

ENCOUNTERS  
*with* Master  
Sheng Yen ㊦

## **Encounters with Master Sheng Yen III**

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## Preface

In an effort to share with the public the thoughts and life experiences of Master Sheng Yen (commonly referred to in Chinese as *Shifu*), 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 “*Zhong Zheng Jing She*,” the residence where Master Sheng Yen lived in his final years). The talks were titled “A Living Example, Countless Teachings—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.

# Table of Contents

## **Extending a Great Legacy, Repaying a Master's Kindness**

Venerable Guo Jing ..... 7

## **Exemplifying the Essence of Buddhism**

Venerable Guo Guang ..... 33

## **Compassion, Acceptance, Commitments and Responsibilities**

Venerable Guo Yi ..... 59

## **Discovering Shifu's Compassionate Vows through His Writings**

Venerable Guo Sheng..... 81



## **Extending A Great Legacy, Repaying a Master's Kindness**

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Venerable Guo Jing

*Over the years, Master Sheng Yen never failed to pay his respects to the elders of the Sangha on every festive occasion. We would always, without fail, hear him expressing gratitude to them. He would always patiently recount to us how they cared for and looked after him in the past. He taught and inspired us all through his example, showing us that we should always be grateful to those who have benefited us, and that we should not forget to repay their kindness.*

## **Introducing the Speaker**

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### **Venerable Guo Jing**

Venerable Guo Jing became a monastic in 1983. She once served as the Director-in-Chief of Nung Chan Monastery, and in 1995 entered Bukkyo University in Kyoto, Japan, completing a Master's degree followed by a PhD. After her return to Taiwan in 2004 she served as the Vice Dean of the Buddhist Seminary at Dharma Drum Sangha University. She now holds various posts including Director, Chung-Hwa Institute of Buddhist Studies, special teaching fellow at Dharma Drum Buddhist College, Assistant Lecturer in the Department of Chinese Literature at National Chung Hsing University, and Assistant Lecturer in the Humanistic Care Center at the National Taiwan University of Science and Technology.

I studied and practiced the Buddhadharma with Shifu for nearly 30 years. There were many events over the years, but due to my poor memory, many are now a little vague. What I can do is share with you those stories I can recall clearly, those that I'm sure about.

Most of the earliest monastics at Dharma Drum Mountain (DDM) were participants in Chan retreats with Shifu. It was the same for me, too, and the impetus for my leaving home to become a monastic started with a seven-day Chan retreat. Now that I mention this, I have someone to thank—the secretary at the Chung-Hwa Institute of Buddhist Studies, Ms. Chen Xiulan. Thirty years ago we were both studying at Soochow University, and she was the president of the “Pure Wisdom Society.” She took the initiative and gave me a copy of Nung Chan Monastery’s Chan Retreat application form, and my affinity with Nung Chan Monastery started from there. At that time, I basically didn’t even know who Master Sheng Yen was!

## What is “solitary mind consciousness?”

After being admitted to the university the first thing I wanted to do was participate in a Buddhist group. I thought the name of every Buddhist group should include the word “Buddha,” so I searched the bulletin board of university clubs for the word “Buddha.” But I couldn’t find any, because at that time the Soochow University Buddhist group was called the “Pure Wisdom Society.” And that’s how I missed the opportunity to sign up with them during the first semester.

During my second year, someone passed a note into the classroom during a lecture. After passing through many hands, the note came to me, and I glanced at it. The note was to inform all students that: “The Pure Wisdom Society will be holding an activity during summer vacation. Would you like to participate?” Immediately, I thought—that’s interesting! This was what I had long been looking for but couldn’t find, and now it suddenly appeared! I approached a classmate right after the lecture to find out more, and asked if a non-member like myself

could participate. He consulted the group, then informed me that I was most welcome. That's how I finally took part in a Buddhist society.

The Pure Wisdom Society focused on the Pure Land practice of reciting the Buddha's name, guided by Venerable Chan Yun (Repentance Cloud). The first activity I took part in was a training for group members. That event had a profound effect on my whole life. It started the process of causes and conditions that led me to a seven-day Chan retreat with Master Sheng Yen.

The training was similar to many Buddhist camps. We performed morning and evening services, chanting sessions and took classes. I was completely new to Buddhism so everything was fascinating and fresh for me, and you could say I put my whole heart into all of their activities. Many reputable teachers such as Venerable Chan Yun and Venerable Zi Chang came regularly to give lectures and discourses. One time, right after the Buddha-name reciting session, we practiced silent sitting. While we were sitting, lights suddenly flashed right in front my eyes.

I had no idea what it was all about. But I was curious, and as I became attracted and attached, the shape of the light was transformed into the shape of a dragon's head. I was frightened...but then it vanished. After the sitting session was over I asked around, hoping to find an explanation about the light I saw. Unfortunately, no one could offer any sound answers. A monastic finally referred to my experience with the term "solitary mind consciousness." I could not understand, even though he explained it to me at length. So after the activity ended, I was disappointed. No one could clear up my uncertainty. Soon, I just decided not to recite the Buddha's name or do sitting practice, and withdrew from all the society's activities.

However, I was still engaged in sorting and arranging books for the Pure Wisdom Society in their library. One day, Xiulan gave me an application form for a seven-day Chan retreat organized by Nung Chan Monastery. She asked if I wanted to register. I really didn't pay much attention to it at the time, but I vaguely remembered that Xiulan said that Master Sheng Yen might be able to provide an answer to my earlier question. So I decided to give it a go.

## A temple that didn't look like a temple... somewhere at the other end of a paddy field.

Nung Chan Monastery is located in the Beitou District, just north of Taipei. I was quite familiar with Taipei then, but I had never been to Beitou and didn't know anything about it. So I took a bus to Beitou and tried to find my way. But when I got off the bus, as hard as I tried, I couldn't find No. 65 Da Ye Road. It was like being alone in the wilderness, with not a single house in sight. It was just clump after clump of grass, all of which were much taller than me. I remember it like it was yesterday. I walked on Da Ye Road for nearly an hour looking for someone to ask for directions. But I didn't see anyone. I finally met an old lady, who I regarded as my savior! When I enquired about Nung Chan Monastery she said she had never heard of it, and walked away. A while later, though, she turned around and told me about an odd-looking temple that didn't look like a temple somewhere at the other end of the paddy fields. I followed her directions and went along a small alley through the tall grass, and finally discovered Nung Chan Monastery.

In the early days, Shifu focused mainly on undergraduates in his seven-day retreats. When I first met him, he appeared to be very serious and strict. Like the rest of the participants, I feared him. I did not have the courage to look at him, or talk to him. Shifu remained very strict throughout the seven-day retreat. Even when everyone was practicing well on the fourth and fifth day he continued to be strict with us, using his stick and a loud, commanding voice. I had a very unusual experience during that retreat. In the middle of walking meditation practice, Shifu said, “If you can hear me, turn around once.” When I heard that my body turned around, once, on its own. My own response surprised me, because I turned around without intending to. It was my body’s natural response. Then Shifu walked over beside me, grabbed my hand and took my pulse. He then held my forehead with one hand, tapped the back of my head with the other, and walked away without saying anything.

I was very tense when he conducted interviews during the retreat, and stammered as I responded to his questions. I couldn’t finish a sentence. I did not have the courage to raise any questions, even questions about the experiences I

came across in my meditation. Nevertheless, I understood exactly what that experience was after I became a practicing monastic. It was simply an illusion, a natural occurrence in the course of meditation practice, and there was no need to pursue an explanation.

Thereafter I continued to take part in a few more seven-day Chan retreats, and also introduced many other students to DDM retreats. After completing my undergraduate studies in 1983 I felt I was at a crossroads in my life, not knowing where to go next, or how to get there. I felt lost, and rather bored. By then, Nung Chan Monastery was organizing a regular Sunday group meditation class, catering mainly to students from the university. Shifu was personally leading the two-hour class. The meditation class was conducted in the reception room, right behind the Three Saints of the West statues in the main hall. It was a small room, so if 20 or more of us attended, it was crowded. One day after class I remained in the room after everyone else had left. Shifu unexpectedly appeared and asked if anything was wrong. I stalled, and then replied, “Yes, there’s something...yet I also feel there’s

nothing wrong.” Shifu, with great compassion, repeated his question. I replied that I needed a quiet place. Upon hearing that, Shifu immediately picked up the phone and contacted someone on my behalf, and gave me the contact information of a monastery in Miaoli County. With that, I bid Shifu farewell, and left. It was a long time before I returned to Nung Chan Monastery again. And when I did, I had already been a monastic for six months.

I returned home and started sorting things out, gave away whatever I could, and packed up what I needed. Before visiting the monastery in Miaoli, I planned a hiking trip around Taiwan with one of my classmates. Hiking was quite popular during those days. Since neither of us had much money, our daily meals were simply crackers and instant noodles. There were times when we could only afford two nutritional biscuits for lunch. We hiked across northern, central and southern Taiwan, and headed to our last stop—He Nan Monastery (Vandana Monastery) in Hualien County on Taiwan’s east coast. That was where my classmate became a monastic. After the tour, my family kept me at home and didn’t let me leave again. So I

contacted the monastery in Miaoli. By then it was almost the end of the year, many months since I had received the contact information from Shifu. I spoke to the abbess, who thought I would never come, as she had not heard from me for such a long time. I assured her I would be coming as soon as I settled some personal matters.

## A once-in-a-lifetime opportunity

Looking back, leaving home to become a monastic wasn't easy for me, especially the very first step—getting out of the house. At that time, I heard an inner voice saying, “If you miss this chance, there won't be another one later.” But when I finally took that first step and left the house, my state of mind changed immediately. Before I got out the door, I was experiencing immense inner conflict. And I was only able to take that first step because my father inadvertently said something that helped me. To begin with, my mother was determined not to allow me to leave the house. So was my younger brother, who was physically stronger and bigger than me. My father, thinking that I was being bullied by my brother, felt bad for me. So when

the other members of my family weren't watching, he let me go out to ease my mind. I was struggling, my mind in an uproar, with one foot inside the door and the other foot out. Should I step out? Should I retreat? As I vacillated, without moving, my father (unaware of my state of mind) said loudly, "If you want to go, just do it openly!" So with his "unintentional blessing," I made my move and left the house! My mood changed in an instant, and I ran as fast as I could towards the bus station. When I got into the bus heading to Miaoli, I was overwhelmed and tears fell uncontrollably. The tears didn't stop flowing until I got off the bus and put both feet down in Miaoli, where I felt stable and grounded.

