

ENCOUNTERS
with Master
Sheng Yen ㊦

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Preface

In an effort to share with the public the thoughts and life experiences of Master Sheng Yen (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.

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A Great Master Who Walked the Talk

Venerable Guo Xiang

Having been a nun under Shifu's guidance for more than 30 years, I have witnessed how Shifu taught and led by example in many occasions. What I admire the most and which touched me the most was Shifu's relentless diligence. I recalled when Shifu visited an elderly practitioner who was chronically bedridden with illness many years ago. When we returned after the visit, Shifu mentioned that he would serve until the very last moment of his life even though he would become old and sick. Indeed, Shifu walked the talk and truly made it.

Introducing the Speaker

Venerable Guo Xiang

In 1979, Venerable Guo Xiang moved into Nung Chan Monastery and was tonsured a year later. She was the first disciple to be ordained by Shifu in his effort to establish a monastic sangha in Taiwan. The venerable has served as Shifu's secretary and interpreter in Taiwanese and English. In her twenty odd years as Shifu's Taiwanese interpreter, she has gained great trust by both Shifu and the devotees with her warm, approachable yet elegant wordings.

The causes and conditions leading to my practice of the Dharma include what I term the remote cause, the intermediate cause, and the immediate cause. When I was four years old, my mother passed away. Since then, I have had strong doubts about life. That was the remote cause. When I was in college, I joined the Buddhist society, which got me in touch with the Dharma. That was the intermediate cause. And finally, meeting with Master Sheng Yen thirty odd years ago triggered my most profound and deepest involvement in Buddhism, which was the immediate cause.

The Great Question of Life and Death Follows Me Like a Shadow

My mother passed away when I was four years old. Although I was at a very young age and had barely started to learn about things and put things into memory, it came as a huge shock and I was thrown into confusion. Prior to that age, I was told by others that I had followed my mother to do laundry and helped carry her soap basket. However, I had no recollection of all these. I only remembered the time

when my mother had gotten very sick and some events after her death. To be honest, back then I didn't know anything about kinship, gratitude, and nostalgia. I only thought that mother was very weird. She was left behind in that dark mountain all by herself. Would not that be scary?

When I was in the third grade, there was a period of time when I would wonder ceaselessly with questions such as "Why does human die? Where do we go after death? Will I die too?" In the end, I came to my own painful answer which I was reluctant to accept. I told myself, "I will die too." I had thought that if we were to be born at all, we should not die. The realization of the fact that we would die eventually was extremely painful for me. Living in this world became an utterly bitter task and this thought hurt every piece of my bones thoroughly. My lungs and heart would ache right through too. I lost sleep every night and wept in solitude. Then I thought to myself, "Can this problem be solved?" That happened when I was just a third grade student. I suppose for someone like that, it was hard to not seek refuge in religion.

In high school, I went into a craze with absolute determination to seek the answer to life. I was also

determined to find the most important direction of my life. Back then in Taiwanese high school, there was no Buddhist study club so I joined a Christian fellowship. I attended gatherings regularly, listened to sermons, sang hymns, and participated in Sunday worships. I graduated from high school and was accepted to the Christian Soochow University in Taipei City. In any major function of the university, there would be an address by the university chaplain. However, I was not able to get the answer from what the chaplain said.

It was during the second semester of my junior year that I came across a Buddhist study club poster for a gathering on Buddhist view of the cosmos. This pricked my interest. I recalled that it was a very novel talk on the extreme vastness and the extreme smallness of the cosmos. I felt, from the bottom of my heart, that Buddhism's scientific view of the cosmos was far wider, more interesting, and more brilliant than the state of the art of astronomy. From there and then, I joined the university Buddhist study club – Pure Wisdom Society. Frequently, I would borrow books, participate in discussions and have my queries answered by the seniors. There was a particular

helpful senior from the Chinese Language department. Her name was Cao Yumei. She would patiently and skillfully help answer many of my questions and that slowly led me to the acceptance of Buddhism.

