

ENCOUNTERS  
*with* Master  
Sheng Yen 一

## **Encounters with Master Sheng Yen**

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## Preface

In an effort to share with the public the thoughts and life experiences of Master Sheng Yen, founder of Dharma Drum Mountain, the Sheng Yen Education Foundation embarked on a series of talks beginning in September of 2009. Fifty-three talks were given at the Sheng Yen Lecture Hall (located in the official residence where Master Sheng Yen lived in his final years). The talks were titled “Countless Teachings through His Living Example – Personal Encounters with Master Sheng Yen,” and we invited all his monastic and lay disciples to share with us their stories about Shifu, how he taught them through his living example and words. Listening to these speakers’ personal accounts of the interactions between teacher and student allowed the audience to commemorate Master Sheng Yen’s journey, and once again hear his gracious teachings.

The talks include stories of Master Sheng Yen’s everyday life, how he would give detailed guidance to his disciples regarding their speech and actions. There are also accounts of his travels to share the Buddhadharma locally and overseas, reaching out to the public, and teaching them skillfully and flexibly based on the existing circumstances. Even in his later

years when he became quite ill, he was an example of how to face life and death with freedom and ease. All of these examples, no matter how small the story or how short the conversation, radiate with Shifu's compassion and wisdom. They inspire us to vow to "Emulate the worthies and sages, practice what the Dharma has taught us, and repay through our heartfelt gratitude."

At the end of the series, we felt that the interactions from these true life stories were brimming with the Dharma spirit. Hence the audiences initiated and organized transcripts of the talks, to be compiled and published by the Sheng Yen Education Foundation, hoping to allow the general public to learn from the wisdom of Master Sheng Yen, so that together we can realize his vision to create a pure land on this earth.

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## **Forgetting himself in propagating the Dharma**

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Guo Yuan Fashi

*Shifu was very patient. He would handle all situations flexibly, and with a good degree of tolerance.*

*Whatever was to be done for the benefit of the Buddhadharma, for sentient beings, wherever it was needed, he would handle it with ease, even when he wasn't feeling well.*

*This helps us understand what it means to "forget himself in propagating the Buddhadharma." It was very touching, very moving, for everyone.*

## **Introducing the Speaker**

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### **Guo Yuan Fashi**

Guo Yuan Fashi is currently the Chan Hall Master at Dharma Drum Mountain. In 1985, he was ordained under Master Sheng Yen at the Chan Meditation Center in New York. Over the years, he successively served as Shifu's attendant, English translator, as well as Abbot of the Chan Meditation Center and Dharma Drum Retreat Center. Fashi frequently joined Shifu on his tours around the world to spread and teach the Dharma. He has fond memories and a deep appreciation for Shifu's devotion to spreading Chinese Buddhism.

In 1983, I had my first seven-day Chan retreat with Shifu at the Chan Meditation Center (CMC) in New York. The CMC was then located at its former address, 90-31, Corona Avenue, Queens, New York City. Being with Shifu in the United States was a different feeling from being with him in Taiwan. Generally speaking, it was quite hard for disciples in Taiwan to see Shifu or have an opportunity to speak to him. There was a little distance between us. But that's not what Shifu wanted. Rather, it was the natural result of the local culture and environment.

## An approachable Shifu

It was different in the United States. Since the CMC was smaller, as long as Shifu was around, one could see him every day. When a lay visitor came to the CMC, they would be able to see Shifu if they could hang around for a while. They could also seek Shifu's advice anytime. One would feel that Shifu was very approachable. Shifu also had an easygoing personality. Sometimes a lay visitor would press the door bell, and if we were not around or he happened to pass by, Shifu would answer the door himself.

His style of handling things was highly flexible.

The first time I joined a seven-day Chan retreat at the CMC, there were only about 20 retreatants. At mealtimes, everyone would eat at the same table with Shifu. Shifu would sit at the head of the long table, and we would sit on the sides, quite close to each other. My seat was very close to Shifu. Naturally, I helped Shifu by taking food and putting it in his bowl. At the end of the meal, Shifu gave us a Dharma talk saying, “Please don’t assume you can read other people’s minds.” This type of spontaneous teaching was a natural display of Shifu’s compassion in daily life.

There were also some Westerners participating in the Chan retreat whose minds were not very refined, and their actions were a little rough. When they served themselves rice, the rice would stick to the ladle. So they would hit the ladle against the bowl—hard, hoping that the rice would come off. However, if you use the rice ladle to smack the bowl, the bowl will eventually crack. Shifu mentioned this several times. Having seen what happened, I thought Shifu would be unhappy. Therefore, I bought two dozen thick

bowls, usually used in restaurants, for the CMC on my subsequent visit. Thereafter, Shifu frequently mentioned this incident, and said that since I was the one who had cracked the bowls, I had donated the bowls. It seemed that Shifu was telling us that the problem was not due to the thickness of the bowls, but rather the state of our minds, being either coarse or refined. Chan practitioners should always be mindful and maintain a state of clarity.

After I moved into the CMC, there was a retreatant who was deeply moved by Shifu during a seven-day Chan retreat. That retreatant got hold of a pen and a piece of paper, and started writing a message. Then he folded it up into a paper box and pasted on the wall. It said “Offerings to Shifu.” When I saw that, I took the paper box down. Nothing like that had ever happened at a seven-day Chan retreat before, and Shifu thought I’d done the right thing. Thereafter, I began to pay more attention to similar matters or any unexpected incidents, especially during seven-day Chan retreats. This became a kind of habit with me, my normal practice.

In 1987 the CMC was moved across the street. The space was slightly bigger, and could accommodate more people. So the number of attendees at a seven-day Chan retreat could be increased from a little over 20 to 36. The new place was originally a “dollar store,” similar to those “ten dollar shops” in Taiwan, selling general merchandise for everyday life. Before moving in, we spent a long time cleaning up the place, clearing out several big trucks worth of junk. Whenever Shifu was in New York, he would work together with the rest of us. Shifu would be wearing his traditional, tunic-style “work robe,” working tirelessly, even though both his legs were as thin as bamboo sticks. When we saw that, it was hard to bear, yet it was very moving. That’s how our Shifu was.

## With the right attitude, it’s no problem

After leaving home to become a monastic, I frequently had the opportunity to travel with Shifu. Sometimes other lay people would join us. Occasionally, everyone would have different opinions. This is particularly true when running a Chan retreat. If another practitioner and I had

a difference of opinion, Shifu would usually ignore the matter. Although Shifu was clearly aware of the problem, he would not interfere. In fact, the matter would resolve itself over time, and everyone would get over it. Shifu was very skillful in managing his disciples, and knew how to deal with problems amongst them easily. Sometimes it's better not to interfere.

Here's an example. Around the year 2000, Shifu traveled to Malaysia to share the Dharma. A lay disciple suggested that I should go along. In fact, I had not been assigned any tasks. However, out of respect for that disciple, Shifu asked me this question right in front of him, "Would you like to go to Malaysia?" I replied, "What would I do there? If there isn't any particular task for me, then I don't need to go." After hearing my response, Shifu replied, "OK. That's fine." Shifu would not insist on his way when handling any matter. Although he knew I didn't need to go, to respect the opinion of that lay disciple, he still asked for my opinion. I think that if I had said, "I would also like to go," Shifu would have agreed to let me come along. That's how Shifu harmonized everything he

handled with a win-win approach.

In 1997 we purchased the Dharma Drum Retreat Center (DDRC) in upstate New York. At the beginning I was responsible for many things, large and small, during any Chan retreat. Whether preparations and set-up, or acting as the lead in chanting, as retreat monitor, interviewer, even translator, my tasks were diverse. So I was very familiar with the workings of the DDRC, inside and out. Thereafter, for a period of time, a foreign monastic came to head up the DDRC. When he led a retreat, we had many differences. As a result, I created some vexing situations for him. After that Chan retreat, Shifu called me in to talk and gave me the message that we should listen to whoever was leading the retreat. After that incident, I always remember this principle. Regardless of who is responsible for the event, all I need to do is to collaborate and everything will be fine. After I went back to Taiwan, there were occasions when we invited other monastics to lead Chan retreats at our Chan Hall. I always applied this same principle, and everything was easier and more relaxed. If, at any

point in time, I realized that I was making comparisons, I would readjust my mindset and devote myself wholeheartedly to the approach and teaching method of the monastic leading the retreat. As long as the mindset is correct, everything will be fine. There won't be any vexations, and one will learn a lot.

## Shifu: Free and at ease everywhere

Shifu put many stories that involve him and me into his books. He would tell the stories in more detail than I could remember. For example, during our pilgrimage to India in 1989, Shifu checked into a reasonably large hotel, with top-flight facilities. It was said that the room in which Shifu was staying had previously been used by a local raja. The bedroom was facing a pool. Due to the fact that the bedroom had not been occupied for a long time, it smelled musty. Shifu had respiratory problems, and his lungs weren't very good, so we swapped rooms. As a result, I got the chance to become a "raja" for a night. The next morning I told Shifu, "In Hinduism, there is a god called (literally, in Chinese transliteration) "damp goddess," and

last night, I became a “damp god.” Later, Shifu included that joke in his book. He had a good sense of humor.

In April of that same year, Shifu accepted an invitation from Dr. John Crook for the first time and went to Wales, England, to lead a seven-day Chan retreat. John had some other matters to attend to on the day we arrived, so he arranged for someone else to pick us up at the airport. The journey from the airport to Wales took us seven hours, and the car was quite old, so all along the way the smell of petrol wafted into the car. Shifu was sitting in the front seat while I sat in the back. I felt really uncomfortable and wound down the car window to breathe some fresh air. But I noticed that Shifu was totally at ease, with no sign of discomfort at all. I thought Shifu would also be uncomfortable. But why did he seem so free and relaxed, so totally unperturbed? I guess that must be because of his achievement in Chan cultivation.

In 1992 we went to Wales for the second time. At the end of the seven-day Chan retreat, we went to London and put up at an accommodation arranged by John Crook. I

was sharing a large bedroom with Shifu. There was a bed with a comforter for Shifu, while I slept on the floor. Even though the floor was carpeted, it was still very hard. All I had was a thin quilt. The weather was kind of cold. As a result, I was tossing and turning all night and couldn't sleep. Even though I tried to relax, it was still impossible. The next morning, Shifu asked me, "What were you doing last night?" I said, "I couldn't sleep, because the floor was too hard, and it was cold." After we toured the British Library, I don't know how Shifu arranged it, but we were put up at the home of a Malaysian of Chinese descent. That night, I slept very well. From that incident, we can see that Shifu really takes care of his disciples.

There was another episode that Shifu also documented in a book. When we visited the British Library, because Shifu had a doctorate, and his stature as a Chan meditation teacher, plus a recommendation from Dr. John Crook, we were granted permission to view many ancient Chinese manuscripts. It was a rare opportunity to see the original Dunhuang manuscripts from China. We were really moved. In his book, *North South East West*,

Shifu wrote, “On the back of one of the handwritten scrolls from Dunhuang, there was a listing of the monks of a monastery, similar to modern day household registration records. During that period, the Tang Dynasty, that list was called the ‘monastics registration record.’ The Dharma name of one of the monks on the list was Sheng Yen, and his lay family name was Zhang. Guo Yuan Fashi was the first to notice this. It was interesting to actually find some ancient person in the Dunhuang manuscripts with the exact same Dharma name and family surname as mine.” When you see something like that in an old manuscript, what comes to mind? The phrase, “Returning to this world by virtue of their vows,” right? At that time, I also thought that Shifu had come back to this world through his vows. But Shifu just thought it was interesting—nothing special.

In May of 2003 I accompanied Shifu to Moscow. Shifu was invited to lead a five-day Chan retreat. We stayed on the outskirts of Moscow, where the living conditions were not very good. The room was moldy and musty, and no one had lived there for a long time. The blankets were also damp and heavy. Even though Shifu was not feeling very

well, he still appeared to be quite relaxed and at ease under those circumstances. It was as though there was nothing you could possibly be upset about.

Shifu's approach to guiding sentient beings was one of great patience, flexibility and acceptance. It made us understand the true meaning of "Forgetting one's self to spread the Buddhadharma." Of course, this came from Shifu's years of practice and experience in cultivation. Once, Shifu recounted his early days of solitary retreat at Meinung. Inside the tiny little room, he never felt stranded or trapped. Instead he felt as though all the buddhas and bodhisattvas were close at hand, accompanying him on his journey, his body and mind unified with the universe. Oftentimes, when we're in a different environment, we feel different. For example, walking through a narrow alley, or inside a room with a low ceiling, we naturally feel suppressed. However in Shifu's case, he would still be living at ease, wherever he went, even though his physical body was not doing too well. That's because he was giving his all for the Buddhadharma, and for sentient beings. This was very touching for all of us.

Previously, when I was Shifu's personal attendant, I always felt that his shoulder bag was very heavy. I had looked inside his bag, and there were many things, including medicated oil and all sorts of medication donated by lay people. I asked Shifu, "There are many things in your bag that you don't need. Why are you still carrying them around?" Shifu said, "We prepare for emergencies. Whenever we need it, we can use it." Although Shifu didn't use these things personally, he still put them in his bag. That was because he wanted to help those who might need those things at any time. And Shifu's medicines were said to be quite effective. Fascinating!

## Supporting the younger generation, great breadth of mind

Shifu's support in grooming the younger generation was something that inspired us. He did his best to develop their potential, especially hardworking young people with talent. During his early days in China, Shifu had come across some young monks and supported them to study at a university in Sri Lanka. Whenever young monks

visited the Chan Meditation Center, Shifu would be very friendly to them and provide them with the best assistance he could. At times, even if we knew someone was of less than stellar character, or was even a bit selfish, instead of rejecting them Shifu would still support them. That's how big a heart Shifu had.

In the early 1990s, Shifu sent Guo Hui Fashi and me for further studies in Thailand. Below are the words of encouragement he gave us.