When I arrived at the monastery my mind was steady and stable, even though the environment was completely new and everyone was a stranger. In the evening, the abbess approached and spoke to me. She told me about the causes and conditions that had led her to leave home to become a monastic. Then she asked if I wanted to become a monastic." I answered in the affirmative, and then she left for a while. When she returned, she told me that she had

already contacted Master Sheng Yen over the phone and received his permission to shave my head. Looking at the lunar calendar she then said that the following day was an auspicious day, the birthday of Medicine Buddha, so that was the day I was tonsured.

Do you all think that I was just running away from home? Later, I heard that my father visited Shifu at Nung Chan Monastery—and not just once. Perhaps that was the only place they could think of. I wrote to my family a week after my head was shaved, asking them not to worry about me. The abbess sent the letter together with my recent photo. She took me home to visit my parents, too. So I became a nun even though my parents didn't agree with my decision and only gave me their grudging acceptance after the fact.

Shifu first gave me the Dharma name Guo Jing, using the Chinese character “jing” that means “pure.” Then he changed the second character to a homonym, so it's still pronounced “jing” but it means “mirror.” That happened just before I received my monastic precepts. I stayed at Pu

Guang Monastery in Miaoli for half a year before returning to Nung Chan Monastery.

I led a simple life during my six-month stay in Miaoli. I was in my early twenties, without any skills or experience. All I did was follow the other monastery residents into the mountains and gather tung seeds, a local agricultural specialty in Miaoli. Then we would sell them, which provided income for the monastery. Besides collecting tung seeds I took part in farming activities, learning to grow vegetables. Even though the chores and tasks were new to me, I was happy, and glad to be there.

Six months later I decided to return to Nung Chan Monastery. Shifu didn't know what I was going to do in advance, so when I showed up, everyone thought it was strange. Where did this monastic come from? Gradually, they got used to my presence. Shifu was extremely strict with me during those couple of years. Perhaps he understood my nature! Even though he was strict, he always gave me many opportunities. There were no more than 10 of us at Nung Chan Monastery, six of whom

were my senior (in terms of monastic service) and the rest were novice monks (sramineras). I was assigned to be the Director-in-Chief not long after I received my full monastic precepts. Even as the Director-in-Chief, it was the norm to receive scoldings from Shifu, who said, “I only scold people who can take it. I don’t scold those who can’t.” I understood very well that this was his way of guiding and teaching his disciples.

It was about ten years after I became a nun and took on responsibilities in the monastery that I left for Japan to further my studies. What impressed me immensely over that ten-year period was how Shifu, at every New Year and festive occasion, without fail, paid his respects and expressed his gratitude to the elders of the sangha. As he paid his respects, Shifu would share stories about his affinities with them and how they assisted and guided him in the early days. He would patiently recall those events, year after year. By setting an example, he taught and inspired us. He thus taught us that we should keep those who have benefited us in mind, and remember to repay their kindness.

## Two things Master Sheng Yen taught

In the early days, Shifu spent three months teaching in Taiwan and then another three months in America. When he was in the States he would write to encourage and inspire us. In his absence, the situation at Nung Chan Monastery was a little bit like that described in an old Chinese saying: “a group of worthies without a leader.” For me, that process became a kind of training. I was still young at the time, and although there were not many monastics and novices at Nung Chan Monastery, most of them were older than me. Although I was honored to be the Director-in-Chief, I lacked life experience and didn’t have much credibility with other people. I basically didn’t dare think about how to manage and lead. I could only attend to matters I was able to handle, and left the rest for Shifu!

Nung Chan Monastery was very small and plain. To enter, all the residents still had to ring the doorbell. Our work was mainly farming and construction. Everyone took part in every aspect of expanding, constructing, and decorating the monastery, even moving bricks and cement.

Little by little, we expanded the hall. The monastery grew from a bungalow with less than two thousand square feet to a cover tens of thousands of square feet.

The monastery's vegetable garden was transformed many times over the years. Originally it was part of a bamboo forest. In the early days we planted guava, and before guava, it was cabbage. Currently, some of our followers might not be comfortable with the many changes taking place at Dharma Drum Mountain. Change, however, is a normal phenomenon. Taking Nung Chan Monastery as an example, vegetables replaced the flowers in our garden, and later the bamboo took over. Change is necessary to meet peoples' needs. Once we ran out of space, the bamboos were flattened, replaced by buildings and a car park. Changes continued until we arrived at what the monastery looks like today.

When Master Sheng Yen was in Taiwan he would join us in all of our outdoor "mindful work" practice. I remember two things he taught us. One was how to prepare and cook vegetables, and the other was how to

clear and reclaim land with hoes. He also invited some senior nuns to offer guidance to nuns in our monastic sangha. Shifu paid a lot of attention to sangha education. When the monastic population increased, he needed a system to better organize the sangha members. The process, however, was never easy. Since many of his disciples were young, Shifu had to take on many challenges himself. This took a toll on him. I often feel ashamed of myself. If only I was more knowledgeable, I could have helped to share and reduce his heavy burden. Today, many in Taiwan feel that Master Sheng Yen started off relatively late, and we were progressing relatively slowly compared to some other organizations. When we reflected upon ourselves, we concluded that this was due to our lack of maturity. If only we were more mature, and could take on more tasks, it would be easier for Shifu, and he would not have had to work so very hard.

Shifu adhered to certain principles when it came to accepting monastic disciples. Therefore, he took in very few disciples in the early days. To accept and receive three to four members at a time was considered a lot. Master

Sheng Yen observed that many of his students were not yet stable and mature, and was thus disinclined to ordain them. I felt that this is also one of the reasons why Shifu had to work extraordinarily hard, because there simply were not many monastics. And those who were already ordained had limited capabilities, and were not quite qualified to take on many responsibilities.

## Remember to deliver sentient beings

In 1995 I went to Japan to pursue further studies. Shifu was not too keen on letting me go because the monastery was lacking human resources back then. What happened was that I chanced to come across a research post offered by Bukkyo University in Kyoto that remained vacant for some time. I thought that I could give it a try, as I had been ordained for a decade, and Nung Chan Monastery had gradually stabilized. I was accepted soon after I applied.

Although Shifu agreed that I could go abroad to further my studies, in principle he was hoping that I would return for good after getting my master's degree. But

after completing my master's I didn't return right away, and prepared to pursue a doctorate. After I received my master's degree I returned to Taiwan to inform Shifu about my plan in person. I had even decided on the research topic for my PhD. Master Sheng Yen did not agree with what I was planning to do, feeling that a doctorate was beyond my reach. I have no doubt that Master Sheng Yen understood me well. He must have felt strongly that I would struggle in my pursuit of a PhD, and saying that was his way to stimulate and inspire me. Honestly, I was a little disappointed when he was not optimistic about my chances. That drove me to be more determined in my pursuit of a PhD.

Despite the fact that he initially didn't agree with my plan, Shifu wrote to me while I was studying in Japan. I've kept that letter till now. In that letter, the only one that he sent me, he reminded me to benefit all sentient beings, and not just work for myself alone. As I was living in Japan, he instructed me to keep a record of what I learned and my local experiences. Shifu visited Japan twice while I was there, once to visit the university he attended, Risho University, and the

other when he participated in a “research summit” in Kyoto. I was able to serve him on those two occasions.

I came back to Taiwan upon completing my PhD. The first thing Shifu said when he saw me was, “You’re back!” When I officially applied to return to the monastery, I presented my post-graduate degree for him to see. He seemed quite happy as he announced to one and all, “Here’s the degree!”

Upon my return to the monastery I was appointed Vice Dean of Dharma Drum Sangha University. Three years later I was chosen to be the Director of the Chung-Hwa Institute of Buddhist Studies. Nevertheless, the first thing Master Sheng Yen did upon my return was to search for a lecturer’s position for me. He personally wrote a recommendation letter to National Chung Hsing University. With his recommendation, I became a lecturer, which was my first “real” teaching post, in the University’s Department of Chinese Literature. This was all made possible by Shifu’s compassion, for which I am forever indebted. To this day I still teach every week at the university. I cherish this blessing every time I think of it.

Because of my engagement with a non-monastic university, I feel it is important to be more sociable and connect with people. Being close to the younger generation, I can at least share right understanding and views about Buddhism with them. It is something truly worth pursuing. Each term about 60 or 70, or even over 100 students enroll in my elective class. Interestingly, while many tend to skip classes, those who do attend will always update them. To me, it is a good sign that they share what they learn. I have a somewhat different approach in my lectures, compared to secular and monastic universities. My aim is to expose as many different groups of youngsters as possible to Buddhism. Currently I am serving as Director of the Chung-Hwa Institute of Buddhist Studies, and Director of the Research and Practice Center of Dharma Drum Buddhist College. I view these appointments as important directives and missions from Master Sheng Yen.

## A word about practice

Here I want to share some of my personal meditation experiences. Ever since I became a nun, sitting meditation

has been a daily routine, unless I am too busy. This was also true when I was in Japan. Shifu used to clarify things and provide guidance when I had any questions about meditation. Here, I would like to share two specific conversations with him on this subject.

The first took place at the living quarters in the early days of Dharma Drum Mountain. After listening to my experience, “Master Sheng Yen commented that it was no different from my experience back in my student days. I asked him, Master, have I seen my true nature, or was it an illusion?” He said, “Haven’t I said it before? Disregard the temporary and external that taint the original pure mind!” Then he asked me if I had any other questions. At the same time, he raised his head and glanced at me. At that instant, I was captivated by the look in his eyes! It was an overwhelming experience! I was convinced that Master Sheng Yen was an enlightened teacher, who could personally experience what I have gone through as I described it to him. This is simply a conversation between a Master and his disciple.

