a skewed understanding of Chan as a renunciation of Buddhist learning, abrogating doctrine and learning. We are less familiar with Chan in its conscientious promotion of a commodious Buddhist orthodoxy; as the reverent guardian of learned tradition, and as the generous sponsor of ever more expansive and accommodating designs of the path. This side of the story is apparent — especially when we venture beyond later Japanese reconstruction of Chan history. The Chinese Buddhist canon itself is a witness to the diversity and complexity of Chan teachings. Master Sheng Yen's life and Chan teaching exemplifies the adaptability and power of Chan to speak to modern times. He encouraged Chan adepts not to feel alienated from their Buddhist heritage. Indeed, they should fully avail themselves of this learned tradition, for what is genuinely distinctive about Chan is not its simple rejection of traditional Buddhist texts, doctrine, and path but its intensification, enhancement, and experiential fulfillment of the orthodoxy conveyed therein.

Sheng Yen vigorously advocated the systematic integration of traditional and orthodox Buddhist doctrines and practices into a unified, but variegated form of Chan. The basic doctrinal tenets of his Chan are founded on the *Āgama* scriptures, but the methods of practice are thoroughly "sudden" (*dun* 頓), in the fashion of Chinese Chan. In fact, this advocacy is not completely out of line with the traditional Chan position as embodied in the earliest Chan texts

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106 Although Taixu has also stated that Chan is the most representative tradition within Chinese Buddhism, his understanding of Chan is not limited to the Chan of the "Chan School" (*chanzong* 禪宗). A full discussion of the differences in the understanding of Chan between Taixu and Sheng Yen is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is an important area of research that I will return to in the future. For Taixu's understanding of Chan as the unique feature of Chinese Buddhism, see Taixu 太虛 (1889-1947), "中國佛學特質在禪" in *Taixu dashi quanshu* 太虛大師全書 (1956, section 1:549-637).

and later works as well, and can be found in such axioms as “the unification of Chan and the teachings” (*chan jiao heyi*), “from Chan stems doctrine” (*cong chan chujiao* 從禪出教), and “use the doctrine to awaken to the principle” (*jiejiao wuzong* 藉教悟宗).<sup>107</sup>

In his book on *Inheriting the Past and Inspiring the Future*, Sheng Yen proclaimed the aims for establishing the Dharma Drum Chan lineage: (1) to systematize and present an integrated form of Chan that harmonizes Buddhist theory and practice; (2) to integrate Chan Buddhism with traditional forms of Buddhism found in different parts of the world and further their strengths.<sup>108</sup>

These two aims evolved naturally as the result of Sheng Yen’s years of trial and error in teaching his students. In the same booklet, he reflects on one of the strengths of modern Japanese schools and their ability to perpetuate themselves vis-à-vis the challenges of the contemporary understanding. He states “The Japanese schools of Jōdo shū (Pure Land School), founded by Hōnen (1133-1212), and the later Jōdo shinsū (“True Pure Land School”), founded by Shinran (1173-1263), are particularly influential in modern Japan. Together, these two Pure Land schools constitute nearly half of all Japanese Buddhists. Numerous monasteries have sectarian affiliations with Pure Land Buddhism. In fact every Japanese Buddhist temple and monastery was and is institutionalized and affiliated with a particular sect.”<sup>109</sup> One cannot help but wonder to what extent his experiences in Japan influenced his own decision to institutionalize a new Chan school.

Sheng Yen’s Chan teachings evolved from spontaneity to full systemization in a period of several decades. There were many transformations in his teachings, from adhering to traditional methods pressuring students, finding new approaches of practice, returning to two distinct Chan methods of *huatou* and *mozhao*, and finally refining them as the corporate identity of the Dharma Drum Lineage.

The success of Sheng Yen’s effort lay in his ability to create a form of Buddhism that is receptive to people today by reinvigorating and appropriating traditional Chinese moral education and articulating an effective means for self-transformation. Sheng Yen’s educational

107 See Sheng Yen, *Chengxian qihou* (2006, 48); the earliest reference to this phrase, “to use the doctrine to awaken to the principle” (*jiejiao wuzong* 藉教悟宗) is found in a text attributed to Bodhidharma 菩提達摩, *Discourse on the Two Entrances and Four Practices* (*Er’ru sixing lun* 二入四行論), which is embedded in the eighth-century work by Jingjue 淨覺 (ca. 688-746), *The Record of the Masters and Disciples of the Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* (*Lengqie shizi ji* 楞伽師資記, T 2837, 1285c12). The *Discourse on the Two Entrances and Four Practices* speaks of essential gates to reach awakening: entering through principle and entering through practice. Entering through principle is to realize awakening through the teaching embodied through the Buddhist scriptures. This is hardly the “separate from learning and doctrine” (*jiaowai biechuan* 教外別傳).

108 See Sheng Yen, *Chengxian qihou* (2006, 54-55).

109 *Ibid.*, 42-43.

projects and socially engaged Buddhism incorporated traditional Chinese values into of the panorama of Buddhism. Thus in Taiwan he succeeded in adapting and continuing Chinese tradition. In the West, he is perceived more as someone who clearly articulated the stages of Chan and how Chan differs from Japanese Zen. The ingenuity of Sheng Yen was that, in the midst of this process of reconstructing Buddhism, he was able to retain the inclusive and adaptive nature of Chan without losing the traditional Chan identity — a path to sudden enlightenment.

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