*To Guo Hui and Guo Yuan, the benevolent ones :*

*You will both be heading to Thailand to study. I believe you will treat each other like brothers of the same Dharma teacher, lineage and school, becoming fellows in life and death, and as one in conduct and practice, looking after each other and providing mutual encouragement.*

*Guo Yuan has more life experience than Guo Hui. But Guo Hui has been ordained longer than Guo Yuan. You both hold key monastic positions in Taiwan and the*

*United States, respectively, and are going to Thailand as my representatives and as representatives of the monastic orders in both countries. Learn as much as you can in your studies and through life experiences, while improving yourself with respect to the vinaya, samadhi and wisdom. You will thus be well-prepared to come back and contribute what you have learned. Here are some expectations and words of encouragement to both of you:*

- 1. Learn the strengths of their Dharma approaches that will be beneficial to the monastic sangha in our country.*
- 2. Learn about the strengths of how Wat Phra Dhammakaya operates, spreads the Dharma, attracts followers, and guides lay people.*
- 3. Observe the monastic disciplinary, comportment and education systems in Thailand.*
- 4. Learn more about their guidance for individual and group meditation practice methods.*
- 5. You will only spend one year there, so do not overdo things. Just do the best you can. Guard your aspiration to follow the Path and your health.*

*May you travel in safety.*

Shifu clearly knew each of our strengths, and likewise assigned the right kind of responsibilities, guiding us in how to learn. He always had a clear direction. Of course, the most important thing was still our aspiration to follow the Path to make a contribution to all sentient beings, and to Buddhism.

Shifu's breadth of mind can be seen in his approach to teaching Chan meditation. When he was leading a seven-day Chan retreat in England, John Crook came for his interview and talked to Shifu about his Chan practice experience. Shifu immediately said that John Crook could lead a Chan practice in Shifu's place. In the book *Tributes & Travels*, Shifu wrote, "Up to now, he is only the second person I permitted to lead a Chan practice (Note: the first was a Dharma heir from Malaysia, Venerable Chi Chern). Their common characteristics are: they have faith in the Three Jewels, respect Shifu, and they both have deep compassion and selfless vows that seek nothing in return. Whether or not they will retain my format in running Chan retreats in the future is not so important. What is important is the ability to apply wisdom, equanimity,

compassion and respect, and to spread Buddhist practice methods and concepts. So I wish them well.”

We often discussed how to promote the Dharma Drum lineage of Chan Buddhism. How should we teach it? Sometimes, with just the slightest difference in the teaching method, the teaching would be different. But from Shifu’s books, we could see a clear principle—Shifu emphasized the guiding principles, and some minor variation in the details was acceptable. He really had great breadth of mind, and a big heart.

Shifu spent a considerable amount of time teaching in the West. It was particularly arduous since he split his time, spending half in Taiwan, and the other half in the United States. Shifu’s proficiency in English allowed him to deal with everyday tasks without any problem. Yet it didn’t allow him to give Dharma talks directly in English. Advocates of Chinese Buddhism in the US Buddhist community included Master Hsuan Hua on the West Coast, and Shifu on the East Coast. Shifu had a good reputation in the Buddhist community, especially

in promoting Silent Illumination, which attracted many people and was widely accepted. Even some teachers from the Theravada Tradition came to learn from Shifu. I think the Silent Illumination method can be accepted by many people in Western societies.

## Whatever you do, give your best effort

Whenever Shifu was in Taiwan, he handled many tasks for the monastic community. I always felt like Shifu was doing three people's jobs. On the other hand, when Shifu was in United States, the workload wasn't as heavy and he would not be as busy, mainly because he didn't need to entertain so many visitors. His Dharma activities included giving lectures on the sutras or Dharma talks on Sundays, classes on Fridays, leading Chan retreats, and responding to requests to give a speech or teach meditation at different universities. The rest of the time would be spent on writing books, assisted by Yao Shizhuang, a lay practitioner who would take down Shifu's narration. She would then organize the documentation, which was reviewed and proofread by Shifu. That's how they

were compiled into books. Many of Shifu's writings were completed in New York.

Shifu felt that no one should be lazy, and that we should give our very best effort in whatever we do. So whenever Shifu was tired, he would do a little more. This is a way to temper the body, as well as strengthen the will. Besides, Shifu was able to read the sutras very fast, finishing a whole page in no time. All these habits and abilities were the result of training. In fact, when Shifu read, he didn't need to follow word by word. That's because he had a firm grasp of both the stylistic methods and the substance, so he was able to read very fast.

Shifu kept on learning his whole life, including when he lectured at numerous universities. Wherever he visited, he would observe carefully and learn attentively. From numerous descriptions in his books, we can see how diligent and thorough Shifu was in his observations. The magnificence of Dharma Drum Mountain today is the culmination of Shifu's decades of continuous learning and observation. And the essence of the DDM Complex cannot

be appreciated in a glance. Its ability to impart a feeling of magnanimity and profound meaning is the result of Shifu's ceaseless pursuit of learning, the inspiration behind such an outstanding achievement.

*(Talk delivered November, 10, 2009,  
at the Sheng Yen Education Foundation)*



## **A life dedicated to practicing the Buddhadharma**

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Guo Guang Fashi

*Shifu was very calm and quiet. He turned around to console us.*

*We have to face the situation and accept it.*

*If surgery is required, then it should be performed.*

*During this process, I discovered what Shifu taught us:*

*Face it, accept it, deal with it, and let it go.*

*Shifu himself is the embodiment of all Dharma,  
and he was using his life to practice the Buddhadharma.*



## **Introducing the Speaker**

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### **Guo Guang Fashi**

Current Director-in-Chief of the Dharma Drum Mountain Sangha community. Ordained in 1989 at Nung Chan Monastery; previously served as the Director of the DDM Sangha community and Managing Director of the Bhikshuni Sangha. She has extensive experience in cultivation practices, Dharma services and administrative affairs, and has taken on great responsibilities in developing Sangha members. When Master Sheng Yen was admitted to the hospital several times in his later years, Fashi was right in the middle of things, running errands and taking care of various affairs, which for her was a very moving experience.

The new location of the Sheng Yen Education Foundation (SYEF) was officially opened on August 9, 2009. That was the first time I came back here since the day Shifu passed away. This place was formerly known as Shifu's residence (now the Sheng Yen Lecture Hall). After Shifu was discharged from the hospital after his surgery in 2005, he moved into this house to recuperate till January 2009. During that period, Shifu would frequently gather members of the monastic and lay sangha here for meetings or visits. Sometimes we would come to Shifu's residence to seek his advice when necessary. In this house, we can feel Shifu's presence everywhere. Although Shifu is no longer here physically, I feel that Shifu has never left us. He is quietly looking after us, just as he always has.

On the day SYEF was officially opened, I wasn't really thinking about anything. But the moment the purification ceremony began, I could not stop crying, until I was crying my heart out. No words could explain how I felt. Was I feeling gratitude? Touched? Deep admiration? ...Why did this happen? I thought back to 2002, when Shifu led a group of people to visit and pay homage to holy places

in China. When I walked into several monasteries of the ancient Chan Masters, I felt the same kind of feeling, weeping incessantly, crying my heart out. It was an unknown connection, weeping that I couldn't explain. At different times and places, the same thing happened. This has led me to believe that when a place, or this place, has had a special connection with or influence on our life, regardless of how much time has elapsed, we will be touched deep inside our hearts when the same conditions arise. This will give rise to strong emotions. It's the same as when we come here to SYEF. The feelings are exceptionally profound.

## My journey into Buddhism

Given that we were able to know Shifu and study and practice the Buddhadharma with him, I believe it's not just a matter of this lifetime. Rather, it's a very deep connection that developed over many lifetimes with Shifu, always learning from him. I started to study and practice Buddhism with Shifu in 1978. At that time, I had many doubts about my life. I was searching for the meaning of

life, and explored many avenues in my quest. I had been to the book shops on Chongqing South Road, the old book stalls on Kuling Street, and the Guanghai Electronics Market, to look for answers. I had even seen the fortune tellers on Dihua Street, and frequently visited the En Zhu Gong Temple on Minchuan East Road to find out more about my life. I did all this in search of the true meaning of life, to find answers. At the same time, I realized that when a person is at a loss or stuck in life, not knowing where to go or what to do, religion can be a source of peace and calm.

When Shifu long ago led the first and second seven-day Chan retreats in Taiwan, they targeted the members of the Institute for the Translation of the Chinese Tripitaka at Nung Chan Monastery. I heard that originally, Shifu didn't plan to organize any Chan retreats. It was done at the request of the students at the translation institute, as Shifu saw that it suited the conditions at that time. But the main reason Shifu arranged the retreats was that if the students didn't have any experience in the Buddhadharma, the sutra translations would get bogged down in mere

interpretations of the words. Therefore, it was hoped that organizing the Chan retreats would help them get some experience in the Buddhadharma and that, in turn, would help their translations.

After the first Chan retreat, the feedback from the retreatants was fantastic. They felt that Chan meditation did help them to delve deeper into the Buddhadharma. One member of the Institute was my colleague's teacher. We called her "Teacher Cheng." She told another colleague, "There is a very experienced and learned Dharma Master who has studied in Japan. He is now back in Taiwan to do some work and will be heading back to the United States soon. You should definitely take refuge with him. If you want to study and practice Buddhism, meeting a good Dharma master is not easy." I thought, since he was such a great Dharma master, I should go and see him. That's how I ended up knowing Shifu.

I recall that on April 22, 1978, the weather was a bit warm. Shifu had come back to Taiwan from America to settle various affairs after the passing of the late Master

Dongchu. It was the evening before Shifu headed back to the United States. My colleague took me to the Chung-Hwa Institute of Buddhist Culture in Beitou to meet up with Teacher Cheng. Then we met Shifu in the Institute's Reception Room. Shifu graciously performed the refuge-taking ceremony for us at the Main Buddha Shrine, and gave me a Dharma name: Guo Guang. There were only four of us taking refuge, but our hearts were filled with Dharma joy. That day, Teacher Cheng's family hosted two tables of guests for a sumptuous vegetarian farewell dinner for Shifu. That was the first time I'd eaten such a delicious vegetarian meal. In fact, I was still kind of ignorant about taking refuge at that time. It was nonetheless the beginning of my journey into Buddhism.

## My first Chan retreat

Whenever Shifu returned to Taiwan from the United States, the Chung-Hwa Institute of Buddhist Culture would send a postcard to those who had taken refuge with him. It would inform us of his return, when the Sunday Dharma talks would begin, and invite everyone to come back. So

I would go to the Institute to attend Shifu's Dharma talks every time he came back. One time, after a Dharma talk, I learned that Shifu was planning a two-part series of seven-day Chan meditation retreats, open to members of the Institute for Translation as well as outsiders. The first session of the retreat was meant for monastics, while the second session was for lay Buddhists. I signed up for the retreat immediately.

When I sent in my application, I was really looking forward to the retreat. However when my application was accepted, I started to hesitate. I didn't even know what a seven-day Chan meditation retreat was. Would I fall into some demonic state? Was Shifu reliable? Did I really want to attend the retreat? I was thinking too much. In a state of indecision, I thought of a method. I went to the rooftop of the hospital where I worked and recited the Buddha's name. Joining my palms together, I looked up to the sky and said to Amitabha Buddha, "If this seven-day Chan retreat is really good, and beneficial for my life, then please smooth my path to attend it. Otherwise, make it so I can't go."

After that, I noticed how smooth things were going. I was working in a hospital at that time, and getting a seven-day leave from work was not easy. In the past, I had never asked for such a long leave, thinking that it would be hard to get. However, when I applied for leave, it was quickly approved. Besides working during the day, I was also attending many classes including English language, enrichment classes, fortune telling classes. My schedule was quite tight every day. Some classes would require me to attend three to five days per week. If I were to attend the seven-day Chan retreat, it would mean that I needed to forego some of those classes. I started to worry. But it just so happened that nobody signed up for the first session of the seven-day Chan retreat, originally meant for monastics, so it was canceled. Therefore the second retreat session, originally scheduled for September, was moved forward to August. And that coincided with a break from my classes. The whole process was exceptionally smooth, as if everything had been pre-planned. Lugging my backpack, I happily went to the Institute to register for the retreat. That was in August, 1979.

In the third session of seven-day Chan retreats, there was a total of 20 participants. We made a perfect circle in the Main Shrine at the Institute. Everyone sat facing the wall, with Shifu sitting in the middle, facing the Buddha statue. He could then watch over everyone easily. Registration day left a deep and lasting impression. In the Chan Hall, the Main Shrine was surrounded by yellow curtains, with sunlight shining through them. It was a very gentle feeling. With the matching coffee-colored square mats and round cushions, the place definitely gave me a sense of calmness and serenity. Thinking about sitting in that space for seven days, I was truly inspired.

My seat was on the right side of the main shrine, by the door. Outside the door there was a corridor leading to a two-story house. The house had a reception area downstairs, and Shifu's bedroom was upstairs. Throughout the seven-day retreat, Shifu would use that door to go in and out. Whenever he walked past me, the corner of the robe he was wearing would lightly brush against my face, which gave me a kind of ineffable joy. I really liked clothes like that robe, and yearned to leave home and become a

monastic. I felt that Shifu was an exemplary model of a practitioner. And this insight continued to grow deeper.

## Transcending life's limitations

The biggest challenge in a Chan meditation retreat is leg pain. Anyone who hasn't experienced this before should give it a try. It is not easy to be born as a human being. Therefore we should try to experience what pain really feels like, while we are still healthy. It's a blessing. Before I attended the seven-day Chan meditation retreat, I didn't know that there would be leg pain, happily assuming that I could sit in the monastery for seven days, just like some supernatural being. I had never heard about leg pain in meditation. Nor did anyone tell me what would happen in a seven-day Chan retreat. Only later did I discover that when attending a Chan retreat, it's best not to know anything.

In a seven-day Chan retreat, the wake-up time is 4:00 AM, and we end the day at 10:00 PM. Before the end of each day's last sitting session, Shifu would give us

a Dharma talk. What did he talk about? He would tell us things like we lacked a sense of shame and remorsefulness, and didn't know how to be grateful. Shifu was very good at scolding us. He would admonish us till everyone felt ashamed, feeling unworthy of our parents or teachers such that people broke into tears! In fact, after sitting all day, it was hard to survive through the last sitting session. Everyone wanted to go to bed and rest. However, after listening to what Shifu had said, we would feel the need to stay on to repent and continue practicing no matter what. So we couldn't just go to bed and get some rest.