The second incident took place about half a year before Shifu passed away. This time, I put down my experience in the form of a poem and presented it to him. After reading it, he commented, “This is nothing special!” To that, I replied, “That’s right! Nothing at all.” He laughed. I understood, and I knew he would make a comment like that. Whatever meditation experiences we have, they constitute the process of practice. There is nothing one should become attached to. We then chatted for more than an hour. Shifu had been undergoing kidney dialysis for more than two years. Physically, he wasn’t feeling well. But when he spoke, he didn’t appear ill. He looked like someone much younger, about 50 years old. He only stopped talking when his attendant reminded him to rest. And at that moment, it seemed like he suddenly turned into a sick, elderly man. It was a very strong contrast—before and after. I was certain they were two of his many manifestations.

Even though Master Sheng Yen has passed away, he has never really left us. His dharma-body has always been with us at Dharma Drum Mountain. Since Master Sheng

Yen built DDM as a Chan practice center based on a vision he saw while in meditative concentration, we can see his meticulous effort everywhere, and feel his presence. The books that make up *The Complete Works of Master Sheng Yen* are also the product of a lifetime of meticulous care and painstaking effort, and I encourage everyone to read them. As long as we follow his teachings, as long as we continue to practice, realize, and spread the teachings, we inherit and carry on Shifu's compassionate vows, as his obedient students and disciples.

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



# Exemplifying the Essence of Buddhism

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Venerable Guo Guang

*Before he passed away, Master Sheng Yen had already prepared the sangha.*

*All these years, his tireless teachings and personal instruction have been like water, seeping into the bottom of our hearts. Even as we have our differences once in a while, we can still achieve a consensus. This is what Shifu showed us, and taught us, through his lifelong teachings.*

## **Introducing the Speaker**

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### **Venerable Guo Guang**

Venerable Guo Guang obtained her PhD from Ohio State University in the United States. She became a monastic in 1994 and has held many posts including Editor-in-Chief of *Humanity* magazine, Chief Editor at Dong Chu Publishing House (now Dharma Drum Publications), Master Sheng Yen's Personal Secretary, Director of the Planning and Development Department, Managing Director of the Administration Center, and the Director of the Sangha Education Department. She currently serves as Vice Dean and Director of Academic Affairs at Dharma Drum Sangha University, as well as in other posts including Assistant Lecturer.

I could never have imagined the remarkable experiences I've had during my more than ten years as a monastic. I have always felt that the DDM Sangha should be known as the "Inner Potential Development Center." That's because here, things that perhaps you couldn't or didn't want to do, you simply have to do. We did not have the luxury to pick and choose our assignments. We accepted all of them, and as a result, we have developed quite well.

## What is life all about?

I first met Master Sheng Yen in 1992 in Columbus, Ohio, a year after I received my PhD. At that time, I was doing my postdoctoral research work at the university. It was also a critical and indecisive period for me, as I wasn't sure about my next step. I could get married, stay on to do academic research, or pursue a career in the States. Or was there another way to think about life?

I only began to understand and practice Buddhism after I went to study in America. At Ohio State University where I enrolled, a Buddhist society was organized by

Chinese students from China and other countries. In the summer of 1987, I chanced to meet the president of the Buddhist Society, Mr. Chen Yuming, when I was enrolling in my English class. Perhaps because I'm a vegetarian, people thought I would be easy to recruit, and Mr. Chen persistently encouraged me to take part in their activities. He lent me tape-recorded Dharma discourses by Venerable Xian Ming, beginning with the *Sutra on Impermanence*, and the *Diamond Sutra*, which I found very enlightening and inspiring. I was attracted to Indian yogic practices during my university days, and vegetarianism, meditation and yoga became part of my life. However, as I was gradually exposed to Indian philosophy, the monistic Brahma-atman concept puzzled me. But when I heard the discourses on the *Sutra on Impermanence* and the *Diamond Sutra*, I could relate to their profound wisdom and philosophy. That helped to clear up my doubts and confusion, and I gradually started to attend more and more of the Buddhist society's classes.

The Buddhist society invited many monks and nuns to give discourses and lectures. One of the regular speakers

was Venerable Master Renjun, a highly respected elder in Buddhist circles. He was also one of my most important teachers. Tirelessly, he travelled and taught extensively throughout the US, touching many with his compassion. Initially however, I did not appreciate and treasure his teachings. I remember how I reacted when he gave a teaching on “The Path to Buddhahood.” After the first class, I said to the president of the Buddhist society, “I am sorry, but I am busy with my thesis. I need to get back to work on it this afternoon.” The truth was that I could barely understand Venerable Renjun’s heavy accent, and had difficulty comprehending what he said. Mr. Chen, the society’s president, must have realized that many people were having the same problem. So as much as he could, he started to recount Venerable Runjun’s teachings and wisdom, sharing them with many people. Slowly, we began to appreciate his teachings, and started to study and practice Buddhism seriously.

Since we had no resident monastic teachers at the university, we anchored our practice in reciting the Buddha’s name. We also had a study group, focusing on the

works of Venerable Yunshun. However, I liked meditation and wanted to learn more. In 1992, Mr. and Mrs. Zhang Guanxiong moved to Ohio from Wisconsin. They were followers of Master Sheng Yen. Having invited him to speak while they were in Wisconsin, they continued to bring Shifu to give speeches when they were in Columbus. I was very pleased when I heard about it. I came to know of Shifu as a Chan master through a member of the society who had attended the basic Chan meditation class at Nung Chan Monastery in Taiwan. He also shared some articles by Shifu with me. I was truly looking forward to meeting a Chan master.

I faced another disturbing quandary while doing my post-doctoral research. At that time I was focusing on agricultural economics, and after getting my master's degree in Taiwan I worked at the Council of Agriculture for two years, working on econometric modeling and forecasting. My superior was a repatriated visiting lecturer who used to work in the States for an economic forecasting company. I was very interested in price forecasting, and continued researching that topic in Ohio. One day, a

younger student asked me for our price forecasting data to help him do some futures market trading. When I consulted my professor, he didn't hesitate to say, "What a joke!" He even made it known publicly, during class, that when he was a graduate student he had lost all his savings dabbling in futures trading. As a result, he never traded futures again. How could an expert on the economic future shy away from engaging in the real world? It was incomprehensible! His abrupt comment had a great impact on me. I suddenly realized how ironic all this was! All the time and effort we put into research were only useful for publishing academic papers.

But that wasn't all. I was even more shocked when I heard from other overseas research fellows that university studies and research projects commissioned by the government were never used. They all ended up as "archives." For someone in their thirties who was passionate about life and her research work, and was ready to start making a contribution to society, that discovery was indeed devastating!

By then, I was also at a loss about my own research work. Stacks of reports were printed, and thereafter, tossed into trash bins. It seemed like they were only good for recycling. I started to wonder if I should continue with my work.

Midwestern states like Ohio were famous for their livestock. Hence, our research team emphasized livestock price analysis. But when I passed by the meat displays in a local supermarket one weekend, I came to realize that their price tags and my life were like parallel lines that never intersect, two independent unrelated events. When I started to think more about it, more and more doubts snowballed in my mind. I was completely confused, not knowing what I should do next. When I shared my concerns with one of my best college classmates, who happened to be from India, she replied “That’s OK! Since you love tomatoes, why don’t you focus on tomato price analysis instead?” However, my problem wasn’t about which commodity we were forecasting prices for. The issue was that I was facing a crisis in my life!

## My first seven-day meditation retreat in America

At that time, Venerable Renjun happened to be giving a discourse in Akron, Ohio, at the home of a lay disciple, Mr. Tang. He started his discourse with these words: “I am just an ordinary monk. The thing that makes me happiest in this life is that I was able to be a monk.” These ordinary words were tremendously profound to me. I began to ask myself what I could do, what role could I play, so that I could say something like that when I reached my seventies. I pondered that question for a long time. One day, I realized the only way to go was to become a monastic myself. I called Venerable Renjun and received his consent. In those days, Venerable Renjun wrote to me every month (referring to what he wrote as “trifling words”). What came to me in the month of April were these “trifling” words: “If you stay firm in your decision, you will be able to unleash and realize extraordinary potentials.” Though I could not fully comprehend what he meant, I felt very inspired by his encouragement. In my inner being, I became more courageous about my decision.

Even as I had made up my mind to become a monastic, I could not decide where to go to do that. I had no concrete idea on how to proceed. I did not pursue this issue further with Venerable Renjun as he did not take in any monastic disciples. Instead, I asked for his advice on Buddhist colleges and institutes. He recommended the Chung-Hwa Institute of Buddhist Studies. With this, I came to learn more about Master Sheng Yen, who was then overseeing the institute. One thing led to another, and the Buddhist society began to invite Shifu to give lectures. Even though I had never thought of becoming his disciple, I was, nevertheless, looking forward to joining a seven-day Chan retreat at the Chan Meditation Center, named after Master Dongchu, in New York.

When Shifu came to Ohio in October of 1992, I tried my best to seek his guidance as much as possible. I attended all his lectures and even sat across from him at meals. I also accompanied him as he travelled to nearby Cleveland. I was very eager to find out more about the seven-day retreat at the Chan Meditation Center, and tried my best to make a good impression on him, in the hope

that he would allow me to participate. The next stop after Cleveland was Michigan State. The original plan was for Shifu to take a flight. However, there were no direct flights and the schedule was inconvenient. So I convinced him to allow another Buddhist and myself to drive him there, a more than five-hour journey. I was so happy when he agreed to our plan! It was an amazing opportunity, to be able to become his driver on our first meeting!

Shifu was very attentive to our needs and well-being throughout the five-hour journey. He was very inquisitive about our surroundings, and asked practically anything that came to mind as we travelled through the vast corn fields of the Mid-Western states. As we chatted, he began to inquire about my studies. He was looking for an editor for the monthly *Humanity* magazine, and asked if I could recommend any of my classmates. I promised to be on the lookout for him. When I asked his advice on prerequisites for a seven-day Chan retreat, he encouraged me to study some of his books on meditation practice, such as *Holding a Flower and Smiling*. It was not easy to find Master Sheng Yen's books in the Midwest,

but I tried hard to prepare for the retreat, and was lucky to get hold of a few.