During the summer break of 1977, I attended a varsity level summer Buddhist study camp organized by a Zhonghe monastery and on the final day of the camp, I took refuge in the Three Jewels and formally became a Buddhist. The moment of my refuge was at 7 pm on the 7th day of the 7th month (July) of the year of 1977. I had a deep impression of the moment as there was a confluence of five 'sevens'. After my refuge, I had an intense feeling that I did not have enough blessings for it had taken me twenty years to seek my refuge. At the same time, I was also happy as this search for the grand path of life starting since I was little, was over. Finally I was certain of the path I was traveling on.

Aspiring for Ordination and Sharing Shifu's Burden

During the 1978 Chinese New Year, Venerable Chang Yan (then Lin Mengying who was also my varsity senior),

myself and several others visited Fo Guang Shan. There was a nun who took a particular interest in me. She knew that I was an English major and wanted me to get in touch with a lady named Miss Cai. The nun hoped that Miss Cai who is well versed in Buddhist study could help me in Buddhism while I could help her with English. Later I found that Miss Cai also lived in Beitou as I did then. She was staying at the Chung-Hwa Institute of Buddhist Culture which happened to be only twenty-minute walking distance away from my place.

On the day when we met, there was a Dharma service at the institute and when I arrived, it was already near noon. The ceremony had just finished and lunch followed immediately. It was during the meal where I first met Master Sheng Yen. We shared the table with Shifu and he showed great hospitality by dishing out extra helpings into everyone's bowls. I also observed that Shifu ate fast as he would finish a bowl of rice in three minutes. It made me wonder why a scholarly-looking gentleman like Shifu finished his meal in such a haste. Later I came to know that it was a habit Shifu picked up from attending seven-day zen retreats when he was studying in Japan. After Shifu

finished his meal, he continued putting extra helpings into others' bowls and chatted with us. Seated at the same table with Shifu were several elderly practitioners. Shifu behaved just like another elderly practitioner and there was no barrier between him and them. That was my first impression of Shifu.

A year later, I was enrolled in a summer holiday seven-day Chan retreat at the institute, led by Shifu personally. I remember that I cried so much during that retreat as if it had been a "crying retreat." Sometimes I cried because I was touched. I also cried because of the pain in my leg. But the one that moved me the most was the power of compassion and wisdom radiating from Shifu. The power infused the air so thickly that I could almost reach out and touch it. After the retreat, I decided to move into an affiliate monastery of the institute – Nung Chan Monastery, to continue my Buddhist study under the guidance of Shifu. Back then, I was still teaching English outside in the evening while studying Buddhism during the day in the monastery. There were then about ten young adults who frequented the monastery. With this core group of people, Shifu established the "Threefold Education Academy"

(sangha education department), which was the forerunner of the DDM sangha.

Six months later, I went for another seven-day Chan retreat. After a dharma talk, Shifu, in an unexpectedly harsh tone, said, “I run the retreat all by myself. I am so busy and exhausted and yet no one has offered to help. If none of you is inspired to step forward, there should not be any future retreat.” Upon hearing those words, I was so sad that I ran out of the Chan hall and wailed in tears. I cried with such intensity that I was totally drained. This was contrary to my nature as no matter how sad I was, I would only weep in silence. Crying until my whole body went numb was the result of extreme remorse I felt. Recounting my twenty over years of living, I realized that I had yet to serve Buddhism properly. I felt lousy for not doing my part at all!

I really wanted to help lighten Shifu’s load but what could I do? I had just graduated from university with no experience working in the society. In addition, due to the circumstances of my background and spiritual capability, I was really bad at everything and anything. If I were to become a nun, what could I really do? I had zero

confidence at all. However I told myself I would completely devote my life's worth of time, soul and strength to helping relieve Shifu's burden. Even if I had to spend the rest of my life sweeping, cooking or washing the toilet, it would be better than not taking up ordination. With this, I decided to become a nun under Shifu.