During the seven-day Chan retreat, I discovered that the possibilities for making the most of life are endless. The energy of life can be expanded. If we know that life has its limits, we should know that those limits can be transcended. I used to treat sleep as something very important. However during the retreat, I only slept three to four hours. Yet, I didn't doze off. No matter how painful my legs were, I would not release my legs before I heard the sound of the bell marking the end of the session. After the retreat, I learned that many people had secretly

released their legs. If I had known that I could release my legs when the pain became unbearable, I would have done so.

In fact, I had never experienced the kind of pain I felt doing sitting meditation. And I realized how much pain the body could give you, so that your entire body is in a cold sweat, and you're gritting your teeth! However, no matter how painful it was, with Shifu's method of counting breaths, counting from one to ten, I would still wholeheartedly follow through and not lose the count. At that time, a thought was swirling in my mind: If I can't even survive through the leg pain, what if there comes a day when I'm faced with unbearable pain in life? Then what will I do? How will I overcome it? At that time, Shifu kept encouraging us, saying that if we could endure the training of a seven-day Chan retreat, it would help us tremendously in terms of willpower and determination, and in life. And I believe Shifu.

## Returning home to show gratitude to my parents

That seven-day Chan retreat was a turning point in my life. Besides having delved deeper into the meaning of life through reflection and thought, I also felt that I could find answers about the direction and purpose of my life through the Buddhadharmā. Having a teacher to guide you is very important on the path of learning and practicing Buddhadharmā. And I also firmly believed that Shifu was a teacher I could learn from for my entire lifetime. After the seven-day Chan retreat, I readjusted my life. Besides working, most of my time was spent in Chan meditation. I had already decided that the only direction in life for me was to become a monastic and practice. However, there was always a little voice inside telling me that, “More experience and training on the path of practice is needed.” I also very much wanted to show gratitude to my parents. Hence, I resigned from my job and headed back to my old hometown in Nantou (Taiwan) to make these hopes into reality.

Returning to my hometown also had another layer of

meaning for my life. There are many differences between our plans and our realities in this life. For instance, when I went back to my hometown, the environment was supposed to be quiet and peaceful, and I would have more time to practice Chan meditation. That was the case when I first went back. However the situation quickly changed. All these conditions were beyond my control. In the first year I was home, the days were quite idyllic, just my mother and myself living together. At the end of the year one of my younger brothers got married, and had a child the following year. A few more children were born over the next few years. Then my older sister's daughter came to live with us so that it would be easier for my sister and brother-in-law to go to work. My mother was very happy to look after a grandchild. For me, besides working the highland and lowland farms, I also had to help look after my young nephews. I began to wonder: What did I return to my hometown for? Reality didn't match my plan. But looking back, when we are confronted with different situations, if we are able to face it, accept it and go through it, it does provide us with the opportunity to experience and grow in life, and is also a process of self-cultivation.

During my six-and-a-half year stay in my rural home in Nantou, I experienced just how hard farming is. Each harvest of grain and fruit required the toil of human beings, and good weather as well. In the event of a typhoon and its heavy rains, all our hard work was for naught. Even if there was a harvest, the state of the market was also a factor. Farmers really do have a practitioner's spirit. They sow and plough come what may, regardless of any natural disasters such as tornadoes or floods. As long as there is land that can be farmed, they keep farming.

It was my wish to return to my hometown to work on the farms. Even though it was hard work, I was willing. On top of that, I was also hoping to deepen my practice and that my parents would have the chance to learn more about Buddhism. In rural areas, the Buddhadharma was not readily accessible. At that time, I was determined to leave home and become a monastic. And during that era, Nung Chan Monastery truly exemplified the "Chan-and-farming" lifestyle tradition, growing many agricultural products. We grew many crops including guavas, bamboo shoots, and others. I thought that if I were to become a

monastic at Nung Chan Monastery, I should at least learn some basic farming and cooking. Otherwise, becoming a monastic would be tough.

During those years back at my rural home, besides learning basic farming and cooking, I also learned how to recite the Shurangama Dharani from memory, which is the hardest chant in the Buddhist liturgy. The most satisfying thing was that I was able to give something back to my parents. My mother had long wanted to plant plum trees. By the time I left my rural home, seedlings planted in the plum orchard on the hills had already grown up, and were beginning to bear fruit. By then, my parents not only had accepted the Buddhadharma, but had agreed to my becoming a monastic. I thought the time I spent in my rural home had been worthwhile, but that it should also come to an end. By then, I was already over 30 years old. I told my mother that I needed to leave home. If I didn't, Shifu might not accept me as a disciple. Therefore, I left my hometown in Nantou and returned to Taipei in 1988.

## Self-cultivation in devotion to helping others

After I moved into Nung Chan Monastery, I was a postulant for a year. The next year, I was ordained and accepted the full precepts. At the beginning I looked forward to being a monastic, as the “Chan-and-farming” lifestyle would be peaceful and carefree, with plenty of time to meditate, and do “homework” for my personal cultivation practice. In those early days of Nung Chan Monastery, the situation was indeed like that. In the morning, there would be personal practice. In the afternoon, we would have work assignments—also a kind of practice, such as chopping firewood, growing vegetables, and digging for winter bamboo shoots. Shifu would join us. At that time, the Nung Chan Monastery lifestyle was very simple. On Fridays, there would be the Great Compassion Repentance Ceremony. On Saturdays there was Buddha-name recitation. On Sundays there would be Dharma talks and meditation.

In 1989 there was a significant event, the acquisition

of a tract of land for Dharma Drum Mountain in the town of Jinshan, north of Taipei. Six months after I moved into Nung Chan Monastery, Dharma Drum Mountain was established. Thereafter, the Association of Dharma Supporters was established for laypeople, and there was a monastic and lay sangha. To support DDM, followers began to set up liaison and administrative offices around Taiwan. As a result, Shifu also started to travel around to give Dharma talks and look after monastic and lay followers. Later on, a foundation was established, building up the organization, layer upon layer.

At that time we used to tell Shifu that everything was happening so fast. We were so busy! Shifu told us that once the Dharma Drum Mountain was constructed, we would have more time for Chan meditation. It wasn't until later that I discovered that Shifu was actually trying to coax us by telling us that there was a future objective, and as soon as we reached that goal, then the future would be better. In fact, since Dharma Drum Mountain was officially opened, we have more and more things to deal with. As a result, I came to realize that as we made our way on this path,

there's more to practice and cultivation than I originally imagined. True practice manifests when we act with devotion, to benefit others. It's only by looking back over the road we've traveled that I discovered: That's how Shifu's led us to practice.

In 1993 the Director of the Sangha, Venerable Guo Jing, was going to Japan to further her studies. So I took on her duties and looked after the Sangha community. Although I became a monastic comparatively late in life, I started learning from Shifu comparatively early. While I was still living at home, I read Shifu's books and would come back to attend seven-day Chan retreats on a regular basis. I only moved into Nung Chan Monastery ten years later. As I look back, although I had not been a monastic for very long and taking on this role was a heavy responsibility, it was also a great blessing. As I had to look after the monastic and lay sangha members, handle work assignments from Shifu, and even got involved in the construction work for Dharma Drum Mountain, I had plenty of opportunities to learn from Shifu.

## Dedicating his life to practicing the Buddhadharma

The period during his later years in which Shifu was ill was a very enlightening period in my own life. Shifu underwent kidney surgery in 2005. The news was not released at that time because originally, we didn't think the surgery would be that serious, and we thought he would be discharged shortly. His post-surgery diagnosis was unexpected. It all happened so fast. When I heard from Shifu first hand that there was a tumor in his kidney and surgery was necessary, I instantly felt as if the large tree that had been protecting and shading us was suddenly tottering. But Shifu was very calm. He turned around to console us, telling us that we needed to face it, and accept it. If surgery was required, then it should be done. Throughout the process, I discovered what Shifu was always teaching us: face it, accept it, deal with it and let it go. Shifu embodied the whole Dharma. Shifu was applying the Buddhadharma and its practice in his life.

I remember on December 30, 2008, the Abbot

President, Guo Dong Fashi, and I, along with several other members of the monastic community were here at Shifu's residence having a meeting with him. After hearing the work reports Shifu made a short comment, saying his responsibility would end that year, and that the following year, and thereafter, everything would be our responsibility. In fact, we were not aware of the deterioration in Shifu's health. It wasn't until his routine check-up at National Taiwan University Hospital the next day that we discovered that his illness was critical. Coincidentally, that was the New Year's Eve holiday. Therefore it wasn't until January 5, 2009 that Shifu was admitted to the hospital.

Throughout Shifu's life, he suffered many illnesses. However as long as his physical condition still allowed him to move around, Shifu always wanted to take care of others. Therefore on January 3, 2009 in conjunction with the year-end social care activities of the lay community of Dharma upholders, I somewhat boldly made a suggestion, and invited Shifu to go back to Nung Chan Monastery to visit everyone. In fact, I knew deep in my heart that Shifu's condition was now extremely critical, and we didn't

know when he would be able to see our lay supporters again. If possible, it would be very encouraging for the lay supporters to see him. As long as it was something beneficial to everyone, Shifu would gladly do it. So he readily agreed.

On January 3, the day Shifu went back to Nung Chan Monastery, everyone present, or who participated through our online webcast, could see how frail and weak he was, and that he needed someone at his side to support him the whole time. Under those circumstances, Shifu still came back to visit everyone. That was the last time he met up with the lay supporters in public.

## **Making good use of every minute, every second, of his life**

Everyone in the monastic and lay sangha had hoped that Shifu would live in this world for a long time. But Shifu's health condition was erratic, sometimes good, sometimes bad, worsening each year. We thought, "What if Shifu really leaves us? What will we do?" This was

something we didn't want to happen, and yet, something we couldn't avoid facing. In late September of 2008, the monastic sangha established "The Completion Project" which was meant to address Shifu's palliative care and funeral affairs, as well as an implementation plan to care for monastic and lay sangha members.

After Shifu was admitted to the hospital on January 5, 2009, his condition worsened and at one point the situation was critical. We got very nervous. The sangha community rushed to prepare for the funeral services. One could imagine how hectic it was. Later on, when Shifu's condition had stabilized and he regained consciousness, the first thing he wanted to know was what had happened during the time he was in critical condition. The way Shifu handled things, including his own illness, was characterized by clarity and coherence. When his personal attendants gave their reports he listened very attentively, like a child listening to miraculous tales, his face showing intense curiosity and interest. This was another facet of Shifu, his childlike innocence.

We also reported to Shifu that during this sudden and unplanned state of emergency, the sangha community had responded by making preparations for funeral services. When he heard that, Shifu laughed. He said, “You all must have panicked. This was a trial run for you. Next time, you won’t panic.” To most people, it would have been taboo to speak to a patient about such “preparations.” But when we mentioned this, including matters such as if we would allow an open casket to display the embalmed body, the funeral design and ceremonial procedures, and whether there should be a memorial tablet in the Founding History Memorial Hall, we confirmed every single item with Shifu. He would either agree or amend the items as we went through them. In the end, he even encouraged us by saying, “You have all been so attentive to detail, so earnest and diligent. Well done!”

Even in the midst of his critical illness, Shifu would still make good use of every minute and every second of his life. As long as his physical state allowed, Shifu would always think about what else he could do. Then he would tell us, “I didn’t eat a free meal today!” Shifu would

always say in his Dharma talks that, if there was a day when nothing has been done to benefit others, that was equivalent to eating rice and then not doing anything. Shifu would always be thinking where he could contribute his effort, where was he still needed. That's what Shifu always did.

During his hospitalization, Shifu's condition was sometimes good and sometimes bad. Before he passed away, Shifu's attitude in dealing with the acute phase of his illness was always one of extreme patience. He would cooperate calmly with the medical team to receive treatment. In the early morning of February 3, I had a dream. There was a ceremony in the dream, with the participants moving around freely. At that moment, Shifu walked in, wearing the robe he usually wore when he conducted a Chan retreat, holding the incense board, with no glasses, and very calm. You could even say he was walking into the hall very quietly, without fanfare. His face expressionless, his gaze naturally to the front and downcast, he walked slowly to the stage. The rectangular stage was about 50 square meters, and 10 centimeters high,

covered with a red carpet, and empty. After Shifu walked to the stage from the center aisle, he turned to face the audience on the left. However, without looking at anything, he put down the incense board and sat down, crossed his legs in the lotus posture, closed his eyes, and began meditating. At that time, the time keeper announced that, “We will rest until 1:30 PM.” I thought that was strange. Why would Shifu wait until the rest period to appear? At that moment, I woke up, feeling uneasy and hurried to the hospital.

When we arrived at the hospital, we discovered that Shifu’s condition was really bad. We informed the Abbot President to come immediately and at the same time we notified “The Completion Project” team to go into emergency preparedness mode. The monastic members of the sangha community and the monastic students at Sangha University worked hand in hand, with a strong team spirit. It was quite commendable. You could say that Shifu taught us well. The medical team at National Taiwan University Hospital had done their best to give Shifu the best medical care available. On that very afternoon, before

we left the hospital, the head of Shifu's medical team, based on his experience and Shifu's blood pressure and blood oxygen level, determined that Shifu should be able to hold on for another two to three hours. That meant that there should have been enough time to get him back to the mountain. But Shifu left us a bit too soon. Less than half an hour after he was put in the ambulance, he passed away en route to Dharma Drum Mountain. Shifu left quietly, without fanfare, just like that.

## The sun has set. See you tomorrow.

After Shifu had left us, our lay followers, monastics, and even people who hardly had the chance to interact with Shifu, were saddened by his departure. Has anyone of you had this feeling? Although we knew Shifu would leave us one day, everyone was mentally prepared for it. However when Shifu had actually passed away, it was different from what we had thought. Just like we know the sun will set every day, but when the sun is shining brightly, it's not easy to appreciate the sunset. My state of mind was like the sun setting in the west. When chanting the liturgy

during morning and evening services I used to be able to chant loudly. But during that period I couldn't chant at all, until one day when I came across a verse in Shifu's collected calligraphy works that said, "The sun has set. See you tomorrow." My mind just opened up, as if seeing the sun rising again. When I saw Shifu's calligraphy of the Heart Sutra in his office, I discovered that Shifu had never left. The care, the compassion and the wisdom that he had showered on us was always there. That feeling was very steady and sure, solid and real.