Fortunately, I was accepted for the seven-day Chan retreat that was held around the Christmas holidays in 1992. It wasn't until I arrived at the Chan Meditation Center that I found out we were to observe "noble silence" for the entire retreat. As it was my first visit to the Center, I was unfamiliar with and confused by the environment—the front and back buildings, the various floors upstairs and downstairs, the doors to the basement. I could not understand how someone could enter the basement through one door and then reappear through another! During the retreat, my "mindful work" assignment was to assist our chef. That made me really nervous, yet it was also a great opportunity for me to stay focused on my method throughout the work process. The chef, who is now Venerable Guo Sheng, greatly impressed me. I was completely clueless about my tasks, and didn't even know where the knives and tableware were. Yet, she was able to guide me without saying a word. I truly admired her skills. Throughout the entire "mindful work" practice, I

was slowly able to understand her actions and gestures and helped her to prepare meals, in complete silence. It was simply amazing.

Though I could focus and practice very well on the cushion, I could not apply the practice to my daily life. I had a bad temper the moment I left the cushion. During the retreat, Shifu spoke of concepts and methods, which I found quite useful. I was very inspired when he said, “Cultivation is all about rectifying our physical, verbal, and mental actions.” For me these were precious words, and have remained practical, even now. He also told us that, “Wherever the hands are, that is where the mind should be.” I incorporated this idea when I was cutting vegetables in the kitchen. I had a very good experience by practicing this diligently.

That seven-day Chan retreat was a major event in my life. During the retreat, I let go of my earlier meditation methods and practiced according to Master Sheng Yen’s instructions. After the third day, Shifu introduced the *huatou* (“critical phrase”) method. I had been practicing

very well using the “counting the breath” method. During the interview, Shifu asked if I wanted to change my method. I could not understand why he recommended the *huatou*. “Why do I need to change over to the *huatou* method? What is the difference between the *huatou* and counting the breath?” I asked. Master Sheng Yen explained, “The *huatou* is useful when you want to know something. Counting breaths is for when you are not looking for answers.” Sensing that I was reluctant to change he encouraged me to temporarily give it a go. Then I could return to the method of breath-counting if I could not get used to the *huatou*. I agreed to change my method under that arrangement. Shifu gave me this *huatou*: “All phenomena return to one. Where does the one return to?” As I mentioned earlier, I was unsettled about the Brahman-atman concept. Isn’t that “returning to the one?” But “where does the one return to?” So I was energized by that phrase, and was soon overwhelmed by a sensation of doubt. In hindsight, it was merely a coincidence, for I was not in any way an accomplished practitioner. Nevertheless, that experience reinforced my faith in the practice, and I became more determined to practice with Shifu.

At one of our interviews during the retreat, Shifu again mentioned that he was looking for an editor for *Humanity* magazine. I informed him I had yet to find anyone, and instead volunteered to do it myself! I never thought that Shifu would agree to it immediately, but he did. Hence, after the retreat, I prepared to return to Taiwan once I completed my final six months of research. At that time, I did not express to Shifu my intention to become a monastic. I planned to work at the publishing house to start with, and would only consider becoming a monastic after I had a better understanding of the monastery in Taiwan. In June of 1993, I bid farewell to my friends in America. After another seven-day retreat at the Chan Meditation Center, I returned to Taiwan with Master Sheng Yen.

## Flowers sprouting from a garbage-ridden mind

After I had decided to become a monastic, the process of seeking a teacher was surprisingly easy for me. However, it was certainly not easy when I needed to face my

family members, especially my mother. My siblings were supportive and they respected my decision. My father, who was an anthropologist who studied Taiwan's indigenous peoples, perhaps viewed monks and nuns, the monastics, as an "ethnic group." Communicating with him about this issue was not difficult. I remember one very meaningful conversation between us. I spoke to him about my doubts about my research work. Creating reports every day was not unlike building a mountain of garbage. Every day, I was just producing piles upon piles of rubbish. Hearing that, he responded calmly, "A flower will eventually bloom out of that mountain of garbage." Those were such wise words. Unfortunately, at the time I was not able to fully appreciate the profound meaning behind what he said. I only began to realize the deeper meaning over the past few years as I recalled that father-daughter conversation. I have come to realize that even though, as a monastic, I have stopped producing physical garbage, aren't the vexations my thoughts produce every day also garbage? Contemplating what my father once said to me, wouldn't you agree that it was something like saying, "Vexation is bodhi"?

I told my father that I had no intention to continue my PhD research, and chose to pursue a monastic life. “How come you’ve only come to realize what life is all about after so many years?” I was ashamed. My father was born during the chaos of war. The question “Why are humans always at war with each other?” bothered him since childhood. He began by studying in the history department, hoping to find an answer. That led him to archeology, and later anthropology, specializing in the field of indigenous peoples. He first set foot on Lanyu [a small island off the east coast of Taiwan also known as Orchid Island] in 1957 and was attracted to it, as it had remained peaceful for a few hundred years. He was hoping to find his answer on that island. The question he asked became his life’s work. One could say that he was an inquisitive anthropologist who had generated a Chan-like “doubt sensation.”

My father agreed with my decision, but he also felt it would be very difficult to convince my mother. We had no idea as to how to raise the issue and communicate with her. One day, I chanced to meet Shifu in the corridor at Nung

Chan Monastery. It had been eight months since I started working for *Humanity* magazine. I informed him about the challenge of convincing my mother, and sought his advice as to whether it would be better for me to wait a bit before becoming a monastic. Shifu responded, “At your age, how much longer do you want to wait?” I was nearly 35 then. It was very clear that time was not on my side, as one could no longer become a monastic after the age of 35. In a way, Shifu gave me the final push that got me into Nung Chan Monastery.

I quietly moved into the monastery at the beginning of March, 1994, without informing my mother. Eventually, my parents came to see Shifu. It was one of the most embarrassing moments of my life. My father accompanied my mother, as he was worried about how my mother might react if she came alone. My mother knelt and appealed to Shifu the moment they met in the reception area, saying, “I understand my daughter very well. I could never change her mind. But Shifu, she listens to you. Please advise her.” I knelt next to her, and we were both in tears in the presence of Master Sheng Yen. I was quite nervous

and worried. How would Shifu handle this? If he were to send me home, what could I do? But in response to what my mother said, he replied, “OK. I will advise her.” He then excused himself for another meeting, and left the three of us in the reception area. I waited helplessly, as time seemed to have stood still, until my parents decided to leave.

After they left, I wandered around in a daze. I only regained my composure when Shifu spoke to me as I walked to the side entrance of the main shrine. He said, “Guo Guang, my advice to you is to do prostrations to the Buddha, and recite the ‘Cundi Mantra.’” By then I realized that Shifu was just advising me to make prostrations to the Buddha, and that he had no intention to send me home. So I was immediately able to relax. And I did prostrations and recited, and after a year of diligent practice, I had my tonsure ceremony and became a monastic without any obstacles.

I had many embarrassing moments after becoming a nun. For example, I had my own opinion about the monthly stipend for monastics. At that time, monks and

nuns were allotted 500 New Taiwan Dollars every month, and the stipend remained the same year after year. I expressed my opinion to Shifu, saying, “How can we have the same stipend month after month, year after year? Shouldn’t we take inflation into consideration?” Among other issues, I also asked, “Is there a retirement age for us? We should have a retirement system!” Master Sheng Yen would look at me in complete silence. Not getting any response, there was nothing to do but quietly retreat. The way Shifu and I handled these things was that whenever I raised an absurd question he would ignore me. However, I was grateful as he was always open-minded enough to listen to me.

## Practicing Buddhist teachings in daily life

Master Sheng Yen’s teachings are truly all-encompassing. Recently, many people have said good things about us. According to some followers, it’s easy to spot DDM monastics because the way they walk and their dignified manner mark them as different. After Shifu passed away, Professor Yang Pei once led us in a sharing session in

which a few monastics recalled how Shifu emphasized personal deportment, and especially how strict he was towards the nuns. For example, if someone spoke too loudly, Shifu would require them to repeat what they said. If someone walked from one place to another in an improper and disrespectful manner, Shifu would make them walk that same stretch over again. He would even summon Venerable Guo Cheh, whose comportment was quite good, to give a demonstration.

Shifu also used to keep a close eye on the monastic dress-code requirement that we wear long sleeves. We replayed some of his earlier lecture recordings where he mentioned that, “I still have you wear your long gowns, even in such warm weather. Please do not be upset with me. This is how a monastic’s mind should be trained, to bear the unbearable.” This was the way he taught and guided us as monastics, in every aspect of our speech and actions. Over time, we gradually adapted to his teachings and guidelines. Perhaps, this can be considered a small achievement.

Master Sheng Yen taught in a very meticulous and holistic manner, for which I am very grateful. I now teach at Dharma Drum Sangha University, and whenever we encounter issues with our monastic students, I always feel that my own virtue is lacking, and my persuasiveness inadequate. So I often go back and revisit Shifu's teachings. Whenever I return to his Dharma talks for help, I'm always fascinated as I watch him in the video archives. He seemed to have the most intricate knowledge of every possible issue that could arise in monastic training, and had prepared us with all the ways and means to deal with them, precisely and accurately. And he would repeat them for us, again and again, patiently.

He had even planned and prepared everything in advance for the monastic sangha before he passed away. There is a firm consensus within the sangha community that we must be united in harmony. You can see the mutual respect between the elders and the Abbot President, and the Abbot President and us. There's a tremendous sense of humility and cohesiveness. For many years, the teachings of Master Sheng Yen have been like water permeating

deep into our hearts and minds. We can always reach a consensus, even when we disagree from time to time, for this is what we were taught. If one feels that the monastic sangha has done well up to now, it is not simply because of our development and growth, but a product of Shifu's lifelong dedication to guiding and teaching us. For now, we are still ruminating on what he taught us. That's what I myself am doing, and I believe everyone in the monastic sangha feels likewise.