A Nursery Rhyme and My Deep Contrition

After residing in Nung Chan Monastery for a year, I began to have self-doubts just a month before tonsure. It was not because I have lost faith but I was hesitant due to my own expectation. Nung Chan Monastery was not a reclusive ground for isolated spiritual training but an active spiritual center with the mission to engage the world. I believed that as one of the pioneering batch of monastics, I should shoulder some serious responsibilities. But when I thought about it, I feared that I was not competent enough. My misgiving had gotten to the point that I thought that it might be better for me to go out into the mundane world to work and return only after accumulating some work experience. Right before tonsure, I told Shifu, "I think I

should get out and ‘roam around’ in the society first.” Shifu replied, “If you ‘roam around’ out of here, do you think you can really ‘roam around’ back again?” It was clear that Shifu disagreed with me and I decided to get ordained right away. In order to strengthen my determination to stay at the monastery, I made a vow daily that I would never leave the monastery for any interpersonal issue or illness.

However, merely a month or two after my ordination, I slowly realized that I was physically unable to adapt to life at the monastery. Around the monastery was paddy field with very high groundwater level and this made the environment too wet and cold for me. I happened to suffer from a medical condition known as “disharmony of ‘ying’ and ‘wei’ qi.” In other words my body reacted to warm and cold conditions very poorly. Since the summer I graduated from middle school, I had been suffering from this medical condition. I would come down with heat stroke easily while having a cold at the same time. Having this kind of illness in a highly disciplined lifestyle of the monastic sangha was a very tough challenge. I also suffered from heart disease and gastric ulceration. There were other problems including having to make many toilet

trips a day. All these made me feel embarrassed, helpless, and even useless. Feeling like a sick soldier stationed in the frontline, handicapped with illnesses, I started to question whether I was the right kind of person to be ordained. But my determination to be ordained was resolute and I had burnt all my bridges. This severed nearly every connection I had with the outside world and there was already no way out.

My condition was not easily explained and understood. Moreover, as the first to be ordained, I believed that I should set myself as an example. My stress was pronounced and this led to a negative spiral. The greater the stress I suffered, the more sick I became and misunderstanding arose. I was even told off by a fellow practitioner, quoting Shifu words, “The diligent enjoy the best health.” I could not explain myself without sounding defensive. As I was ill, my ability to follow the sangha routines deteriorated. Gradually Shifu started to question if my intention of becoming a nun was due to the setbacks I had encountered in the mundane world.

Even so, as I was the first to be ordained, Shifu was very forgiving. In one of the letters Shifu wrote me in the earlier years, he said, “I think highly of you.” Whether it

was serving as Shifu's secretary or holding other duties, my capability and physical conditions were terrible. I was always operating with a 'foggy' mind but Shifu pardoned every bit of it. The only thing I did well was serving as the Taiwanese interpreter for Shifu. Back then, providing live Taiwanese interpretation was very important and Shifu thought highly of my effort. To this day, there are still laypersons and monastics from all over Taiwan who talk about my interpretation when they bump into me.

I have always felt that I had let Shifu down as I should have been able to take on more responsibilities and help share Shifu's burden. Shifu had great expectations on me. But due to my poor health and lack of ability, I dropped the ball over and over. Shifu once remarked that I was a "cow" with no shoulder. My contrition towards Shifu led me to write a nursery rhyme which was included in an anthology of poems for children titled "Xiaobai leads the way." Most readers may find it innocent and fun but hidden between the lines is my deep sense of contrition.

*I wanted to give a birthday present,
But I didn't know what to give.*

I thought and thought, and perhaps it should be a wristwatch.

I thought and thought, and it would be a bunch of bananas.

I thought and thought, and forgot all about it.

In the end, I only gave a smile.

My original purpose to become a monastic was to give a gift of life to others and to devote myself to a life of Dharma service with Shifu and the monastery. I came full of ardor and sincerity but I have done very little. I felt as if I was able to do no more than wearing a plain smile that expressed my good intention. Initially this was very painful but with the passage of time, I have gradually learned to face myself with a more tranquil and ordinary attitude. I learned to be grateful to Shifu and the sangha for bearing with me and giving me opportunities to grow. I also made it a daily practice to nurture a deep compassion towards all sentient beings, an endless adoration for the Dharma, and the determination to take refuge, learn and spread the Dharma forever and ever.