Even though Shifu has passed away, we are all even more firmly determined to uphold Dharma Drum Mountain's mission and Shifu's compassionate vows. Isn't that so? Likewise, our monastics feel our responsibilities have grown tremendously, as has the need to shoulder them, and to transmit the aspirations we inherited from Shifu to the next generation. Besides the need to complete the construction of Dharma Drum University, it is also very important to spread Dharma Drum Mountain's vision throughout the whole world through Threefold Education to establish a pure land on earth.

## Shifu: The guiding teacher in our life

Shifu gave me a lot of inspiration in this life, so I'd like to share a few points with everyone.

The first point is our attitude in facing life. Whatever circumstances that Shifu encountered throughout his life, he would never give up. As long as it was something that should be done—something worth doing, and it benefitted society, he would press on and persevere to the very end. What Shifu taught us was that we should overcome all obstacles to complete any worthy task. Even if the first attempt was a failure, we should try again and again.

The second point is to clearly grasp a direction in life. After Shifu had passed away, a professor published an essay recounting how he met Shifu in the early days. During that time, Shifu was the first monastic in Taiwan to have a profound understanding of Buddhism and to have a doctorate. Therefore he invited Shifu to pursue further academic research in Buddhism. However Shifu told him that there were already many people working on

academic research, but few were involved in propagating the Buddhadharmā. What he wanted to do was to spread the Buddhadharmā. That's what Shifu did in his entire life, spreading the Buddhadharmā. Although he affirmed academic research in Buddhism, the research was meant to help in sharing the Buddhadharmā to benefit all sentient beings.

Shifu's attitude towards his life and his way of managing affairs was similar, always upholding his direction. If there was any deviation from that direction, there would not be any compromise. If the direction was correct, he would accommodate conditions and adjust schedules. In the past, some monastics would respond to Shifu by saying, "Shifu, you have changed what you said yesterday. We don't know what to do now." Shifu would say, "That was yesterday. Today is today. Causes and conditions have changed. But my direction remains the same. If change can make things better, why not?"

The third point is to make good use of every minute and every second in your life. Things to be done today

should not be postponed till tomorrow. We always saw Shifu giving Dharma talks on stage and he would look energetic. However, when he left the stage, he would be totally exhausted. After some rest, Shifu would start writing again. Since he had no time to write during the day, he would usually write past midnight. By the next morning, Shifu would join everyone at the morning service, have breakfast together, and give us a morning talk. According to Shifu's attendants, he was like a candle burning at both ends simultaneously, day and night. Shifu fully utilized the value of his life, every minute and every second. About a month before he passed away, towards the end of December 2008, Shifu went up to Dharma Drum Mountain for the last time. He was still delivering Dharma talks to the monastic sangha. Everyone was dismayed to see Shifu's condition, but he still propped himself up in his effort to educate his disciples.

## Life's meaning lies in fulfilling our responsibilities and contributing to others

For me, Shifu's final years were profoundly inspiring.

Life is impermanent. After today is gone, will there be a tomorrow? No matter how much difficulty Shifu was facing, he would complete whatever needed to be completed that day. Even when he was sick, there was no procrastination. Until the very end of his life, Shifu was still showing us that the meaning of life lies in the fulfillment of our responsibilities, receiving karmic results and fulfilling our vows. When we have reached the end of the journey of life and we look back, what will we have accomplished in this life? What is the meaning of life? Is it possible to have no regrets? That depends on if we have done our duty well. That's the meaning of life. If one is a monastic, then one should assume a monastic's responsibility properly. If one is a father, one should play a father's role. If one is a son or daughter, then one should play the role of a child well. For everyone to play their individual role well, doing his or her best, is to express the meaning of life.

The process of fulfilling our responsibilities is equivalent to accepting our karma and fulfilling our vows. To fulfill our responsibilities, will there be many obstacles which we have to overcome? Will we come

across plenty of setbacks? If we treat these as vows we have made in the past, and now we are here to fulfill them, isn't that wonderful? Taking these as part of our causes and conditions from the past, and seeing that we are now here to receive karmic results and repay karmic debts, isn't that great as well?

Shifu was realizing the meaning of his life up till the very moment of his death. He was not only being responsible for himself, but was also helping others to fulfill their responsibilities. When Shifu was leaving the hospital to go back to Dharma Drum Mountain, the head of his medical team held Shifu's hand and sobbed into his ear, saying, "Shifu! I am really grateful to you! Ever since you've been hospitalized, I am thankful to have the opportunity to be at your side and care for you, Shifu." Even while he was sick, Shifu was benefitting others. That's how Shifu always taught us, leading by setting an example in speech, and in action.

The meaning of life lies in making contributions to others. As a Buddhist, if we only wish to stay deep in

the mountains to practice, or wait for offerings from lay followers, then what have we done for society? What have we given back to humanity at large? If there is no contribution, what is the meaning of life? Shifu taught us that if Dharma Drum Mountain makes no contribution to this society, then we, as an organization, have lost the value in our existence. As an organization, that applies to Dharma Drum Mountain. As an individual, it applies to everyone. Since everyone has a family, there's always somewhere to serve. Value lies solely in making a meaningful contribution. Shifu used to encourage us that as long as we are still able to breathe, then we should give something back.

We have learned a lot from Shifu's guidance throughout his life. After he passed away, many people mentioned that Shifu is the guiding teacher in their life. I feel the same as well. Shifu taught us a direction in life, showed us the purpose in life and its value. That's truly the guiding teacher of a lifetime. I believe we are all connected to Shifu in one way or another. Just as Shifu stated in his last testament, "We had the shared causes and conditions,

virtuous karmic roots and merit, to learn together on the bodhisattva path. We came together to cultivate wholesome karmic affinities under the tutelage of countless buddhas, and will cultivate supreme bodhi with countless buddhas, together as one family on the path of true Dharma.” I believe our connection with Shifu is not limited to just one lifetime. Shifu will surely be reunited with us one day, just as we will come back here again. Let us wholeheartedly carry on Shifu’s aspirations, till the end of all time, until we attain Buddhahood.

*(This talk was delivered on September 2, 2009  
at the Sheng Yen Education Foundation)*

## A scolding is a blessing

Guo Fang Fashi

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*Shifu doesn't simply scold people.*

*You are scolded because you can withstand it.*

*Sometimes Shifu scolds people for no particular reason,  
and that's his wisdom.*

*Sometimes he scolds people so that others will hear.*

*I get scolded quite often by Shifu, but I am quite happy to  
receive his scolding,*

*because it's a blessing to be scolded by him.*



## **Introducing the Speaker**

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### **Guo Fang Fashi**

The Managing Director of the Bhikshuni Sangha at Dharma Drum Mountain, she was ordained under Master Sheng Yen in 1985. Guo Guang Fashi's strength is in singing and chanting. She has used her voice to draw many laypeople to come for group practices in chanting. Her personality is open and direct. Having been reprimanded by Shifu several times, she is very well aware that that was training through Shifu's wisdom. Therefore she feels that getting scolded by Shifu is really a blessing.

Since a tender age, I grew up in a family with folk beliefs that didn't clearly distinguish between indigenous gods and Buddha. Since we were young, we were taught that the moment we join our palms together, we should recite two verses. One was "Namo Amitufo" (Amitabha Buddha) and the other was "Namo Guan Shi Yin Pusa" (Avalokiteshvara; Guanyin Boddhisatva). Although we were often confused, the process of reciting did have some impact, and also helped us cultivate our karmic capacities. Whenever I felt frustrated or had any setbacks, I would recite "Guan Shi Yin Pusa." Sometimes, I would even sing out, chanting loudly, reciting out loud. Within a short while, my troubles would disappear.

We were quite poor when we were young. My grandmother reared some chickens and ducks. When they had grown up, they would be sold for a good price. Granny used to tell us that, "For every half a pound (of their meat) that you eat, you have to give back eight ounces." Therefore we dared not eat any meat. The concept of being vegetarian then was purely to avoid creating bad karma, incurring debts. After graduation, I started visiting Chengtian Chan

Temple, Pumen Temple, and others. Also, I took refuge in the Three Jewels under Master Guang Qin.

## An instant “celebrity” at Nung Chan Monastery

Soon, I started going to Nung Chan Monastery because my colleague went to learn meditation there. She even attended a three-day Chan retreat, and told everyone how wonderful it was! Although I heard what she said, I didn’t really think about it much. By the end of the year, she went for a seven-day recitation retreat as well. Even though I was a Buddhist, I didn’t even know what a recitation retreat was. So I decided to join her by signing up for the first seven-day retreat for Amitabha Buddha recitation at Nung Chan Monastery.

That was the first time I had attended a recitation retreat in my life, and it was also a turning point in my life. Master Sheng Yen was not in Taiwan at that time. There were only two monastics in the main hall at Nung Chan Monastery. Even the outside support team only had

one monastic. The rest of the internal and external team members were all lay volunteers. However everyone at the retreat was filled with the joy of Chan meditation. After listening to a Dharma talk by the monastic, I understood the purpose of practice, which is to find the path of liberation from the cycle of life and death. Some people misunderstood the purpose of the retreat, thinking that it was meant to dispel disasters and generate merit. In actual fact, the ultimate aim is to free ourselves from the cycle of life and death.

Since I only had three days of leave from work, I had to return to the office after the third day. But I would rush to Nung Chan Monastery after work each day to join the repentance prostrations at night, listen to the evening Dharma talk and join the transferring of merit at the end. At night I would stay overnight in the monastery. The next morning I would join the group in prostrations, reciting the Buddha's name, having my morning breakfast and doing my mindful work assignment, and then head back to work in the office. For the entire eight days, I was commuting between the office and Nung Chan Monastery.

Yet, each day was filled with the joy and bliss of the Dharma.

There was a group sharing session on the last evening of the retreat. I left my workplace that day, rushing to listen to everyone's retreat report. I wanted to get there quickly, but I was not able to. Due to my restlessness, I took the wrong buses twice. Finally, I got there late. Since I was late, I was brought to a seat in the front row. It was like sitting on pins and needles, as I felt that sitting in front of the Venerable was really stressful. But this also gave me the opportunity to present my retreat report. As a result of my presentation, everyone had a good laugh, and I became an instant "celebrity" at Nung Chan Monastery. No one knew me before, but now everyone recognized me. From then onwards, virtuous connections started streaming in endlessly.

## Making a vow at the Chan meditation retreat

After the seven-day recitation retreat, I joined the

meditation class for beginners. Thereafter I signed up for the seven-day Chan meditation retreat. During that time, the Chan meditation retreat was personally led by Master Sheng Yen. After attending that retreat, my experience was even deeper and I made a vow that I would not attend any Chan meditation retreats in the future. Why? Because I wanted to give the available slots to others who had never attended a seven-day Chan meditation retreat. In the early days, it was hard to gain admission to those retreats. After sending in the application form, there would be interviews and then a further selection process. Only one out of four or even five people were chosen. So I was really lucky. Having just started learning meditation, I was selected. The seven-day Chan retreat had a major impact on me mentally and physically. It allowed me to have greater faith and confidence in my practice. Since I had gained the benefits of the Chan meditation retreat, I was more than willing to give the opportunity to others who had not had the chance. Therefore I made a vow to not attend any more Chan meditation retreats. However after I left home to become a bhikshuni (female monastic), I had no choice but to participate in Chan meditation retreats.

On the third night of the retreat, after listening to Shifu's Dharma talk and settling into the last sitting session, I sat very peacefully, filled with the joy of the Dharma. My legs did not get sore nor give me much pain. My mind was counting the breaths. As I counted...Why has my breathing disappeared? Why can't I count any breaths? Have my hands disappeared? I panicked, and started breathing heavily. The burst of energy was like the breaking of the banks of the Yellow River, and I wept right there. At that moment, I wasn't being temperamental, nor was I feeling sad. It was, in fact, a process of the practice itself. When you are using the methods earnestly, focusing on regulating the breaths, it is a natural reaction. But at that time, I was quite worried that I would be disturbing my fellow practitioners. The Chan Hall was very quiet, so how could I cry so loudly? My voice was very sharp and uncontrollable, and the more I suppressed it, the louder it became. Only then did I realize that I couldn't control my body, which is like being incapable of independent action. Finally, I was lifted and carried by four people to the interview room. They lay me on the wooden sofa to let me rest. But I couldn't stop crying. Since it couldn't be

suppressed, I decided to ignore it. However, the crying stopped after that. When Shifu came to the interview room to talk to me, he said, “Don’t be afraid!” In fact, I wasn’t fearful at all. My fist was clenched, and Shifu released the fingers one by one. The moment Shifu’s hands moved away, my fist clenched up again. At that time, I felt the gentleness in Shifu’s hands, and thought that all practitioners must have gentle hands, so I want to practice, too. That was my immediate thought.

My mind was filled with Dharma joy as I lay there, clearly experiencing the energy flowing up and down my entire body. Although my body was motionless, and not responsive to my commands, I was crying and laughing uncontrollably. At that moment I had a discursive thought: Why don’t I ask the Bodhisattva Kshitigarbha to take me on a trip to hell. By understanding the conditions in hell, I could take the opportunity to deliver my family members and relatives. I then started to silently recite the name of the Bodhisattva Kshitigarbha. I recited for quite a while but there wasn’t any response. Suddenly I thought, “My legs have been so painful for the last three days.” I wouldn’t

let my legs free as long as the signal from the hand chime had not been struck. I had met a spiritual friend before the retreat who suggested that I bring along some medicated plasters to stick on any body parts that hurt. I applied the plaster on my legs where I had pain. It definitely helped ease the pain a bit, and relieve the suffering. I told myself that these days were similar to what it's like to suffer in hell. We have seen a lot of suffering in this world, for instance patients in intensive care units who have had tubes inserted all over their body, that kind of pain, fear, and helplessness, not being able to eat or drink or be cared for by their families—aren't these situations hell itself? Why would I need to look somewhere else for hell? Therefore it's very important to have the right attitude. When one is kind, has a positive outlook, and is compassionate to others, isn't that heaven? The moment I had this thought, my body regained its normal behavior and physical movements. It was unbelievable. When our conceptual understanding—our thinking—is awry, the body will not listen to us. The moment we understand—see things clearly—everything is back to normal.