The most profound influence that Shifu had on me was the way he put the teachings into practice, exemplifying the teachings with his whole life. I once thought Shifu's writings were shallow, with little depth. But that was simply because I was at a much lower level, and I subscribed to the idea that profound writings should be difficult to understand. One time, at an international academic forum he shared a paper on the vinaya with me before it was presented. I said, "This is rather strange. Why is it that I can understand your thesis?" What I want to express is that Master Sheng Yen was such an exceptionally knowledgeable person, and I'm not, so it only seems

reasonable that I wouldn't understand his writings. His reply was something I have always remembered: "I do not conduct research to come up with incomprehensible papers. My aim is to make them accessible and practical for all." In one of his books, *Orthodox Chinese Buddhism* Shifu made extensive references to the Agamas and many generations of Buddhist writings. He then masterfully gathered, assimilated, integrated, organized, and presented the core and essence of Buddhism in a most easy-to-read and practical manner that the average person can understand. That required persistence, and truly required incredible energy, skills and intelligence.

So when we see things Shifu wrote we can understand the meaning of the doctrines he presents, doctrines that we have to practice every day and realize in our own lives. Mr. Shan Te-hsing, a Research Fellow at Academia Sinica (a leading academic research institute in Taiwan) has long been applying the teachings in Master Sheng Yen's 108 Adages of Wisdom in his daily life. This must be due to his virtuous karmic capacities. As for me, I regret that I did not pay much attention to that kind of text. It was not

until Shifu passed away that I gradually came to realize the wonders of these simple and concise writings. One adage in particular (Four Steps for Handling a Problem) says: “Face it, accept it, deal with it, and then let it go.” It’s such a gem for applying the Buddhist teachings to daily life.

When I look back at all the little things that transpired over more than a decade, I am so grateful to him—more than grateful. I believe we have all been motivated by Shifu’s words, and that his teachings will continue to benefit us for life. Within our lay and monastic sanghas, our community, we often remind one another that our common aspiration is to repay his kindness. I am here now to do that—to repay his kindness through my interactions with you. I hope we can all work together to promote and share his teachings with more people. We can achieve that by starting with ourselves, setting a good example by practicing and realizing the essence of his teachings. I am truly happy with my decision to become a monastic. To have arrived at this stage after overcoming all sorts of difficulties, I feel that my life has become truly grounded

and meaningful. I pray that my karmic affinity with Master Sheng Yen will continue beyond this lifetime. Let's all remind ourselves and encourage one another to persevere in the Bodhisattva path.

*(Talk delivered on August 25, 2010  
at the Sheng Yen Education Foundation)*

## **Compassion, Acceptance, Commitment and Responsibility**

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Venerable Guo Yi

*Throughout the process, I must have committed many mistakes and made some silly decisions. And yet, Shifu continued to give me opportunities, and merely observed without comment. Perhaps this was his way to make me discover my own path, to realize that I am solely responsible for my commitments, and that I need to be fully committed.*



## **Introducing the Speaker**

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### **Venerable Guo Yi**

Venerable Guo Yi took up a full-time volunteer post at DDM in 1993, and was tonsured in 1996. She served in DDM publications for 14 years, holding various posts such as the Editor-in-Chief for *Humanity* magazine, the DDM Newsletter, and the Dharma Drum Publishing Corp. She is now serving as the Managing Director of the DDM Public Buddhist Education Center.

The moment I arrived, I saw a book at the back of the exhibition space. There were some written comments of Shifu's in the book, and also records with my name. Suddenly, I started to recall many events. I used to receive many manuscripts by Shifu in the old days, when I was working as the editor for magazines and books. So what I just saw were manuscripts from later in his life, which were quite different compared to those of his early days. It was sad to see the apparent change in his handwriting, which was no longer as neat as it once was .

## From non-believer to monastic

It was 1993 when I first came across Dharma Drum Mountain. I did not know much about Shifu, and had only read one of his books, *Orthodox Chinese Buddhism*. Nevertheless, that book had a profound effect on me. It miraculously transformed me from an absolute non-believer to someone who accepted the Dharma unconditionally. That was such a big change. Somehow, my karmic causes and conditions brought me to serve in various posts at Nung Chan Monastery. My first post

was in the Public Relations Office, handling advertising. Halfway through my assignment, I left my post and was away for a year. During that time, DDM was starting to produce a television series called “Great Dharma Drum,” and I volunteered to help. My task was to plan and prepare topics for each episode. It turned out that I had worked on the first 50 episodes. I thought there would be no more than 50 episodes, yet it turned out, surprisingly, that there were about 1,400 episodes altogether, and the series was still being broadcast in the years leading up to Shifu’s passing. That was quite an amazing experience.

So I returned to DDM a year later. This time around, I was working for the publishing department, which I enjoyed very much. I had been working in the publishing industry including books, magazines, newspapers, and even got involved in multimedia before I became a monastic. However, the more I worked in commercial media, the more I felt like I was wasting my time and my life. In the commercial world, there is little choice but to please the masses. To me, this is a profession that requires extreme commitment and effort. That being the case,

how could one exhaust one's energy for something so unworthy? In the end, I could no longer continue working in the private sector. I had long wished to devote my energy to something I enjoy doing; this feeling became even stronger after I began my Buddhist practice.

Naturally, I was very pleased when I could work and serve in a Buddhist organization with the right faith, more so when I could work with the publisher founded by the author of *Orthodox Chinese Buddhism*. Finally I could focus my life and energy on something meaningful. At times I felt it was inconceivable—that I could meet someone like Shifu. Even though I considered myself blessed and lucky, there were also many challenging moments.

I joined the monastic sangha not long after I started working for DDM publishing. The main reason I became a monastic was a seven-day Chan retreat. At that time, all the retreats were conducted by Master Sheng Yen himself. During the retreat, I observed how unstable and turbulent my body and mind were, and how uncontrollable they could be. At the same time, I also discovered a ray of hope

in the methods taught by an accomplished master like Shifu; the practices and methods seemed promising and useful. This insight inspired me to leave home and become a monastic. After I was ordained, I worked in publications for 14 years. To me, the entire process, right from the early days at the Dong Chu Publishing House, to the Dharma Drum Corporation publishing house, and later at the DDM Cultural Center, was remarkable. From a small team of ten plus people to more than seventy when I left, it was truly a great learning process, an opportunity for which I am extremely grateful and blessed.

## Enhancing Buddhism's status via professional publications

Even though Master Sheng Yen showed great concern and care for the publishing unit, and was constantly interacting with us, he rarely talked about any concrete plans. We had to research and discover things on our own, and in the process of doing so, we continued to learn, experiment and refine ourselves. I realized that he was quite open minded and tolerant, because in the entire

process, I must have committed many mistakes and made some silly decisions. And yet, for the most part, he merely “observed” and continued to give me opportunities. I was extremely grateful to him, because it was very rare to have such opportunities, more so when this very person was your Shifu, your teacher and master. The way he treated me had a great effect on me. It made me realize that it is impossible to achieve success overnight, and that time is essential for personal development. We need to provide opportunities, and be patient for others to evolve and develop in their very own space and time.

Even as we were beginners and struggled with our work, Shifu gave us two very clear principles : 1) We can't deviate from our direction; and 2) We cannot lose money, and cannot ask the organization for financial support. The first principle was easy to understand although it's not particularly clear. The second was obvious but never easy to achieve. Financially, the publishing unit had long been in the red. Shifu's intention was to motivate us to be independent, creative and diligent. Ultimately, he wanted us to promote Buddhism using a professional publishing

model. He stated many times that Buddhism could not stick exclusively to the traditional free-book-distribution model, and that we had to get on equal footing with other publishers, with our books on the shelves in the major bookstores right next to theirs. He thought that was the only way that people would hold Buddhism in high regard.

To me, the most challenging task was to stay in the black. But this was also the area in which I learned and developed the most. Shifu constantly reminded us to maintain a business-centric approach. This created a great sense of conflict in me. However, from another perspective, I believe that was his way to ensure that we managed the publishing unit professionally, and to gradually instill the culture and habit of purchasing books within the Buddhist community. Shifu even made a rule that said nobody was to enjoy any preference or special discount, and this applied to himself as well. A decade or more ago, when Buddhists were used to receiving free Dharma books, we received a lot of criticism and blame. Whenever we received negative feedback and criticism, he would say, “Tell them I have to pay for the books, too.”

Shifu clearly remained firm in upholding his principles about professional publishing.

## Challenges in the Training

The editorial team had only two publishing arrangements for Shifu's books, one for those that he wrote and provided to us, and one for those that we thought of and proposed.

Most of Shifu's books were written in America. Some were transcriptions of his lectures and discourses that he then read and approved. He would hand over the manuscripts for publication when he returned to Taiwan. I remember that before his return, he would always fax us a list of the work he'd completed along with summaries. He would always present them as if he was reporting to me, even though I was merely his disciple. The moment he returned to Taiwan, he would call me for a meeting and hand-deliver his draft manuscripts that very evening or the next morning. I discovered later that he actually carried the drafts with him during the flight, not putting

them in his luggage, because losing them would be really troublesome. When he passed me the draft manuscripts, he would explain how the book came about, who transcribed and collated them, and whom to look for if I needed help. From that point onwards, we would handle the rest of the editing and publishing process with little intervention from him. We would still consult him whenever we had problems. That's how we published some of his books.

Some of his books were the result of our own ideas, which we proposed to him. These included collections and series including “The Shifu Library Series,” “The Palm of the Hand Series,” “The Essence of Chan Meditation Collection,” “Dialogues of the Century Series.” Taking “The Palm of the Hand Series” as an example, the concept was conceived after I attended an international book exhibition outside of Taiwan. I was most impressed by the Catholic and Christian publications, which were lively and practical, as they made references to real-life situations and problems. With layouts featuring both text and graphics, the books were presented in a relaxed and interesting format. I felt that these ideas were worth a try

for Buddhist publications.