Dignified and Meticulous in All Aspects of Daily Living

Having been a nun under Shifu's guidance for more than 30 years, I have witnessed how Shifu taught and led by example in many occasions. What I admire the most and which touched me the most was Shifu's relentless diligence. I recalled when Shifu visited an elderly practitioner who was chronically bedridden with illness many years ago. When we returned after the visit, Shifu mentioned that he would serve until the very last moment of his life even though he would become old and sick.

Indeed, Shifu walked the talk and truly made it. In over a month before he passed away, even though he was so weak that he needed help to stand up or sit in the wheelchair, he always wore a smile in front of people and he was still very clear minded and humorous as he had always been. And in the final two weeks, he was still able to give very clear and detailed instructions on numerous complicated matters.

In the past, I had personally witnessed how Shifu handled things even when he was very ill. For example, in

1982, the government of Singapore invited Shifu to teach the Dharma there. Due to the hot weather and a tight schedule, Shifu contracted shingles, a viral infection of the nerve roots, on his left face. It was excruciatingly painful. Shifu had to return to Taiwan after having been treated by several local doctors to no avail.

When Shifu arrived at the Chung-Hwa Institute of Buddhist Culture, many people cried when they saw him. Half of Shifu's face was blackened from medication. Physically weakened, every step he took was very difficult. Right then, Shifu wanted me to make a call to the monastics in Singapore as he wanted to speak to them in person and let them know that he was safe and sound. He had specially instructed me, "Guo Xiang, you had better not scare them by telling them that Shifu is very sick. I am just fine."

Two days after Shifu came back to Taiwan, he was sent to a clinic at Zhongxiao East Road in Taipei City for treatment. During the day, Shifu would sit on his bed greeting visitors smilingly while during the night, he would sit in meditation on the bed. The continuous intense pain caused the already slender Shifu to be even thinner. Later, Shifu continued his treatment at a Chinese medicine

clinic in Zhongli.

When Shifu's condition improved, the director of the clinic invited him to spend half an hour daily to give dharma talks to the staff and patients. Shifu agreed readily as he loved none other than connecting with people through Dharma. So in the latter part of Shifu's hospitalization, the clinic provided a special service – "Time with Shifu," from 12:30pm to 1 pm during which Shifu would give a talk to all. Shifu's action was akin to that of Vimalakirti in the Vimalakirtinirdesa Sutra, expounding the Dharma to sentient beings using his illness as a condition. It also affirmed the teaching in the sutra that for a great practitioner, everything and anything is a basis for expounding the Dharma.

Shifu was highly disciplined. He always wore dark brown monastic robes which appeared dull and low key. Whenever we saw Shifu, he was always in his long robe. He instructed all monastics to be in long robe when they stepped out of their rooms, as this was the most basic form of manner.

When participating in large activities, Shifu would talk and carry himself in a disciplined and rigorous manner.

Shifu once led a group of devotees on a pilgrimage tour to India. The weather was very hot and everyone had their straw hats on but Shifu did not put on a hat. Shifu said, “This is the holy ground where the Buddha had taught the Dharma and delivered sentient beings. As a Buddhist, how could I wear a hat?”

A western disciple of Shifu also recalled an incident when Shifu returned to the USA from Taiwan. Shifu was wearing a new pair of spectacles and the disciple praised that Shifu looked better with the new pair of glasses. Immediately, Shifu returned to his room and came out wearing his old glasses.

Gratitude in Action

Shifu was a simple and down-to-earth man. For several decades in the USA, he did not use a proper mattress bed. In his study room, Shifu had a thin foam pad that was folded up and put away in a corner. During the night, he would unfold it and that would be his bed.

Shifu loved to share with others what he had. All of us had probably read about Shifu’s childhood story in which

he had a bite of a banana and found it very delicious. He could not wait to share and brought it to school for everyone to have a taste of it. Shifu always said, “The Dharma is so wonderful and yet so few people know about it.” That is the reason why he was so earnest to share the Dharma.