After the Chan meditation retreat, I thought it was time for me to leave home and become a bhikshuni. Although I had this intention after the Recitation of the Buddha's Name retreat, my will power wasn't very strong. I wanted to leave home after the Chan meditation retreat, but was worried that Shifu would not take me. That's because in those early days, Shifu primarily approached college graduates, and delivered many young laypeople to study and practice Buddhism, and even to become monastics. I thought, "I'm already 32 years old and Shifu might not want me to be his disciple." That's how I was thinking, but I didn't take any action. In reality, it's easy to talk about leaving home to become a monastic. But in addition to courage, causes and conditions also have to be favorable.

## The last step before leaving home

After the Chan meditation retreat, I participated in another Recitation of the Buddha's Name retreat. That was the first "Qing Ming Recitation Retreat" at Nung Chan Monastery, led by Shifu personally. During the retreat, I

would help out in the kitchen. As my hands are naturally allergic to detergents, I hardly go into the kitchen. At home, I would wear gloves when doing housework. At my first recitation retreat, I prayed that I wouldn't be assigned to the kitchen for mindful work practice. But after three days I decided to help them out, as my attitude had changed. Whatever needed to be done, I should take the initiative to do it. After that, I would take a job assignment in the kitchen at every recitation retreat. My jobs were washing the rice, followed by cleaning up the stove, the pots and pans, and washing the cleaning towels. The kitchen was spick and span. Eventually, without knowing it, my allergic hands were fully cured! Volunteering in the kitchen was the best opportunity for me to get to know everyone and to help others. It was also the quickest way to eliminate bad karma. But the intention must be genuine. Go wherever it's needed, do whatever you can, the best that you can. Don't get fussy or compare yourself with others. Take up tasks which no one wants to do. This process helped me to reduce a lot of my self-centeredness and eliminate bad karma faster. Leaving home for the monastic life was very smooth.

On the last day of the retreat, I was cleaning up the kitchen in the morning. Suddenly I heard someone calling me. I turned my head and saw that it was Shifu. Shifu said, “So and so, you should come be a monastic.” I replied to Shifu saying, “Shifu, one day, I will.” Shifu said, “By that time, you’ll have grown old!” Shifu left after saying those words, turning away. I immediately felt so ashamed, until I felt my cheeks and ears were turning red. But I also felt like an obstruction was swept away, and all the doubts and worries disappeared. But why were my cheeks and ears turning red? At that time, I was already 32 years old. If I didn’t leave home then, when would I? What Shifu had said was the last determining factor for me to take the plunge. It made me feel like everything can be let go of, there’s nothing else to be attached to. Therefore I quit my job and approached Shifu wholeheartedly and asked him to let me become a monastic.

## Becoming a monastic is to suffer for sentient beings

In the early days, anyone who wanted to become

a monastic had to ask Shifu to allow them to realize their wish to leave home. Shifu himself would interview aspirants. At that time, there were several important points which Shifu would ask at the interview. I am listing 10 of them to share with everyone. First, Shifu would ask, “How long you have been coming to Nung Chan Monastery? Which school did you graduate from? Where do you work? How long have you been working?” Then, Shifu told me the following:

1. Nung Chan Monastery is very simple and basic. The living conditions are not very good. You must be mentally prepared.
2. After you become a monastic, you have to comply with whatever the monastic sangha decides, and follow the sangha lifestyle and schedule in all you do.
3. You are not allowed to watch movies or go out to meet friends.
4. You are not allowed to go home if you are homesick.
5. Do you have a boyfriend? Affections are the hardest thing to let go of, including our own family and male-female relationships. Leaving home means letting go of these relationships. Don't even think about trying

to deliver him. When you try, he may lead you to leave. You must ask yourself if you've given enough thought to this. Are you leaving home because you are clear about the reasons, or you are just being impulsive?

6. Do your parents agree to this?
7. Leaving home doesn't mean you'll become a great master. But rather, you are here to relieve the suffering of sentient beings. You need to shoulder the suffering of sentient beings. Once you're clear about this, however difficult the situation is, you will gladly endure it with a smile, all for a noble cause. The people in the monastic community come from all walks of life. Everyone has their individual habits. Other people may commit errors, but it's not your concern. Just be concerned about being sincere in your practice.
8. You must learn to work and cooperate with others. Leaving home means wearing away your sharp edges. Don't be fussy or compare yourself with others. You need to blend yourself into the community.
9. If you haven't done anything wrong, don't run away if Shifu hits you or scolds you. But if Shifu wants you to go, you have to go. Why? There are two perspectives

on this: First, maybe you will become accomplished in your practice and Shifu will ask you to go away to spread the Dharma. And you must obey. Second, if you do something wrong, the offense is serious, and Shifu wants you to leave, you have to leave.

10. Do you have any debts? One cannot become a monastic if you have debts, nor can you bring in any money. All you need to bring is an aspiration for the Path. Don't depend on Shifu too much.

This was the advice and mental preparations which Shifu gave me. These words have been really useful to me in my life as a monastic.

## The regret of a lifetime

Although Shifu had said you should do whatever the monastic community expects you to do, it's inevitable that there would be some karmic obstacles along the way. I remember when we had just acquired the land for Dharma Drum Mountain. The monastic community assigned various monastics to take turns in looking after the place,

first for half a month, then later for half a year each time. Later, a monastic was assigned to reside permanently up there. I once lived on the mountain for half a month. At that time, wishful thinking told me that I could have a solitary retreat for half a month, and practice diligently up there. But my wish wasn't granted. In reality, I was a "Jack of all trades," and had to do everything. At that time, a monastic recovering from illness and a postulant were both living up on the mountain, too. Although I didn't need any "medicinal meal" (for monastics, the evening meal) myself, I still had to cook a light dinner to take care of them. My solitary retreat was an empty dream. But remembering what Shifu had said, I decided to accept whatever came along.

At that time, no one was living up on the mountain and the location was far away from the city. Suddenly I felt it was a world apart, and I had come from a bustling place to an isolated place. It was a very different feeling when I heard the honking of car horns coming from afar. In those days, the weather was very damp and cold on Dharma Drum Mountain. It was difficult to sit in the full lotus position at night. My legs had previously been quite

flexible, but during that period, it felt as though my legs were swollen. It was hard to sit for even half an hour. That half a month seemed like half a year. Yet, I still made a vow that I would be willing to be a pathfinder and pioneer on the mountain. Before I knew it, my wish was granted. A few months later, Shifu posted me up on the mountain.

Thereafter they finally agreed to post a monastic permanently up on the mountain. Who would be selected? Shifu wanted to send a female monastic (bhikshuni). He was asked who would be the most suitable candidate. Shifu said, “Anyone who can do the bookkeeping.” At that time, the most appropriate person was me. Therefore, Shifu said, “We’ll send you up there.” I was quite hesitant but I couldn’t say “No.” In fact, that was my vow, so it was something I should accept. But I still negotiated some conditions with Shifu. I said there was a Chan meditation retreat after the Chinese New Year, and I wanted to finish the seven-day retreat before leaving. Shifu agreed. In the end, the tasks up on the mountain were arranged with me in mind.

Later, there was a change in the situation. Another

monastic was posted up to the mountain to prepare for ceremonies to be held during the Chinese New Year festivities, including Dharma assemblies and offerings to the Buddha. Shifu came to see me again, wanting me to go up to the mountain earlier than planned. If I did, I should organize the ceremonies. If not, no ceremonies would be held. I was very stubborn then, insisting that I would only go up to the mountain after the Chinese New Year and after the retreat. As I wanted to prepare myself better, I didn't want to go up to the mountain hastily or return hastily. Instead, I wanted to dedicate myself fully to the work up on the mountain. I only found out later that Shifu had approached another monastic to go up to the mountain, but they declined as well. We never knew how sad Shifu was about this affair.

This is the biggest regret of my life. Just because I was being stubborn, I had given Shifu a hard time. I really felt sorry I let Shifu down. But this was the only time that happened. In all future arrangements by the monastic community, I accepted my assigned tasks. Of course, there would be some differences of opinion, but I would not

insist, and go with the arrangements made by the monastic community.

## Simplify the complexities and grasp the overall direction

Shifu always said that there were many things to be done by a limited number of monastics. Sometimes there would be an unequal distribution of work. Therefore he would remind us that, “The most capable should do more, and the most skillful should contribute more on behalf of others.” One should find a balance in whatever one does. Shifu also said that the more you do, the more you cultivate merit and wisdom. The growth and merit are your own. Those who are fussy and picky have no wisdom or merit. Furthermore, if one has done anything wrong or has been misunderstood or wrongly accused, setting off a stream of gossip, then what should one do? Shifu taught us, “If we have done something wrong, then we should correct it. If not, then we should take it as praise and encouragement.” If we have done anything wrong, we should correct ourselves. If we didn’t do anything wrong, why should we get angry? That

way, there's nothing to be vexed about. If one is still troubled and feeling uncomfortable, then maybe one has not applied the method well enough, in a grounded way. Furthermore, only those who can withstand scolding will get the chance to be scolded. Shifu doesn't simply scold people. You'll only get scolded because you can endure it. Sometimes Shifu scolded people for no particular reason. That's Shifu's wisdom. Sometimes Shifu would scold someone because he wanted someone else to hear what he had to say. I used to be scolded by Shifu often, but I would take it happily. That's because being scolded by Shifu is a privilege.

Anyone who aspires to leave home and become a monastic must, of course, uphold the precepts properly. After I received the precepts, I didn't know how to uphold them well. Shifu compassionately taught us that the most important thing in upholding the precepts is the spirit, not some other reason. We do it as part of our cultivation, and the purpose of cultivation is cultivation. As long as we uphold the Novitiate's (samanera) Ten Precepts (including the Five Precepts) properly, not committing any violations, then all the precepts are covered. Shifu had thus turned a

complex question into something simple, making it easy for us to understand the overall direction.

Whatever Shifu did, he always set a good example. When he went anywhere to give Dharma talks, whether he was staying at an inn or a hotel, he would tidy up the room when he left so it appeared as if no one had used it. Shifu also taught us to do that. Just because we paid for the room, we shouldn't expect others to serve us. This is an attitude about life, and about practice. What Shifu taught us about our conduct and deportment was very useful as well. Wherever we went, we should return anything we have used back to its original place, and keep public places clean and tidy. This is a very good education for everyone.

Shifu used to tell us that to spread the Buddhadharma, if one has a good grasp of the essence, one can give Dharma talks from the northern tip of the island of Taiwan down to the tail end in the south, and even overseas. Whatever we do requires a certain level of mastery, simplifying complexities while understanding the right direction. After listening to Shifu's advice, it made us feel that

spreading the Dharma isn't really so hard.

## Shifu was the great benefactor in my life

After being a monastic for 10 years, the monastic community sent Guo Zhou Fashi and me to Thailand for a year of study. During that period, I fell sick. I actually had heat stroke. Since I ignored my condition, it affected other organs and I almost lost my life. Without family or friends around me, I was afraid, and not ready to accept what was happening. Feeling that my own practice was still insufficient and there were still many things to be done—plus my teachers, elders and parents were still alive—how could I just leave? But life and death are beyond human control. By that time, I couldn't eat anything. Whatever I ate, I threw up. I couldn't even keep the prescriptions from the doctor down. I was waiting for death to come. In fact, I didn't fully understand the matter of life and death. So I was afraid of death. Now I am not afraid of death, as living and dying are really a single phenomenon. I was able to see this because of Shifu's Dharma talks. Shifu told us that when we are terminally ill, we should “let the doctor take

care of your body, and put your life in the good hands of the buddhas and bodhisattvas.” Do whatever needs to be done. Everything else, you can let go of.

Shifu has been a great benefactor in my life, and he was also my mother’s benefactor. After I moved into Nung Chan Monastery as a postulant, my mother suffered a setback and became depressed. I had helped her fight her depression for 10 years. In the end, it was Shifu who helped her overcome this problem. I was deeply moved by Shifu’s compassion. I was also thankful to Shifu for encouraging me to develop my chanting potential to the fullest. When I first started to learn how to chant, I was doing fine with the morning and evening services. But when it came to learning how to sing and chant “In Praise of the Jeweled Censor” it was very difficult! But as a result of Shifu’s encouragement, I began to have confidence in myself. No matter how difficult it was, I was determined to master it.

In addition, Shifu was very good at finding the right opportunity for spontaneous teaching. I remember once at Nung Chan Monastery, everyone was in the kitchen after

breakfast. Shifu said, “Guo Fang, please go and pick up that leaf.” I am short-sighted, so without hesitating, I went over to pick up that “leaf.” But when I touched it, I jumped. To my great surprise, the “leaf” could move! It was actually a large green caterpillar, soft and gentle. I was startled! Everyone had a good laugh. That’s how Shifu taught us. Whatever we do, we must look carefully, see clearly. If we are hasty and reckless, nothing will ever get done.

Lastly, I am grateful to Shifu for having delivered my mother and me, as well as many others with whom he crossed paths, so that the true Dharma can live on. We should make a vow to repay the kindness we received from our teacher, and work towards the benefit of sentient beings till the end of all time, practicing the path of the bodhisattvas. I make a vow every day that I will be reborn in the Western Pure Land by chanting the Buddha’s name. I also hope to come back, to follow the Buddha in every lifetime, leaving home to become a monastic, practicing the Bodhisattva path till I have attained Buddhahood.