So I drafted a proposal to Shifu once I returned to Taiwan. Shifu acknowledged the proposal with a simple comment, saying, “That’s good, please go ahead.” When I heard that, I was not totally convinced, and thought, “Does Shifu really mean it? Or does he have reservations?” Nevertheless, I had nothing more to ask, as usual, and so we bit the bullet and took up the challenge! In hindsight, perhaps it was Shifu’s intention to keep it simple with few comments. If he were to say a lot, I probably would not be able to stand on my own feet. I probably would have been more passive, less dynamic. All that he had in mind was for me to discover my own path.

Everyone may have heard that Shifu responded differently to his monastic and lay disciples. In my case, I almost never received any compliments from him. When I did not perform well, he would point that out to me, or relay the message through other means. I almost never heard him say, “You did that well.” As his disciple, this was great training. You could get on with what you were doing

and not to be caught up in too many thoughts. I believe Shifu was constantly observing, and would definitely tell you if you were not performing well. When there were no instructions from him, it would be a good test, putting your self-affirmation and decision making to the test.

It was the same with “The Essence of Chan Meditation Collection.” As usual, Shifu gave me no direct comments, good or bad. He merely passed on remarks and opinions he heard from others. Since the books were already in print, there was nothing I could do. Even though he did not share his thoughts, that collection was a souvenir that he often gave his visitors. At times, I could really not make out what he had in mind, but I am very certain he observed and watched over us carefully, although he did not play an active role. This reminded me of the two methods our grandmaster use to educate and train his disciples. One way was “raising canaries” and the other was “keeping bees.” For me, it was 70 percent of the latter, and 30 percent of the former.

Based on my personal experience, I am convinced that

when you meet a real master, or a great teacher, you don't have to think too much. Just take his instructions as a form of practice, and work diligently. For example, take Shifu's idea about keeping the publishing unit profitable. This was indeed a great challenge, but I did not think too much about it, and remained focused on how to fulfill the tasks and targets he set forth, working faithfully, and resolving difficulties as they came, and picking up skills as and when needed. At the end of the day I realized that irrespective of the outcomes, I was the one who gained and developed the most, and realized what commitment and responsibilities were all about.

I want to share with you an encounter that taught me a lot about commitments and responsibilities. It was a profound teaching for me. One time we discovered some mistakes in a newly released book, and needed to run a reprint. I realized this was rather serious, and decided to apologize and confess to Shifu personally. It was an afternoon and the weather was pretty good. I walked up to Shifu's study on the second floor of Nung Chan Monastery. It was very cozy with a soft afternoon sun peeping through

the window. Shifu was reading a newspaper. He asked if I had anything to discuss, and started to share his thoughts and analysis of various news items, pointing out their underlying dharmic meanings. He spoke for about half an hour, and then asked, “What are you here for?” “To confess,” I said. Then I started to inform him about the mistakes, and the reprints. I then reiterated that I was there to prostrate and repent to him. He was very relaxed and gave me a surprisingly simple reply: “That’s your issue, not mine.”

I was caught by surprise. Was he not angry with me? Was he not going to give me a serious scolding? I was taken aback, as he was clearly not disturbed, and continued to talk of other matters. Tears fell uncontrollably when I left his study. They were tears of gratitude. I realized that if he accepted my act of repentance, I simply could have felt relieved and considered the matter resolved. But Shifu was exceptional. Instead of empathizing, he came out with a straightforward comment: “That’s your issue, not mine.” His message was direct and clear. He could provide comfort and encouragement, but as far as responsibility

goes, we can only depend on ourselves, and we must be fully committed to deal with them.

There were numerous encounters like that. Gradually, it became clear to me that although Shifu led the way in the practice, support and propagation of the Dharma, we have to take charge of many things ourselves. When it comes to propagating the teachings, we must be self-reliant and be fully committed to it, and should not depend on him. The way Shifu led and taught us was immensely important, and crucial for our own self development.

## An accomplished Master, seen but once in countless eons

I once came across a written record of the interactions between Master Hanshan and his attendants. Master Hanshan was one the four Buddhist masters of the late Ming Dynasty. He suffered a great deal throughout his life. A victim of politics, he was constantly in exile, migrating from place to place. Among his many attendants there was one who was most loyal and followed him faithfully,

without question. One time, when Master Hanshan was forced into exile again, he summoned his attendants and asked them to leave for their own good, keeping only two by his side. When Hanshan reached his new abode, one of the attendants who had left earlier returned of his own accord to serve his Master. Master Hanshan asked him, “You followed me for many years as a monastic. For all these years I have not taught you anything, or explained the Dharma to you. I only instructed you to attend to chores and work. Why are you still following me?” The disciple replied, “I am observing the Master's mind.” Master Hang Shan asked him again, “But my mind is formless, devoid of attributes. What is there to observe?” To this, the disciple replied, “Precisely because your mind is formless, I have come to learn and practice.”

That incident reminded me of Shifu. I had been following and practicing with him with the same attitude, reflected in the few examples I just mentioned. Naturally, Shifu talked about many concepts, but he would not provide specific instructions on how to handle things. Yet it was clearly a learning process as you observed the way

he dealt with situations.

There's another example which I remember very well when Shifu was on a teaching tour in Russia. In addition to writing his own books, Shifu also actively worked on press releases all by himself. Even though he had his disciples with him, they were not capable of preparing press releases, so he had to prepare them on his own. On that particular tour, Shifu wrote a press release that was quite interesting. The content revolved around his itinerary in Russia, things like when and where he gave talks, and how well received he was. When we read it, we were amused by the way he wrote. How could someone write about himself, saying that "he" was warmly received! I was very ignorant then, and only later began to understand how taxing it all was on him. If it were me giving the talks, I would be exhausted and desperate for a rest when they were over. Yet, Shifu continued with a series of intensive activities—seven-day Chan retreats, looking after the well being of others, lectures and talks. Those who had read his travel logs would know how terribly taxing his schedule was. For this same person to prepare his own press releases was such a

heavy task, but it was certainly something which he had no choice but to be engaged in. However taxing it may be, he never, ever complained, and took on that writing task as he deemed necessary. In contrast, we were the ones who were always pressuring him, pursuing him to deliver his writing projects to meet our publishing deadlines.

What I am trying to say is this: the commitment Shifu exemplified in propagating the Dharma had a great influence on me; from the meticulous way he handled every single minute detail, to his fully committed attitude in carrying out whatever was needed, whenever necessary. In the past, whenever an activity was completed, I would consider everything over. Now, I could comprehend the need to prepare reports, and to invite volunteers to share their thoughts and experiences. The latter really matters, simply because it is an effective way to attract and engage more participants. To do this has never been easy, as many will be reluctant to respond. You have to be patient and persistent.

I also observed the way Shifu looked after and cared

for the well being of every single person working with him. For major events, he would host a merit-dedication gathering (he had specifically reminded us not to have any sort of “celebration.” As Buddhists, we are always supposed to dedicate our merit, transfer it to other beings and causes). For lesser events, Shifu would prepare personal thank-you cards and letters. We can learn so much through the very process of working out these little bits and pieces. To sustain Buddhism, we need to take a holistic approach to nurture and continue many aspects of the teachings. On one hand, we need to organize things like meditation retreats, Buddhist ceremonies, and Dharma classes. On the other hand, we must look after and extend care to others, and be in harmony with the common values and needs of society.

Shifu’s holistic approach to education-for-life is a rare and precious teaching. I am grateful to be here today to share memories of him. I have always regarded us as extremely fortunate to have met such a great teacher. He was not here to merely share with us his knowledge, understanding, and the right way to live. He went beyond

that in pointing out the right direction, leading us out of suffering. Indeed, Shifu was a rare, outstanding and exceptional master, one who comes about literally once in countless eons.

From my personal experience, unless one is endowed with tremendous merit and good roots, a great teacher is necessary to guide us on the path. In hindsight, I am truly deeply grateful to Shifu. The next issue is to see how we are to continue. The goal of the Dharma is to relieve suffering and attain happiness. Once we have benefited from it, we ought to assist others in relieving their suffering, and help them to gain happiness and joy. Perhaps we have our limitations, but as Shifu pointed out, we can share whatever we have realized, whether much or little. In this very life too, we should make full use of our merit for the benefit of others. This is the duty of a Buddhist. For all of us who are inspired by Shifu, who have learned the Dharma in a methodological and aspiring manner from our DDM community, we should be sharing and promoting the Dharma diligently. This is the way to repay the kindness of Shifu, our teacher, as well as that of Shakyamuni Buddha

and all the lineage masters and patriarchs. This is also our way to inherit and maintain the Dharma from one generation to the next.

*(Talk delivered on July 28, 2010  
at the Sheng Yen Education Foundation)*



## **Discovering Shifu's Compassionate Vows through His Writings**

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Venerable Guo Sheng

*In describing his attitude about writing, Shifu was quite eloquent, comparing writing to preparing “Dharma food.” That food has to be nutritious, as well as delicious. I think that was his way of reminding us that whatever Dharma Drum Mountain publishes should be accessible to contemporary society, and provide what contemporary society needs.*

## **Introducing the Speaker**

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### **Venerable Guo Sheng**

Venerable Guo Sheng joined *Humanity* magazine and the Dharma Drum Monthly newsletter as a staff writer in 1995. She was ordained in 1997, and has a strong affinity for cultural publishing. Prior to becoming a monastic she worked full time for a local magazine, and following ordination has continued to work in the cultural arena. The Venerable is now the Managing Director of the DDM Cultural Center.

There's a popular saying that, "After a master introduces the path, the individual is responsible for their own cultivation practice." To me, all great spiritual friends and accomplished teachers are not only there to initiate and guide us in our practice, but are always beside us, accompanying us all along the way. In the case of Master Sheng Yen, his presence is pervasive, and he is never far from us. The moment we encounter his Dharma teachings, he is literally present, with us, to teach and guide us.

In the past, reading Shifu's books was like listening to the wise words of a sage, expounding on the Dharma and the wisdom of life. And now, since Shifu has passed away, whenever I come across his writings I feel his presence in front of me, delivering his teachings. It's a very special feeling that makes me reminisce about experiences from the past.