Shifu’s sharing nature can also be seen in his daily living. If Shifu received offering of clothing from lay people, he would keep one set and give the rest away to his disciples. When I just got ordained, Shifu gave me a hat but I returned it as I did not dare to wear Shifu’s hat. If anyone sent him cookies or fruits, Shifu would also share them with others. I recalled an incident at Dharma Drum Retreat Center in the USA. Shifu saw a particular flower by the lake that bloomed magnificently. When he went indoor, Shifu told everyone to stop whatever they were doing and go check out the flower. That was Shifu.

Shifu also had a great sense of humor. In Taiwan, because most people held a reverential attitude towards monastics, Shifu would assume a solemn demeanor on the podium accordingly. However in the USA, Shifu’s dharma talks were very funny. Shifu had a unique and refined

sense of humor. In daily living, Shifu would also relax and joke with us at times.

Shifu took debt of gratitude seriously and remembered everyone who had helped him. When the Dharma Drum Mountain Complex was completed, Shifu invited nuns who had many years of special relationship with Dharma Drum Mountain for a visit. On that day, while most of the guests wore coffee colored robe, Shifu wore an old grey cotton robe. We were puzzled, “Why would Shifu wear a grey robe that is very old and wrinkled? This is very weird.”

During the gathering, Shifu introduced each and every guest and when he came to Venerable Rong Zhi, a nun who provided external support for Shifu during his solitary retreat in Meinong some forty years ago, he pointed to his robe and said, “This robe was made for me by Venerable Rong Zhi during my solitary retreat. I am wearing it today to delight her a little.” At that moment, there was a thunderous applause. Whether the applause was to thank Venerable Rong Zhi or to praise Shifu, I could not differentiate. However, from that moment, whenever I wore a wrinkled robe, I would recall Shifu’s innocence and his exceptional outlook on gratitude.

Another thing is that Shifu never celebrated his birthday. On Shifu's 70th birthday, he happened to be on a plane and he spent that birthday which is commonly an important milestone in life, quietly and without any fun fare.

In 2002, Shifu led a group of monastic and lay followers to Shentong Temple in Shandong, China to return the stolen Akshobhya Buddha head. The accompanying laities bought a cake to celebrate Shifu's birthday but were scolded for it.

On another birthday, some laities made lunch offering to the assembly as a means of celebration. However, Shifu made his point by leaving Nung Chan Monastery before noon.

Sometimes, there would be birthday presents from his lay disciples and Shifu would send all of them back. Shifu upheld his principle of no birthday celebration strictly and thoroughly. Shifu's monastics disciples had seen it and also learnt from it. For the monastics of Dharma Drum Mountain, birthday is not celebrated.

The Four Mindsets and Bodhisattva Vows

Throughout Shifu's life, not only did he carry out Dharma practice by actions, he also instructed his disciples that practicing the Dharma required four mindsets – great faith, great vow of compassion, great diligence, and renunciation.

First of all, great faith refers to having faith in the Three Jewels and in ourselves. We should have faith in the Three Jewels and believe that the Three Jewels can help us depart from the myriad sufferings of life and death. Most of us struggle on amidst all sorts of difficulties including birth, ageing, sickness and death. The Three Jewels are a beacon and a vessel to help us thoroughly transcend suffering. Hence, the first condition for practicing and learning the Dharma is to have faith. Have faith in the Three Jewels and have faith that we are capable of practicing the Dharma. Have faith that through practice, we will eventually attain Buddhahood.

Second, great vow of compassion refers to the Bodhi mind. Seeing the suffering endured by sentient beings, we simply can't bear to turn away and therefore strive to help

them depart from suffering and gain joy with Dharma. This is vital. In one of Shifu's talk, he mentioned that a "vow" was a promise to oneself. In our world of suffering, the greatest promise we can make to ourselves is to generate a vow. In Shifu's autobiography "*Footprints in Snow*," he clearly stated that it is through such compassionate vows that ordinary beings attain Buddhahood in their practice.