*(This talk was delivered on November 18, 2009  
at the Sheng Yen Education Foundation)*



## **Go where the Buddhadharma is needed most**

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Chang Kuan Fashi

*Since Sheng Yen Shifu passed away, everyone has been hoping that he will come back to Dharma Drum Mountain, fulfilling his vows.*

*I have asked myself: Where will Shifu go?*

*I believe that wherever the Buddhadharma is needed, Shifu will go –wherever it is needed most.*



## **Introducing the Speaker**

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### **Chang Kuan Fashi**

Ordained in 2001, Chang Kuan Fashi twice served as personal attendant to Sheng Yen Shifu. He is currently the Vice Dean of Dharma Drum Sangha University. From the time Shifu was taken ill and hospitalized, till he moved into his official residence (now the Sheng Yen Lecture Hall), Chang Kuan Fashi was always by his side, doing his best to look after Shifu. Although Fashi is reserved and quiet by nature, he would frequently strike up bedside conversations with Shifu, talking about how Shifu was dealing with the pain of his illness as well as living and dying. By listening to what Shifu had to say, Fashi gained profound insight.

I am not very good with words. Having spent some time with Shifu, there are actually many thoughts and feelings lodged deep in my heart.

I first met Shifu in 1994. During that time, I was studying in the United States. Because my father had been diagnosed with cancer and hospitalized at National Taiwan University Hospital, I came back to look after him. At that time my friends suggested that we should go pray at temples, and make a point to visit Nung Chan Monastery. I didn't know where Nung Chan Monastery was, and didn't even know who Master Sheng Yen was. The day we arrived at Nung Chan Monastery, we came across Shifu on his way out at the end of the alley. He greeted both my father and me from inside his car. That was the first time I met Shifu, and the last time my father met him. Three months later, my father passed away.

## Stories of the Sages: Planting the seed for becoming a monastic

After my father passed away, I went back to the

United States to continue with my studies, and wanted to learn more about Buddhism. I then joined the Michigan State Buddhist Society. There were two sets of books at the Buddhist Society that attracted me, one was the Miao Yun Collection by Master Yinshun, and the other was The Complete Works of Master Sheng Yen by Sheng Yen Shifu. During that time I was new to Buddhist texts. Because I tended to like things that were green while I was studying in America—my coats and my car were green—and the cover of the Complete Works was also green, that’s what I chose. Out of all the books in the collection, I picked “Stories of the Sages,” which is the first book by Shifu that I read. It was only after reading it that I found out that the book told the stories of how the Buddha’s disciples left home to join the monastic order. Maybe that’s when the seed for me to leave home in the future was planted.

After I finished my studies in the United States, I decided to go back to Taiwan. The people at the Buddhist Society asked me which practice center I would go to when I was back in Taiwan. I couldn’t answer. All I wanted to do was buy a copy of the The Complete Works of Master

Sheng Yen the moment I got back to Taiwan. The first place I visited after returning to Taiwan was the Anho Branch Monastery in Taipei, which put me in contact with Dharma Drum Mountain. By 1999 I had already worked for several years, and started to seriously think of finding my dream job. At that time, I saw a recruitment advertisement in the “Dharma Drum Monthly” newsletter. I thought I would give it a try, and sent in my resume. In actual fact, I sent out two resumes during that time, one to the Dharma Drum Corporation and another to the Eslite Book Store. On the same day, I received a phone call from Dharma Drum Corporation for an interview in the morning, and a call from the Eslite Book Store in the afternoon. By then I had already made up my mind to work at the Dharma Drum Corporation (DDC). That’s how things came to be.

At that time, the DDC was hiring employees for positions including editing and sales. But I didn’t have expertise in either. The last position available was as a warehouse manager. I thought maybe I could do that. During the interview, the Fashi and supervisors asked

me, “You have a master’s degree. Are you sure you want to come to Dharma Drum Corporation to move books?” I said I only wanted to learn more about Buddhism, and the salary was not so important. Luckily, I was hired. From then on, I worked in the DDC warehouse moving books around for two years. During that time, whenever Shifu returned to Taiwan from the United States, he would definitely visit the Foundation, the Institute of Buddhist Culture, and the DDC to see how all the full-time employees were doing. Every time Shifu came to the DDC the general manager would introduce me to Shifu by saying that I studied mathematics, and was brought there specifically to help Shifu count the books.

## “In the future, you should take good care of Shifu”

The few encounters I had with Shifu definitely left an impression on me. Although Shifu rarely talked, in my heart, I felt there was an affinity. In 2000 I decided to leave home and become a monastic. The monastic community arranged a gathering for the family members of those

seeking ordination with Shifu. My mother and my sister came. Shifu asked me, “How come your father isn’t here?” I said my father had already passed away. Following that, Shifu said to me, in front of my family, “Then in the future, you should take good care of Shifu.” I didn’t know why Shifu would say that.

After having my head shaved and becoming a monastic in July of 2001, the monastic community arranged for me to serve as Shifu’s personal attendant, the first time I filled that position. The first time I drove Shifu, we went to the recording studio of China Television (CTV) for the production of the program “A Different Voice.” Shifu sat in the front seat. It was a very unusual feeling. Since I was sitting so close to Shifu, I was very nervous along the way. Sitting very upright and still, my mind generated many fears. I once heard Shifu say, “I think I am a very compassionate person, so why does everyone hide when they see me?” Actually that was due to a feeling of reverence and awe. It’s just like back then, when my palms were always sweaty, and I remember as we were taking the off ramp, Shifu asked me, “Chang Kuan, is your mind at peace in

the sangha community?” I didn’t answer. But after that incident, I became calmer and more at peace, instead of being so uptight. No matter what situation I came across subsequently, I would ask myself if my mind was at peace.

The first time I worked as his personal attendant, I felt that it was Shifu who took care of me. Shifu would teach me how to fold the clothes, how to keep the robes, how to fold the blankets, and he even taught me how to be his calligrapher’s assistant. As his assistant, whenever Shifu was writing calligraphy, I would help him to grind the ink stick or replenish the ink supply. The first time I watched Shifu write calligraphy, it was in the Abbot’s room on the second floor of the monks’ quarters at Nung Chan Monastery. At that time, Shifu wrote four large characters: “Water Moon Dharma Center.” But this piece of calligraphy was almost ruined by my own hands.

At the start, Shifu was certain he wanted to write in large characters. Therefore a long piece of fine writing paper was prepared. After writing the two words, “Water Moon,” the paper had to be shifted in order to continue

writing. At that moment, Shifu and I both pulled the paper from opposite corners. When Shifu moved the paper towards him, I had not let go. I immediately heard the sound of the paper tearing. Luckily, only a tiny corner was damaged. After the calligraphy was mounted and framed, the damage wasn't very visible. From then onwards, I was quite apprehensive about being Shifu's calligraphy assistant. Every time Shifu wanted to write calligraphy, I would quickly go wash the car. At that time, another personal attendant, Guo Yao Fashi, made a point to ask me, "Shifu is writing calligraphy right now. Why don't you go up?" In reality, I was avoiding going up because the previous time I helped, Shifu had said, "Oh! Chang Kuan cannot be a calligraphy writing assistant." So I had no confidence that I could do the job. But Guo Yao Fashi said, "Shifu is testing you! You should still go up." Finally, I went up. After that incident, I had an easier time communicating with Shifu, and I didn't find him as stern and strict. On the other hand, he can be very humorous and gentle.

A year later I was posted to Dharma Drum Sangha University as a Monastic Advisor. Before I left my position

as Shifu's attendant, I had some mixed feelings, because I realized that any tacit, mutual understanding between people needs to be cultivated. My departure would mean that Shifu needed to establish a new rapport with the incoming personal attendant. It would be hard for Shifu. But how did I build up a rapport with Shifu? It had to be developed slowly through the various roles that the personal attendant played.

## Not too tight, not too loose

One of my roles as a personal attendant was to accompany Shifu on his hiking trips. Near the Chung-Hwa Institute of Buddhist Culture in Beitou, there's a monastery called Shan Guang Monastery, and Shifu used to go hiking there often. The monk's shoes that Shifu wore were not suitable for the mountainous terrain. So we bought two pairs of sneakers for him. In order to match Shifu's robe, we bought brown sneakers, one pair for the car and another for his living quarters. One evening, Shifu's confidential secretary said to me, "You need to help Shifu put on his shoes." I thought that was strange.

So I asked, “Doesn’t Shifu know how to put on his shoes?” The confidential secretary didn’t answer me, but expected me to do as I was told. Therefore, I started to visualise how it should be done, and even did some simulations in advance—placing a stool where Shifu would descend the stairs, putting his shoes in the proper place, and then thinking about where I would position myself after he had come down the stairs. When Shifu actually came down the stairs, I knelt down to help him put on his shoes. Shifu asked me, “Does Chang Kuan know how to tie shoelaces?” I said, “Your disciple knows how to tie his own shoelaces.” Then I heard Shifu say to me, “Not too tight, and not too loose.”

I heard what he said quite clearly. However, since I was not the one wearing the shoes, how would I know if they were not too tight, and not too loose? Subsequently when Shifu was hiking up towards Shan Guang Monastery, the right shoe lace came loose. Shifu said, “Didn’t I tell you, not too tight and not too loose?” Around the same time next day, Shifu was getting ready to go out. I was still pondering over what constituted “not too tight, but not too

loose.” As I was helping Shifu tie the right shoelace, Shifu suddenly bent down and tied the shoelace for the other foot. So I was tying the right shoelace at the same time Shifu was tying the left one. That was when I established a tacit understanding with Shifu. Shifu’s shoelaces never became loose again.

From that incident, I learned that it’s harder to get things just right when we want to help others. That’s why the Buddhadharma talks about having compassion and wisdom simultaneously, and not separately. Only with the dual practice of compassion and wisdom can we achieve the state of perfection.

July 31, 2002 was the last day I served as Shifu’s personal attendant. That night was last time I helped cover Shifu with his blanket at Nung Chan Monastery. In my heart, I had things I wanted to say, but I couldn’t get them out. It wasn’t until the next day when I was walking on Daye Road, heading back to Dharma Drum Mountain, that I realized I had a filial affection for Shifu, like a son for his father. Although I told myself that, “I’m already

a monastic. So I should be able to pick things up when I should, and let them go when I should.” And yet, there are still traces, emotional stirrings, in my heart.

Between 2002 and 2005 Shifu had several different personal attendants. During that time, I was working at Dharma Drum Sangha University. However, I still served as acting personal attendant a few times, and many things happened.

During my tenure as acting personal attendant in 2003, every night I would go and check to see if Shifu had gone to bed, or ask him not to stay up too late. After that, Shifu was concerned that I would worry. So he moved a table lamp and desk, by himself, from the reception room into his living quarters. As the desk was very heavy, and during that particular period Shifu had been quite exhausted, when he moved the desk there was a pressure surge in his upper body. This caused unusually high pressure in his eyes that resulted in bleeding. I felt really remorseful about that, feeling that a personal attendant’s responsibility should be to take care of Shifu. However

out of consideration for his attendant, Shifu would rather trouble himself, even to the extent of hurting himself.

## Repaying Shifu's kindness for my whole life

In April of 2005, Shifu traveled to China for some academic meetings. At that time he had not yet become ill, and so was fast on his feet, which most people would describe as “walking like he was flying.” At the end of the trip I accompanied Shifu to Hong Kong to change planes. I had two monastic backpacks on my back, Shifu's and my own. I was also lugging a suitcase in each hand. As we rode the escalator, I saw our airport guide get off the escalator and walk to the right. But I also saw that another accompanying layperson, who had fallen behind, turned left. Since Shifu was walking behind that layperson, Shifu naturally turned left. So I shouted out, “Shifu, you're going the wrong way!” As a result, Shifu turned his head, and tripped and fell over the suitcase I was lugging along. I quickly helped Shifu up. But after that, my mind was a blank. I was totally at a loss. All I could think was, “How

could that happen? How could I let Shifu fall down?”

On the flight back I wasn't able to eat at all, nor was I able to drink any water. My mind was totally blank. When we arrived at Taiwan's Taoyuan International Airport, everyone was waiting for their luggage at customs. I only remember giving Shifu some water, and heard him telling me, “Chang Kuan, where is my monk's bag?” Then I realized I had left Shifu's bag on the plane. Then Shifu said, “Chang Kuan's in a demonic state!” Then he said, “You will still trouble me one more time.”

After returning to Dharma Drum Mountain, I was too ashamed to face the sangha community, nor was I able to account to everyone for what had happened. I packed my belongings and asked a monastic who was my roommate to drive me to Jinshan Road to take the bus. I also asked him to help look after Shifu in my stead. He knew I was very remorseful, and said, “If you really decide to leave, you need to tell Shifu yourself.” I was extremely tormented at that time, not knowing how to face Shifu. But I still decided to bid farewell to Shifu. That afternoon, Shifu saw

me in the monks' quarters reception room. I knelt in front of him and repented, saying that I was not qualified to be a personal attendant. Shifu then said, "There won't be more than three incidents. Didn't I tell you that you'll trouble me once more? That was the third time, so there won't be a fourth. Everything's all right now." After that, he said to me, "In the future, you should repay Shifu's kindness for the rest of your life."

Then Shifu gave a Dharma talk at the temporary monastic quarters, which he asked me to attend. Shifu told everyone in the assembly about this incident, saying that in dealing with ourselves, we might occasionally bite our tongue with our own teeth. Even moreso, when there are two different entities, there are bound to be conflicts or friction. Shifu was trying to get me let go of the obstacles in my mind through his Dharma talk, hoping that I would be able to put my mind at ease. A few days later I was up on the mountain, and Shifu called me from Nung Chan Monastery. But I wasn't around to take his call. Another monastic conveyed Shifu's message, and told me, "Shifu said he is much better now. He doesn't need to use the

walking stick. He asked Chang Kuan not to worry.” At the end of the trip to Thailand, Shifu flew directly to the United States, and called me again from there. This time, someone took the call and conveyed Shifu’s message to me: “Shifu said he has completely recovered, and is able to move around freely. Please ask Chang Kuan not to worry.” At that time, the other monastic even conveyed another piece of advice from Shifu, “Shifu said, you are called Chang Kuan [in Chinese, the word kuan means “broad”]. First you need to broaden your mind, only then can you broaden the minds of sentient beings.” After several reminders from Shifu, I finally was able to put down the burden in my mind and transform it into positive energy.