## Seeking purpose and answers in life

My interest in Buddhism started in my university days. By then, studying Buddhism was indeed my life's objective. Why such thoughts came to me at the time, I

don't know. Though I frequented many Buddhist centers with close friends, I could never engage myself fully. Deep within, I sensed that they were not what I was looking for. I put in a whole lot of time and effort to search for the purpose of life. That search became even more intense after going through a challenging ordeal in my life. At the time, I told myself that as soon as I could find the purpose of life then I would be satisfied, and I would never change that purpose, because the process of searching was so arduous.

I started working after graduating from university. Most of the work was related to magazine publishing. I was busy at work, and under a lot of pressure. As I was totally immersed in work and learning all kinds of things, I temporarily forgot the most important purpose in life. I frequented many bookstores looking for books and reading magazines for the latest publishing information and ideas on publishing. One day, while browsing at Eslite Bookstore [Taiwan's foremost bookstore chain], I came across a book entitled *The Life of Chan*. Flipping through a few pages, it was apparent to me that the author was the very master I had been searching for. That was a very reassuring feeling,

like suddenly discovering a clear destination while adrift in a sea of ignorance.

I was quite blessed, because not long after I first read Master Sheng Yen's writings, I started working for DDM publishing. Before that, I was a staff reporter for a contemporary interior design magazine. It was a pretty good situation, which most people characterized as “good pay, light workload, and close to home.” However, I still felt rather lost about life. In addition to being attracted by Shifu’s writings, another reason that encouraged me to immediately give up my job and go to work at DDM was Venerable Guo Yi. We were colleagues before she decided to become a full-time volunteer at Nung Chan Monastery. So there was a sense of camaraderie when I learned that she was there, and I felt very strongly that I should join her. In hindsight, I realize I benefited tremendously from her, and I truly have so much to thank her for.

Master Sheng Yen's ideas and vision led me to see things from a different perspective. That inspired me, and transformed my view about life. I used to have very narrow

and limited views, often confined by a world that included only my relatives and friends. But after encountering Shifu, I realized that there is unlimited potential in our lives. That potential was demonstrated in a video that was popular on the Internet. The footage started with images of what two children can see at ground level. Slowly, their limited vision extended higher and higher, all the way into outer space. Their view of the earth from out among the stars and planets was extremely broad and expansive. Similarly, I felt that before meeting Shifu my views were limited to mundane life. It was Shifu's open-minded nature and vision that elevated my views beyond the mundane into the boundless universe.

The first profound shock and inspiration I experienced in life came from Shifu's writings. The second occurred after I started working at DDM publishing. More than a decade ago, we had only ten full-time staffers in our rather small but cozy office. There was a period of time when I had the urge to pose a question to anyone I met: "What is the purpose of your life?" When no one could really answer, I had to think long and hard. Some people were

even contemplating resigning from their jobs because they could not find an answer. Colleagues would even joke with me and say, “It would have been better if you didn’t raise that question! Now that you have asked, and we have no clue and are completely lost, how are you going clean up this mess?”

I believe many people had similar questions in mind, and were looking for answers. Naturally, everyone has to search for the purpose of life for themselves. I discovered the answer from Shifu’s discourses, and that further strengthened my determination to become a monastic.

Why do we come into this world? What is the meaning of life? Master Sheng Yen said that, “The purpose of life is to receive our karmic results.” We come into this life to receive karmic results, and have to accept them, whether good or bad. He further explained, “The meaning of life lies in fulfilling our responsibilities.” Whatever we experience in life, whatever roles we play, we ought to fulfill all of our responsibilities. That’s the meaning of life. However, as the Confucian teachings say something

similar, so what do Buddhist teachings have anything exceptional to offer? Responding to that question, Shifu has said, “The value of life lies in altruism.”

Those three answers are from Shifu’s Dharma talks during a retreat. My colleague Gu Congyu, who was a lay practitioner, attended and told me about them. Once the retreat was over, she immediately called and told me, “Shifu gave all the answers to your questions at the retreat.” Those words shocked me again, and helped me establish the purpose of my life.

## The ultimate blessing: Ordained by Master Sheng Yen

I made a sudden decision to become a monastic in 1997. It was in the month of August, when Shifu was still conducting a summer retreat for the monastic sangha at Dharma Drum Mountain. I had a very strong urge to join the monastic sangha, and was running out of patience. On August 27, I left for the mountain and was ordained by Shifu.

It's now been over a decade since I left home. If we look at the developmental history of DDM's monastic sangha by decade, there are three periods. The first was the earliest, followed by the middle era that includes me, and finally the youngest group, the generation whose names include a Chinese character pronounced "chang." The eldest group comprised Shifu's earliest disciples, who received teachings directly from him. For them, we have great admiration! My generation received teachings directly from him less often. When we share our experiences from more than 10 years ago about listening to Shifu's discourses over breakfast, since whenever he returned to Taiwan he delivered most of his discourses and teachings at Nung Chan Monastery, the youngest group, the "chang" generation, always admire us. Nevertheless, they are also blessed to receive a most profound education from the Dharma Drum Sangha University that Shifu founded.

Having the opportunity to be close to, and personally guided and taught by Shifu in this very life is indeed a supreme blessing! When I accompanied Shifu on his 2001

trip to Malaysia, I happened to interview a local monastic. I asked him, “I heard that you do not take any disciples. Why not?” He said, “To have disciples is not easy, as there is so much to handle. I would have to look after all of their needs.” I could understand that everyone has different affinities and purposes, but the only thought that came to me at that time was my deepest gratitude to Shifu! We wouldn’t have been able to become monastics without him. Shifu’s efforts in grooming monastics is not unlike the way parents raise their children, having to take care of all the little details of their lives. Come to think of it, the details of everyday life are minor issues. The real task is to cultivate monastic talent and Buddhists of this generation to serve society. From that interview experience, I realized that not everyone who wants to become a monastic can do so. Even in Taiwan, becoming a monastic isn’t easy. I have also realized why Master Yinshun, while he was alive, never failed to pay reverence, year after year, to his own master, Master Qingnian. Their only connection occurred at the tonsure ceremony, yet this was the cause and condition that enabled Master Yinshun to become fully ordained as a monk, and the cause of his lifelong gratitude. I was

never able to appreciate all of these things until I did that interview, so I was deeply thankful to Shifu.

## Sharing the Dharma through words: A different kind of media work

In the past, I had been a staff writer. The work flow was simple—just prepare articles by integrating interviews with contemporary views and observations. After working at Dharma Drum publishing, however, I began to realize it's much more than that. This was clearly illustrated in a letter from Shifu. He wrote it on May, 11, 1990 at the Chan Meditation Center in New York to all of those working at the Dong Chu Publishing House (predecessor of the Dharma Drum Publishing Corp.):

*As the outstanding Dharma expounders of your time,  
With great passion to propagate the teachings,  
With a compassionate mind to deliver sentient beings,  
With great reverence and faith, kind words and behavior,  
And an ever joyous and open mind,  
You will serve our readers,*

*many healthy “Dharma delicacies,”  
Composed of precious writings,  
Meticulously tuned and prepared within the offering  
vessel.  
With the utmost reverence of mind, as if making  
offerings to all the buddhas,  
Let’s present our writings to all great spiritual friends.  
You and me, the editorial team,  
Are the starting point for our efforts,  
To build and promote a pure land on earth.  
May we all continue to be inspired.*

Shifu had a greater vision for us. Instead of treating us the same as any other ordinary publishing and media employees, he emphasized the importance of personal attitudes, our behavior and speech, openness, implementation and presentation skills. The first requirement was to have a passion for propagating the Dharma. Such passion would not have been generated unless we had benefited from the Dharma. This enthusiasm and passion are the product of an altruistic mind, dedicated to sharing the Dharma with other people to help

them whenever we see they are suffering and struggling. That meant that every article we composed carried the responsibility to relieve suffering. The second requirement was to have a sense of reverence towards, and faith in, the Buddhadharma. Next was to conduct ourselves in a gentle and harmonious manner. He frequently inspired us to compose and publish in a positive and uplifting way, and not with negative criticism. Such gentle and harmonious conduct can't become mere preachy words, and has to be practiced and cultivated in our daily life. Lastly, he required us to cultivate a joyful, open-minded perspective. One can only share wholeheartedly when one has a healthy and joyful attitude and great breadth of mind.

Shifu was quite eloquent in explaining the right attitude toward writing. He wrote that we should “serve our readers, with many healthy Dharma delicacies, composed of precious writings, meticulously fine-tuned and prepared within the offering vessel.” As Shifu described it, writing is like preparing Dharma meals, which should be both nutritious and delicious. I believe he was telling us that we ought to write things that are timely and that meet our

readers' greatest needs, and that they must be able to digest and absorb what we write. And after we've written them, how should we present them? "With the utmost reverence of mind, as if making offerings to all the buddhas. Let's present our writings to all great spiritual friends." So we were not to treat our audience as mere readers, but as great spiritual friends as well. He concluded by expressing that, "the effort to promote a pure land on earth begins with you and me." That sentence embodies a most profound meaning, and a grand mission. So I was immensely moved and inspired when I first read his letter. It appeared to me that I was no longer a typical staff writer. Encouraged and inspired by his words, I naturally felt a sense of mission to serve the Dharma through writing.

## Master Sheng Yen: Actualizing the Path

Buddhists usually divide teachers into three categories: sutra masters, shastra masters and vinaya masters. I personally consider Shifu a "life master" because his actions were always consistent with his words. He delivered whatever he promised, in full, with all his

heart, through his own effort. Many of you have come to know him through his biographies. In my 14 years with DDM, I have also come to know about his whole life through his biographies, as well as hearing about him from various elders and senior monastics. Shifu wrote something that's now exhibited in the DDM Founding History Memorial Hall that says, "My life is but a process of actualizing the Buddhadharma." Shifu accommodated causes and conditions throughout his life. We saw this in the development of DDM. DDM gradually came to be what it is today through his efforts, and his ability to adapt and respond to all contemporary causes and conditions, as well as look after and cultivate his numerous and diverse disciples.