Shifu had said that even for a person who had not done a single good thing in his entire life, if he could make a pure vow right before his death to be reborn as a human being so that he could practice diligently and help sentient beings practice the Dharma, he would be spared the foul paths and return through the power of the vow. In the past, we had thought that in order for someone to be able to return through the power of the vow, he or she had to be a great practitioner. However Shifu told us that as long as a person made a pure vow before death, he would be able to return as a human being although he had not done any good in his life. As we can see, the power of vow is very potent.

This was also why Shifu had likened "vow" to a life buoy. We, the masses, are adrift on the seas of suffering in

the three realms. Making a vow is like wearing a sturdy life buoy. If a wave crashed over us, the life buoy would keep us from drowning and we would resurface quickly. Therefore, it is very critical that we make a great vow.

Third, great diligence. This is the key to success in all endeavors and it is especially important for Dharma practitioners. In the sutra, it is mentioned that Shakyamuni Buddha and Maitreya Bodhisattva were once Dharma brothers. Originally, their practices were at the same level but Shakyamuni Buddha was more diligent and he attained Buddhahood before Maitreya Bodhisattva. Personally I believe that with Shifu's energetic diligence, he would attain Buddhahood soon.

There is a saying by Shifu which I recall frequently and would like to share with everyone: "By having great diligence, you will be able to overcome all hardships and difficulties, and be successful in all your endeavors."

Fourth, renunciation. For most people, the most difficult thing is to relinquish the attachment to our body and life. Their greatest concerns are none other than serious illness or death. Besides these, a Dharma practitioner must also depart from concerns and matters

such as relationship, family, sensual desire, power and privilege. There is a difference between renunciation and aversion. Aversion leads to escapism while renunciation means enthusiastically helping sentient beings and sharing the Dharma with a clear head and a pair of cool eyes. This is what the sutras mean by being an “unsolicited friend” – someone who does not wait for call of help but takes the initiative to spread the Dharma, and to serve and benefit the world.

The entire life of Shifu – learning on his own, going into solitary retreats, studying in Japan, founding Dharma Drum Mountain, and promoting the Dharma internationally – reflects the actualization of the four mindsets. For him, teaching by words and teaching by examples were unified, and his realizations were harmonized with that shown in the scriptures and the realizations of past great masters. Although Shifu’s physical body has passed on, he had set up for other practitioners guiding principle and direction through his life’s work. His spirit and compassionate vows live on forever. Shifu had great expectations on us and it was his hope that all of us will take up the responsibility of propagating and

upholding the Dharma. Without a doubt, Shifu's wish to return to serve the Samsara world is our greatest inspiration. We hope that in the near future, we will have the opportunity to practice the true Dharma with Shifu again, and dedicate our lives to following Shifu's footprints.

*(Talk delivered on September 30, 2009
at the Sheng Yen Education Foundation)*

The Inexhaustible Benefits of Shifu's Teachings

Venerable Guo Zhou

*If I am able to let others feel that they are cared of,
it all came about from Shifu's teachings.*

*If I am credited with the slightest of merits,
they all came from Shifu.*

All I did was following and learning from Shifu.

*The tiny smattering I learnt from Shifu has benefited me
endlessly.*

Introducing the Speaker

Venerable Guo Zhou

Ordained in 1986 at Nung Chan Monastery, Venerable Guo Zhou has served as Master Sheng Yen's attendant and as the director of DDM centers at Jiayi, Tainan, Kaohsiung, Pingdong, and Chaozhou. In 2010, she was appointed Director of the DDM Vancouver Center in. She currently serves as the director of Zhaiming Monastery. The venerable excels in taking care of others. She believes that care begins with being empathetic and considerate towards others and understanding what others really need. Only then will truly beneficial help be possible.

Since the time I started to practice as a layperson and then as a nun, I have always felt grateful wholeheartedly. Most of my sangha postings were in southern Taiwan where I started to serve in the seventh year after my ordination. I have been posted to Jiayi, Tainan, Gaoxiong, Pingdong and Caozhou, and have always been deeply moved by the enthusiastic dedication of our supporters.