## A complete education about life

Everyone knows that Shifu was hospitalized in 2005. In August of that year, he traveled to Japan to inspect the work on the Lotus Bell. When he had a medical exam upon returning from that trip, tumors were found in his kidneys. When I heard that news at National Taiwan University Hospital, my immediate response was that I had returned

to a familiar situation again, right back at the same old place. Why did I think like that? Because I still hadn't overcome the grief of losing my father. Besides, I always felt that the interactions between the patient, his family members and the medical staff could be smoother. In that respect, I felt that Shifu did well. For three and a half years, Shifu used his life to educate us. What we normally see is family members blaming the doctors, or family members who are too exhausted and fight amongst themselves. But in the more than three years after Shifu was admitted, we had excellent communications with the medical team. For me, going back to National Taiwan University Hospital was like getting a complete education about life.

On October 27, 2005, Shifu was discharged and moved into his official residence, where our lifestyle was quite different from that in the sangha community. It was like living in a small family, and the members of the household were Shifu with his three personal attendants. Whenever Shifu was staying at his official residence, he would handle documents or had visitors. But most of the time, he would be writing calligraphy, which he did

frequently during that period. Sometimes he would even use the names of us attendants to write verses. Shifu always talked about Chang Yuan and me, saying that Chang Yuan speaks, regardless of whether he should speak up or not, while I, Chang Kuan, don't say anything regardless of whether I should or not. That's because there are times I can go for a whole day without talking. Therefore Shifu wrote this: "It's rare to encounter a true friend, but do not ignore others for a lonesome solitude." Those two verses were meant to tame my mind. Then the next verses were, "Too much thinking and worry increases obstacles, fewer vexations and distress generates merit." When Shifu saw that I was losing weight, he asked me why. I didn't answer. Shifu then said, "First, you haven't been eating your "medicinal meal" [for monastics, that means the evening meal]. Second, you think too much." Shifu made an analogy using a farmer. While working the fields, the farmer isn't forever thinking about just how he should sow and plow. Wherever his hands are, that's where his mind is. So his mind won't be filled with thoughts.

During my tenure as Shifu's personal attendant,

besides driving the car, I also did secretarial work involving all sorts of communication and coordination. I remember once I was making a phone call, and Shifu was beside me. In my phone conversation, I said, “I am Chang Kuan.” Shifu corrected me, saying, “Who is Chang Kuan? You should say you are Master Sheng Yen’s personal attendant at Dharma Drum Mountain. Otherwise how will people know who Chang Kuan is?” That’s the first time Shifu taught me how to handle things. Working with Shifu was definitely full of heartwarming memories.

## An extra bed for the sickroom

In the later stages of Shifu’s kidney dialysis, his body started to itch and he slept poorly. We were worried that Shifu might turn over during the night, throw off his blanket, and catch a cold. So we put an extra bed in Shifu’s bedroom, right beside his bed. That decision was made after much discussion before Shifu agreed, because he didn’t want his personal attendants’ sleep to be affected while taking care of him. Therefore, I took a different approach to talk to Shifu by saying, “Shifu, you’ve said

before that there's something called "fragmentary samsara." Now, your disciples are practicing "fragmentary sleep." Whenever we have time, we can rest anytime, so our sleep won't be affected." Shifu finally agreed. Starting in 2008, I had been sleeping in the extra bed in Shifu's room. The moment Shifu turned his body or made any movement, I would immediately notice. But there was one time when Shifu got out of bed without calling me. He almost fell down. Luckily, before he fell, I was able to get up to help him. Shifu said, "And here I always thought you were a slow poke, Chang Kuan."

Many people ask why eminent monks, who have already seen through the illusion of life and death, still suffer the pains of illness. Shifu told us a story about an eminent monk from the past who had a serious illness in old age. When he felt pain, he would scream. His disciple asked, "Shifu, haven't you already transcended life and death? Then why are you still screaming with pain?" The eminent monk said, "Transcending life and death is transcending life and death, but pain is still pain!" What I'd like to share with you all is, everyone experiences bodily

pain when they're ill. The difference lies in whether that pain will affect your emotional well-being. When Shifu felt pain, he would let us know, but not by becoming emotional. Those of us who were looking after Shifu would think about what was the best way to help him.

In addition, we must have our own practice methods. Chang Yuan Fashi asked Shifu for advice about this. When Shifu was feeling very itchy and very uncomfortable, did he use the Huatou method? Shifu said he used the method of reciting the Buddha's name. In fact, it's just as Shifu always taught: even when we're sick, we need to have a healthy attitude about being sick. Although there are bodily pains from our illness, the psychological aspect in us must be healthy. Whatever needs to be done, should be done. Just because we have solid practice skills doesn't mean we should allow pain to persist, and ignore it. Illness involves two elements, so we should also consider those who are taking care of us. They can't bear to see the patient suffering in pain. During this period when Shifu was sick, we really learned a lot.

## The Buddhadharma is also found in our sorrows

While taking care of Shifu, I felt the most important element was not just filial dedication, but even more so—fulfilling his wishes. For the elderly, getting their needs or wishes fulfilled means a lot more than just being dedicated. Therefore, I told myself that I should not get temperamental in any circumstances, and I should establish good communication with him. In taking care of Shifu, everything could be communicated about including his dietary needs, medical treatment, and other issues. The best approach was to list out a few options, and make the decision through discussion. As different people have different perspectives, there will be different viewpoints. For example, the personal attendant handling Shifu's diet, the doctor and the nutritionist may all have different opinions. But through discussion, the optimum solution could be agreed upon. We would normally discuss things among ourselves before reporting to Shifu, and let Shifu make the final decision.

Shifu had previously said that when the day came for him to leave, he wanted to leave with a certain quality of life. What does that mean? A few years ago, before undergoing any major surgery, Shifu signed a Do Not Resuscitate (DNR) Agreement. If he was unconscious, Shifu did not want tubes inserted into his body or any invasive emergency treatment. This is very important. The patient's family will often choose emergency treatment because they are not ready for the patient to die. But as a result, the patient suffers even more. The patient will be experiencing great pain, and yet cannot speak, which causes great anguish. When Shifu was ill, he emphasized respect for quality of life numerous times, remaining committed to upholding that quality of life until the very last breath.

On February 3, 2009, Shifu was discharged from National Taiwan University Hospital, and passed away en route to Dharma Drum Mountain. At that time, none of his three personal attendants were by his side. Instead, the Abbot President, the monastic Director-in-Chief, and a medical attendant were traveling with Shifu in the same

car. In fact, since the moment I knew Shifu had cancer, I had thought about this: “What if the day really comes and I am not at Shifu’s side? I just want to be able to say “Good-bye.” I also remember the day I received the full precepts. Everyone had to make three vows. I wrote down, “I will protect and support Dharma Drum Mountain lifetime after lifetime.”

It has been seven months and ten days since Shifu passed away, and slowly, I feel that I’ve gotten out from under it. It was only after I left home to become a monastic that I started to feel that I cry often. I am not sure if, before I left home, I didn’t cry because of social constraints that prohibit men from crying. Hence I didn’t dare cry. In fact, I noticed that there is Buddhadharma in our sorrows. It all depends on how we transform it. Since Shifu passed away, everyone has been hoping that he will return to fulfill his vows, and return to Dharma Drum Mountain. I have asked myself, where will Shifu go? I believe wherever there is a need for the Buddha, a need for the Buddhadharma, Shifu will go there –wherever the Buddhadharma is needed most. Right now, which part of the world needs

the Buddhadharma the most? Maybe it's the most unstable  
places that need the Buddhadharma the most.

*(Talk delivered on September 23, 2009  
at the Sheng Yen Education Foundation)*

## **A classic example, forever in my heart**

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Chang Yuan Fashi

*Even though Shifu is gone, his Dharma body and spirit will always be with us.*

*His comportment will remain a classic example that can help us as we work to remove our vexations, his Dharma body forever in our hearts.*



## **Introducing the Speaker**

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### **Chang Yuan Fashi**

Chang Yuan Fashi was ordained in 2001. Prior to ordination, he had volunteered in the living quarters of Nung Chan Monastery. In 2002, he began his Sangha education at Dharma Drum Sangha University (DDSU). Thereafter, he became Shifu's personal attendant, a position he held until Shifu passed away. Although he is comparatively young, he was a very attentive caregiver.

I lived here (the Sheng Yen Education Foundation, formerly Shifu's official residence) for over three years when I was working as Shifu's personal attendant. During that time, the monk's quarters where we slept was behind this classroom, separated by a curtain. It was a spacious area where we slept comfortably. Today, I'm here to share some stories about Shifu's everyday life.

## The qualities of an eminent monk

We all admire and respect Shifu enormously. In our society, he is considered an eminent monk. But what does it take to be an eminent monk? Shifu himself taught us that to determine if a monk is eminent, we need to assess his past accomplishments, thoughts, and moral conduct—his behavior. The first criteria is accomplishments, such as translations, sutra lectures, writings and setting up monasteries. Shifu himself established a number of monasteries, including DDM headquarters and all of the DDM branch monasteries. He also lectured and wrote extensively, with over 100 books in the Complete Works of Master Sheng Yen. In addition, he promoted the idea

of a Pure Land on Earth and the Protecting the Spiritual Environment movement. All these are his accomplishments and ideas. The third criteria is moral behavior, including Shifu's work-style and guiding principles for action and decision making. The Dharma Drum Mountain "way" was derived from Shifu, who lead by example, exemplifying correct moral conduct and ethics in his own behavior.

When I was in my fourth year at DDSU in 2005, the sangha community assigned me to be Shifu's personal attendant. Before that, I hardly had any access to Shifu. I remember the first time I accompanied Shifu on a hike. I was really nervous. At that time, I was newly ordained and did not know much. Throughout the entire hike, my mind was not very clear and I did not know what I should do. In the end, I decided to recite the Buddha's name in order to calm myself down, and completed the entire route with Shifu.

## Shaving Shifu's head

After becoming Shifu's personal attendant, there's one incident that I remember very clearly. In September

of 2005, Shifu was hospitalized for major surgery. He was very weak. One of my jobs at that time was to help Shifu shave his head. In the beginning, I was very nervous because I had never been so close to Shifu physically, and especially since I had to shave his head.

Shifu guided me the first time, step-by-step. He asked me to prepare a bowl of warm water and a razor. Shifu used a straight razor with an exposed blade. Therefore it had to be used with care. While shaving his head, I was worried that I did not use the right amount of force, afraid that I might hurt Shifu. Therefore, my movements were very slow. Half way through, Shifu said, “Chang Yuan, why do you use a different amount of pressure each time? Is your mind restless?” Upon hearing this, I was even more nervous. So that was my first experience shaving Shifu’s head.

After Shifu was discharged from the hospital, his health gradually improved and he did not need me to shave his head. By 2007, Shifu’s health condition deteriorated again and I had another opportunity to help him shave his

head. Come every weekend, I would ask Shifu if he had time, and if he wanted to shave his head. Every time, Shifu would say yes. Initially, I would spend up to half an hour to complete the task. After gaining more skill, I only needed 15 minutes. Sometimes Shifu would be very happy and say to me, “Chang Yuan didn’t shave my head off. He did a very clean job. Very good !”

## Putting himself in other people’s shoes, consideration for others

I first started as a personal attendant for Shifu’s diet. Cooking is not difficult for me. The key point is to bring out the food’s true flavor. But it is another story when cooking for someone who is sick. After Shifu started his kidney dialysis program, the amount of nutrients in his meals had to be calculated accurately. For instance, the meal would have a pre-determined amount of nutrients such as protein, calories, potassium, sodium and phosphorous, which I also needed to be aware of. Therefore, the responsibility of Shifu’s personal attendant for meals included the role of nutritionist. The amount of

nutrition in Shifu's meals had to be manually calculated. At first, I spent a lot of time doing it. After I got used to it, I did the calculations faster.

In theory, after serving as Shifu's personal attendant for dietary matters for a period of time, I should have understood his personal taste and preferences. But in reality, that was not the case. I still often heard Shifu say, "I can't eat the food today. It's too salty." Or, "The food is tasteless." At first, I did not know why these things happened. It was only later that I realized Shifu's taste buds had deteriorated. When a person's body is weakened, it is normal to lose one's appetite and taste for food. But at that time, I didn't know this could happen to the elderly. It was only later that I managed to adjust Shifu's meals according to his health condition.

In reality, many things happen without us knowing what the real causes are. Hence we often tend to blame others or vex ourselves. If we can put ourselves in the shoes of others to understand the situation, empathize with how others feel, things can get better and we will not

get perturbed as much. Having spent three years working closely with Shifu, I learned a lot.

## As long as we are alive, there is meaning

Shifu was admitted to the hospital in September, 2005 to begin kidney dialysis, and it was quite an ordeal for him. Once I asked him, “How do you deal with this kidney dialysis?” Shifu said, just “face it, accept it, deal with it, let it go.” Shifu always said, when we reach old age, age-related illnesses become a constant companion. When one is sick, one has to face it, and do whatever it takes to treat the illness. And what if the doctors cannot even treat it? Then just let it go.

Shifu told a story from the sutras: The Buddha once asked his disciple, “If someone has been shot by an arrow, what is the first thing you should do? Should you treat the wound immediately, or ask—Why am I the one who got shot?” Of course, we should treat the wound immediately. But most people’s response is to fall into self-pity and grievances, complaining that they are the ones who have

been afflicted with a serious illness. Therefore Shifu told us that when one is sick, one should face the illness and accept the situation, as only then can one deal with it and let it go. Being able to face it and accept it is a kind of positive energy. One's attitude will become healthier, and we'll be able to get rid of unnecessary vexations without forever rubbing salt on the wound, generating more serious problems.

Shifu encouraged everyone with his teachings, which he himself put into practice, energetically leading by his own example. He once said, "When you are sick, you should let the doctors treat your body, and put your life in the good hands of the buddhas and bodhisattvas." Shifu really lived by what he taught. He trusted the medical staff and rarely questioned them about medical treatments. He wouldn't ask about his medical condition unless he felt some discomfort. Otherwise, he would not disturb them. Maybe many of you have heard this, but once an astrologist said that Shifu would live to the age of 65. But Shifu only started to build Dharma Drum Mountain when he was 60 years of age. At 70, he published The

Complete Works of Master Sheng Yen, and began the next generation of the DDM lineage with the Dharma name starting with “Chang.” And the Dharma Drum Mountain headquarters was officially opened when Shifu was 75 years old. Shifu never stopped moving ahead, regardless of what the astrologist had said. Even when he was sick, his contributions did not end. As Shifu said, as long as one is still alive, life is meaningful. In the last years of his life, Shifu attended numerous functions as part of his effort to support others in response to their needs, and be a force for peace.