I always felt that Shifu had a firm mastery of the Buddhadharma, spiritually and conceptually. One example can be found in his early book *Living by the Monastic Precepts*. In the chapter entitled "*The Pros and Cons of Buddhist Rituals*" he wrote extensively about rituals in Chinese Buddhism, tracing their roots, evolution and development in great detail, and offered views to

revolutionize them. He wrote: “Buddhist rituals are a necessity. However, appropriate and ideal rituals are never a form of trade or commercial transaction.” “In rituals, both the monastic and lay participants are engaged in spiritual practice. Whenever we perform rituals, monastics should serve in accordance with the teachings, reverently and respectfully. Lay followers and their families should participate in the practice, chanting along with the monastics, and receive the blessings of the Buddhadharma as they offer their prayers to the deceased.” Reading those words, I could not help but agree with him enthusiastically.

Shifu practiced what he preached. The quotations above are from an article published in “Buddhism Today” in 1960. It was not until 40 years later, in 1997, that DDM held its first-ever “Emperor Liang's Repentance Ritual.” Even as he saw the need to revolutionize an old ritual tradition, it was necessary to gather all the right causes and conditions, evolving over a period of time, to deal with the situation effectively. Revolutionizing repentance rituals is a case in point. That could not be achieved without a

concerted team, and even with a team, we could not rush into it. The DDM organization was formed in 1978, but we were small and the environmental factors weren't ripe yet, so it wasn't until 1997 that we held our first "Emperor Liang's Repentance Ritual." Looking ahead, one could say the upcoming "Water and Land Liberation Rite" will be his next important milestone in revolutionizing ritual practices.

## The wisdom of taking things on, and letting things go

A scene just appeared in my mind as I was talking. It was a vivid image of Shifu during our interview for the preface of the book *A Bowl of a Thousand Offerings*, which took place on November 18, 2008. To me, Shifu was that book's editor, as he was involved in the production over a period of three years, including directing the form of the final chapter. During the interview, I consulted him about the theme for that chapter. Would it be about the blossoming of Three-fold Education at DDM, or efforts and achievements in spreading Chinese Buddhism to

the West? He gave a simple reply, “Spreading Chinese Buddhism to the West.”

If we view that book like a movie, Shifu was the director, as well as an actor, along with all of us, the monastic disciples and lay followers. He was very pleased that day during the interview, as the preface would be the last piece of text to complete the book for publication. He had just undergone kidney dialysis in the morning before the afternoon interview, and was clearly not at his best when he walked into the interview room, supported by his attendant. He was moved to tears as he browsed through the book’s photos, as each one captured a piece of DDM history. Many a time in the course of the interview, he informed us that he was tired. “I have said enough for the preface. People will not be interested in a lengthy preface.” I don’t know where I got the courage to plead with him to speak a little more. In the end, he spent more than an hour with us, and that’s the preface you will find in the book. I would encourage you to read that preface, which contains almost 4,000 words. I consider it rather remarkable, a classic that has become a personal motto in my life. Here

is an excerpt: “Back when I was a young monk, Chinese Buddhism was already in a critical state. So I made a vow that at least I would never stray from Buddhism. And as long as I am alive, I must support and spread the Dharma. I hope that all the monastics and laypeople of DDM will also have this kind of compassion and great vow.”

That interview reminded me of my first encounter with Shifu when I started to work for DDM. That was in June, 1995. I was still a lay person at that time, and continued to discover surprises and receive inspiration at work every day. My task was to interview Shifu for *Humanity* magazine about “needs and wants in daily life.” I arrived ten minutes early for the interview, and waited for Shifu, who was in a meeting. I could sense it was a rather demanding meeting, as all the participants appeared rather serious. Once we sat down, Shifu asked what the topic was. Even though we had prepared an interview outline for him earlier, he must have been too busy to review it beforehand. I spent some time briefing him about the background and purpose of the interview. Then he asked how many words I needed. I told him, “About 2,500.” He closed his eyes

for about three minutes and then started to respond, and talked about the topic for fifteen minutes at a stretch. I had no questions for him, as he had answered all the questions I had in mind. Once I transcribed the interview, it came out to be around 2,500 words, as planned. In hindsight, he was the easiest interviewee, his answers always clear, logical, and well-organized.

In Shifu, I saw an exemplary Chan practitioner. Even if he became tired due to his taxing schedule, he didn't appear to be burdened or affected. Instead, he could focus on the present moment instantly. Once I finished the interview, he continued to the next item on his agenda without resting. So at the interview, I was very impressed. I really admired Shifu for the stability and focus he exuded, and the sense of ease that he carried with him as he accepted, dealt with, and let go of situations.

Fourteen years ago, that first interview sparked my interest in Chan meditation practice. Fourteen years later, Shifu remained as focused as ever during our interview even though he was ill, frail and tired. Fourteen years ago,

he let go of the time pressure of his agenda. Fourteen years later, he also let go of the discomforts of his illness, and responded wholeheartedly to an interview.

My colleagues and I also used to talk about how much Shifu respected professional expertise. Every time he completed an article, he would seek our opinion, saying, “Would you please review this article and see if it's suitable for publication?” From a worldly, everyday perspective, Shifu was the elder, our supervisor, who could have just issued direct orders. But he didn't. Instead, he had great respect for everyone on the editorial team. Whenever his secretary forwarded his work to us, he would add an end-note with a request: “Please look this over and see if it's suitable for publishing.”

At times, Master Sheng Yen would inquire about the Dharma Drum Monthly's headline news. After I filled him in, he would only mention that, “There's still a press release. How can we handle it?” Even though he was an experienced editor and understood the entire process thoroughly, he continued to express his respect for us

and other professionals. This continued even when I was promoted to Managing Director. At that time, I used to seek his advice about many issues, yet in the end he gave us a free hand to make our own decisions. Ever since I joined DDM, I realized I had a lot to learn from his professionalism and respect for others.

At the end of 2007, Shifu's condition became very unstable. In December we held a calligraphy exhibition entitled "Chan Joy: A Delightful Journey of Mind," for him at a Shin Kong Mitsukoshi department store in Taipei. Many were in tears when he appeared in a wheelchair during the opening. Seeing that, he said to us, "What are you crying about? Even though I am sick, I am not afraid of death, not waiting for death, and not seeking death. I continue to live each day with a positive mindset, enthusiastic and energetic." In February 2008, he completed a two hour dialogue with Cardinal Paul Shan Kuo-Shi, although he looked weak and frail. A few months later, in May, China experienced a terrible earthquake in Sichuan Province. Shifu was extremely concerned. You could say that the DDM Disaster Relief Center was located

right there in his residence (now the location of the Sheng Yen Education Foundation), where he was receiving treatment and care. He was also the director for all the relief work. Shifu could not bear to see the suffering of the victims. So it was right there at his former residence that he sent telegrams to China's State Administration for Religious Affairs, and used the phone there both to call Venerable Guo Pin, who was in Sichuan at the time, and continuously seek relief resources. He continued to serve and give, even though he was not well at all. His health seemed to have improved a little, and he seemed to have gotten back to his usual busy schedule again. In fact, he was even complaining about the efficiency and quality of our relief work. What really sustained and drove him, was his compassion towards the victims in China. But that period was extremely taxing on him.

Shifu was the captain of a ship. With great determination and aspiration, he took us on board, and delivered us to the other shore. In his later years, he used to say that he was leading us like some elderly, worn out guide. At that time, we were, sadly, very ignorant about

what he was saying . We felt that it was just an interesting analogy.

## A Dharma family

Coming here today reminded me of Shifu's openness and vision. Over the past few years there have been frequent natural disasters all over the world, and to the best of our ability, DDM has never failed to participate in relief activities. Some people might be concerned that relief funding will affect funding activities for Dharma Drum University. We really do not have to be concerned about that. Once while I was reporting to Shifu, he had to attend to a call from an overseas supporter. The caller said that he wanted to offer financial support, and Shifu suggested that the funds be used for disaster relief. I was quite moved. We all knew that, in the latter years of his life, setting up the university had been his greatest compassionate aspiration. But at that moment, he didn't give it a second thought. All he was thinking about was to serve and relieve those in need. He was not concerned about any impact the relief work would have on the university project. That thought

or concern may reflect a lack of commitment to and impartial compassion for all beings and phenomena.

Shifu's teaching are like a sudden flash of light after an interminable darkness. The difference is that the light he shined on us did not vanish in a split second. Instead, the torch was rekindled again and again, and continued to burn. Even as the fire died out, he did not let go, and continued to strive on until the very last moment, when he illuminated his life completely to reveal the inherent wisdom within our reality-body, our Dharmakaya.

Shifu once said that when the causes and conditions of this life expire, they're over. However, he was still connected to and concerned for us, remembering us till the very last moment of his life. He was like a compassionate father, and if there was anything he held on to, it would be his concerns for all of us, his students and disciples. This "not-letting-go" of his was a reluctance that manifested as a great and virtuous elder's unerring care for a group of disciples who were not yet mature. In his will, he reminded us that, "Within the fourfold monastic and lay sangha,

there is no contention for an estate, financial assets, power, or fame. We can look forward to cultivating compassion, wisdom, harmony, and respect, and being educated about Protecting the Four Environments.” He also encouraged us with these words, “Be appreciative and mindful, wise ones, that we have good karmic roots, great merit, and all the right causes and conditions, as fellow students of the bodhisattva path. We have had great affinities under countless buddhas, and will continue to cultivate the ultimate bodhi together in the infinite assemblies of buddhas as one Dharma family of the great Dharma era.” Shifu considered all of us as fellow students cultivating the bodhisattva path, siblings of the Buddha cultivating the true Dharma. His will, yet another highlight of his life-long wisdom, has since become a classic reference for many humanistic and cultural scholars. Let us keep his last words in our hearts. Let us remind ourselves that we will always be together, one Dharma family, of the great Dharma era.

*(Talk delivered on September 9, 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 I*
- E-18 Encounters with Master Sheng Yen II*

## Books in English by Venerable Master Sheng Yen :

- *Attaining the Way*
- *Catching a Feather on a Fan*
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- *Dharma Drum*
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*What I am unable to accomplish in this lifetime, I vow to push forward through countless future lives; what I am unable to accomplish personally, I appeal to everyone to undertake together.*

– Master Sheng Yen (1930-2009)