## A life written in calligraphy

In his later years, Shifu wrote much calligraphy. When he wrote, he would be fully engrossed and put his entire life into the work. Beginning in 2006, Shifu would write whenever he had time, including when he woke up in the morning or after his afternoon nap. Sometimes, if he was up at night, he would write. One time when he was at the Chan Meditation Center in the US, on the day following kidney dialysis, Shifu started writing calligraphy even

before breakfast. I asked Shifu if he would eat first, and write later. Shifu said to me sternly, “Chang Yuan, don’t disturb me. My mind is clearer in the morning after waking up. I don’t know if I will still be alive tomorrow. If I can write now, I’ll write a bit more. I will write calligraphy first. After writing, I’ll eat. Take the food away!” Actually, Shifu was exhausted from the dialysis the day before, especially since that dialysis session was long. So it was after four o’clock in the afternoon by the time he came back. It was something I remember clearly. When Shifu wrote calligraphy in Taiwan, it was to support the establishment of Dharma Drum University. When he wrote in the United States, he did it to raise money for the building fund of the Chan Meditation Center.

Usually when we got up in the morning, we would help Shifu check his blood pressure and weight as part of the daily routine and monitoring. Next, we would ask Shifu to wash up and eat breakfast. Sometimes Shifu would miss his normal meal times or his snack because he was writing calligraphy. Therefore we would always try to negotiate with Shifu, or think of other ways to persuade

him. For example, we might say, “Shifu, would you please eat something first. Then you will have more energy to write calligraphy.” But Shifu would say, “I don’t know if I’ll still be alive tomorrow. If I can write now, I’d like to write more.” Upon hearing this, we could only concede. But each time, we would still ask Shifu, “Would you like to write calligraphy first, or have a snack?” The answer was usually, “I’ll write calligraphy first.”

After being the personal attendant in charge of Shifu’s diet for two years, my job assignment changed and I became Shifu’s personal attendant. I tend to be comparatively direct, a straight talker. When I stood beside him, watching Shifu write calligraphy, I would give him some ideas. Writing the four Chinese characters that comprise “Sheng Yen Academy” was one of my suggestions. In addition, I would frequently find other tasks for Shifu to do, hoping he would do more physical exercise. Particularly in his later years, Shifu’s physical energy progressively diminished. Even walking was very tedious for him. If he did not exercise, his condition would only worsen. Therefore I would think of many ways to get

Shifu up and about. Sometimes, I would ask Shifu if he would like to take a walk after his afternoon nap. When we were on the Dharma Drum Mountain campus, Shifu stayed at the Founder's Quarters. After waking up in the morning, I would tell him, "The air outside is very good. The flowers are blooming and the air is fresh. Would you like to go out for a walk?" Shifu would compassionately agree. It was much later that I realized Shifu had been accommodating our wishes.

Once, Shifu was very tired after he came back from kidney dialysis. Yet, I still asked Shifu to get up and go for a walk. Shifu agreed, but said that he would just do one circuit around the outside of the house, and I accompanied him. One we finished, Shifu just sat down and didn't walk any more. An hour later, I asked Shifu to walk another loop around the house. He kindly relented, got up and walked. But when he reached the office cubicles of two other personal attendants, Shifu told them, "Chang Yuan is too strict with me—worse than a prison warden!" At that time, I did not feel that I was being scolded. Instead, I felt Shifu's sense of humor. There are many unforgettable

memories from the time I spent with Shifu.

## Treating everyone equally

Maybe people envy Shifu's personal attendants. There were only a few of us, and we were always by his side. Maybe they think that Shifu looked after us a bit more. In reality, Shifu treated everyone equally. We were very close to Shifu, yet we were not attached to him emotionally. If there was any emotional attachment, it was our own issue. Shifu treated everyone impartially. Sometimes it was just a simple greeting such as "How's it going?" or "Everything OK at work?" But we all felt his concern for us. And that was our Shifu.

Being his personal attendant for the past few years, I feel that Shifu was someone who fulfilled wishes, whether those of his personal attendants, of monastics, or of so many laypeople. You may have heard this story. Many years ago at Nung Chan Monastery, a layperson bought some grapes imported from Japan and presented them to Shifu. Shifu said, "These grapes are very tasty, very

sweet.” After hearing that, that lay bodhisattva was very happy. Some time thereafter, he bought grapes again, and presented them to Shifu. Shifu told him on the spot, “These grapes are very nice, but I’m not a glutton.” What did he mean? When a layperson brought food and gave it to Shifu, of course he would say it tasted good. It was his way of caring, and granting our wishes. Sometimes, when Shifu visited the kitchen, he would praise the volunteers for the delicious meals they cooked. That was also his way of caring and fulfilling our wishes.

## Working for the benefit of sentient beings every day

Do you all know what the “DDM tradition of Chan spirit” means? It means that each and every day: “no work, no eat.” Shifu often said this in his morning Dharma talk. He advised monastics: “Don’t eat rice if you haven’t done anything, haven’t made a contribution.” When Shifu was staying at his residence, if his schedule for that day was light, he would say, “I’m eating rice without doing anything.” What he meant was—he didn’t make much of

a contribution that day, which is like eating rice without justification. It was always Shifu's way of giving himself continuously, making giving his mission, doing something meaningful for sentient beings every day.

In December of 2007, Dharma Drum Mountain organized the first Great Compassion Liberation Rite of Water and Land. At that time, Shifu had begun to recover from his illness and had to use a wheelchair. However, he still insisted on personally inspecting the ten platforms all over the mountain. I was very worried because Shifu's physical condition did not allow him to work too hard. So before his inspection tour, I discussed some conditions with him, one of which was that if he wanted to go on that kind of tour, he had to come back after an hour so he could rest. Shifu agreed.

At eight o'clock that morning, Shifu started his inspection tour of the platforms. However by nine o'clock, even half past nine, he had not returned to his living quarters. I began to worry and starting calling the other personal attendant, asking him to bring Shifu back

immediately. By ten o'clock, there was still no sight of Shifu. By half past ten, I decided not to wait any longer. I went to the platform directly to bring Shifu back. At last, I saw Shifu at "The Dome." Shifu happily told me, "I inspected every single platform. And I've been obedient, moving around in the wheelchair, and walked very little." That morning, after inspecting things for three hours, Shifu was totally exhausted and very weak. The moment he went back to his living quarters, he lay down and rested.

Throughout Shifu's entire life, he lived to the fullest, contributing his life. Among the last few times everyone saw him was on January 3, 2009 when Dharma Drum Mountain was organizing year-end social care activities taking place simultaneously at headquarters and all of the branch monasteries. The first stop was Nung Chan Monastery, which Shifu made it a point to visit. Another time was January 17 of that year. By then, Shifu was already hospitalized. He took leave from the hospital to go back to Nung Chan Monastery, Yun Lai Monastery and the Chung-Hwa Institute of Buddhist Culture so he could personally thank everyone who had wished him well and chanted for

him during his illness. Until the last moment of his life, Shifu was still caring for each and every one of us.

## Will Shifu return to the human realm?

After Shifu passed away, a United Daily News report stated that during the terminal stage of his illness, Shifu said that he would return to this world, the human realm. In his books and his Dharma talks, Shifu had already talked about returning to the human realm, and even after he became ill, I heard him say that several times.

The first time I heard him talk about that issue was in May of 2007. When it was time for the evening meal, I asked Shifu to get ready to eat. But he said he had no appetite, and would not be able to eat. I asked Shifu to eat whatever he could. He did not finish the entire meal, and left a few mouthfuls in his bowl. Again, I asked Shifu to finish off the last little bit. Shifu said to me, “Chang Yuan! Shifu is no longer young. Young people have a flexible stomach and can eat another mouthful or two of food. But Shifu is old, and my digestive system has deteriorated. I

can only eat what I can eat. Please don't try to force me."

Filled with remorse, I said, "Your disciple knows Shifu is undergoing kidney dialysis and your diet needs to be controlled. So the food is not very tasty. If possible, your disciple would like to be your personal attendant again in the next life, to help prepare tastier meals for Shifu." Shifu then said, "Oh, Chang Yuan! Building a rapport and lasting bonds doesn't just involve you and me. We need to build bonds with all sentient beings." So I asked him, "Will Shifu come back to Dharma Drum Mountain again?" Shifu said, "The universe comprises countless worlds. There are countless sentient beings to be delivered everywhere. I don't know where I'll be in the next life".

The second time was in 2008. One night after Shifu had bathed and was getting ready to go to bed, I helped cover him with his blanket and chatted a bit. I said, "I feel so lucky to be able to practice with Shifu. In my next life, your disciple still wants to be your disciple." Shifu said, "Good." Then I asked again, "Shifu, will you come back to the human realm again?" At first, Shifu said, "Yes." Then

he said, “That kind of idea shows too much stubborn attachment. Shakyamuni Buddha said that there are countless worlds. I don’t know where I’ll go. Wherever sentient beings need me, I’ll go.”

The third time was also in 2008. One day near noon, Shifu was still undergoing kidney dialysis at National Taiwan University Hospital. I chatted with him, saying that Dharma Drum Mountain only existed because of him. And if one day Shifu should leave us, what would Dharma Drum Mountain do? Shifu said, “It doesn’t really matter. Even after I leave, Dharma Drum Mountain will not be affected.” Then I asked again, “Will Shifu come back to Dharma Drum Mountain again in the next life?” Shifu said, “Sure. If I don’t come to Dharma Drum Mountain, where will I go?”

## Repaying our teacher’s kindness by benefitting ourselves and others

Since we have all come to Dharma Drum Mountain, each of us must have a connection, some bond with Shifu.

We are involved in Dharma Drum Mountain because we have been moved by Shifu's compassionate vows. We believe in Shifu and have faith in Dharma Drum Mountain. Where does that faith come from? It comes from our own experiences with the Buddhadharma. The Dharma teaches us to have a sense of humility, contrition, and gratitude, so we can have fewer afflictions. For instance, many people like Chan meditation. That's because we have developed some deeper experiences during Chan retreats and found them to be useful. That's how the faith comes about, through practice. And I am deeply thankful to Shifu.

Lately I have seen many laypeople attending seven-day Amitabha chanting retreats or other group practices, which is a way of paying a debt of gratitude to Shifu. If we continuously develop ourselves, dissolve our self-centeredness and uplift our character, we are already paying our debt of gratitude. Because we study and practice the Buddhadharma, we rid ourselves of our bad physical, verbal and mental habits. That not only helps us, but also allows others to see our transformation, which encourages others to approach the Buddhadharma, and

derive the benefits from it. That's how we can show our gratitude to Shifu and repay him for his kindness.

Shifu always said that in studying and practicing the Dharma, the value of the initial aspiration to cultivate the path is incomparable. When you forget or are lazy, remind yourself to return to that original aspiration. People tend to be forgetful. What was done today will be forgotten tomorrow. The vows we made to the buddhas and bodhisattvas are forgotten after a while. Therefore, Shifu told us that we should make vows frequently—every day. Aspirations or vows are goals in life. There are small vows, medium-sized vows and great vows. There are the Four Great Vows, which are: 1) I vow to deliver innumerable sentient beings; 2) I vow to eliminate endless afflictions; 3) I vow to master innumerable approaches to Dharma; 4) I vow to attain the unexcelled enlightenment of a Buddha.” These are vows shared in common by all Buddhists. As Shifu has explained, we can start by making small vows or attainable vows. For example, I originally started by volunteering once a week. Then I vowed to volunteer a few days a week, or become a short-term volunteer after some

time, or become a lifetime volunteer. This is something achievable. We can also vow to do things such as bring in more people to study and practice the Buddhadharma, or help in fundraising activities for Dharma Drum University. For deeper vows, we can model ourselves after Shifu, who dedicated his life to the propagation of Dharma lifetime after lifetime.

Some people said that when Shifu passed away, I must have grieved the most. In reality, I was just the same as everyone else. Especially since many laypeople here have spent a much longer time learning from Shifu than me, your sorrow was probably no less than mine. Whenever we feel sad, or vexed, what should we do? We should use the methods Shifu taught us. Besides, Dharma Drum Mountain is a practice center dedicated to Guanyin Bodhisattva (Avalokiteshvara). We can empty our hearts, and tell Guanyin Bodhisattva our woes. Do you ever feel that we can always find the answer in Shifu's Dharma talks or books, so that our worries will be dispelled instantly? And that Shifu is like an embodiment of Guanyin Bodhisattva? Although Shifu's physical body is no longer

with us, his Dharma body and his spirit are always with us, no matter where we are. His conduct and comportment will always remain a classic example, one which will help us free ourselves from vexations. Shifu's Dharma body will always be in our hearts and minds.

*(Speech delivered on September 16, 2009  
at the Sheng Yen Education Foundation)*

## ***Appendix***

### **Dharma Drum Mountain Pocket Guides to Buddhist Wisdom**

*E-1 Meeting of Minds*

*E-2 In the Spirit of Chan*

*E-3 A General Introduction to the Bodhisattva Precepts*

*E-4 The Effects of Chan Meditation*

*E-5 The Meaning of Life*

*E-6 Why Take Refuge in the Three Jewels?*

*E-7 The Buddhadharma in Daily Life*

*E-8 A Happy Family and a Successful Career*

*E-9 Chan Practice and Faith*

*E-10 Establishing Global Ethics*

*E-11 Wu Ming Exposes Ignorance*

*E-12 The Buddha Mind, Universe, and Awakening*

*E-13 The Dharma Drum Lineage of Chan Buddhism*

*E-14 Master Sheng Yen*

*E-15 The Six Ethics of the Mind*

*E-16 Living in the 21st Century: A Buddhist View*

*E-17 Encounters with Master Sheng Yen*

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