In recent years, I was posted to Vancouver, Canada and I was very grateful too. It was a different kind of learning, a whole new subject for me. As Taiwan and Canada are different culturally and socially, the needs of the people are different too.

In a discourse, Shifu has said, “Wherever we may be, the first thing we should think about is how to devote ourselves to the local community and how we can help them.” Shifu’s words moved me greatly and I have been learning to put them into practice. So wherever I go, I will always think about what I can bring to the people and how I can help them. What Shifu taught is highly inspirational and moved me greatly.

Sojourning in the Dharma amid the Fleeting Life

My brush with the Dharma began when I was twenty-four. However, the motivation to learn the Dharma can be traced to my elementary school years. During a summer holiday, a female classmate had gone with her mother to visit her maternal grandmother in the countryside and never returned. I heard that she was riding on a bicycle pedaled by her cousin and fell off. She suffered a concussion and died a few days later. Although I was very young, it was a big shock to me. I used to play with her frequently. She was a classmate and also a playmate. After she passed away, her mother gave me some of her clothes. When I wore her cloth, I sometimes got sentimental and wondered where she had gone.

At that time, folk operas and folklore telling were quite popular. Most of the storylines were about loyalty, filial piety, moral integrity, and righteousness. The shows always ended with good people rising to the heaven and evil doers falling into hell. Since my classmate was only a child, she would have neither done any evil nor hurt anyone, and

should have gone to heaven. Thus I would wonder. I would occasionally stare at the starry nights and thought about where my classmate would be. “At birth, where did I come from? In death, where will I go?” The question on life’s core issue was then stirred up.

However, with the passage of time, the question faded. It was after many years later that I encountered my first book on Buddhism that offered a basic explanation of the Dharma. The book expounded issues of human life so thoroughly that I was deeply shaken. Even though I didn’t understand everything, I was very moved after reading the book and the idea of becoming a nun was seeded.

Back then, I had a job in the civil service and had also begun to learn about the Dharma with a focus on the practice of reciting the Buddha’s name. I thought that life is really a suffering. If we were to be born, why did we have to die? If we would die, why were we born in the first place? How wonderful it would be if there is no such coming and going.

At that time, it was all about finding salvation for myself. I was hoping to leave this world of suffering behind and live in the land of ultimate bliss. As for generating the

bodhi-mind to benefit sentient beings, it was completely out of my grasp and I really didn't get it. Even joining the monastic order was partially an escapist motivation. There was a lack of true confidence in my practice of the Dharma.

I had thought of studying in a Buddhist seminary before joining the monastic order. However, causes and conditions were lacking and a decade went by quickly. During those ten years, I continued with Buddha-name recitation and practiced at several Buddhist centers. As I was young and hardworking, wherever I went, I would first report to the kitchen and help with vegetable and dish washing, and kitchen clean up. I was very happy doing all these.

However, my thought of joining the monastic order has never changed. It was just that I lacked the wisdom to decide which monastery to join. So I made a vow before the Buddha statue and prayed for guidance to find a good mentor who would help me depart from suffering, attain happiness, and learn the authentic Dharma. As the saying goes, "if there is a vow, it will be fulfilled." I recalled very clearly that after I had taken the bodhisattva precepts

at Songshan Monastery, I began to receive the monthly *Humanity Magazine*. It was the 14th issue and a notice caught my eyes: In December, Nung Chan Monastery will hold a 7-day Amitabha Buddha recitation retreat.

Monastic Life as a Way of Filial Piety and Gratitude

I signed up for the retreat immediately and applied for leave from work. On the first day of the retreat, I got off the bus at Daye Road in Beitou. It was my first trip to Nung Chan Monastery and no matter where I walked, I could not find it. I believe this was a rather common experience for many of the early devotees. At one point, I thought of giving up. But having taken my leave and getting to Beitou, I simply could not bear to give up like that. I willed myself up and eventually found the monastery.

The retreat was led by Venerable Guo Ru, as Shifu was not in Taiwan. There were twenty over participants. Venerable Guo Ru led the retreat in a forceful manner to inspire diligent practice and that left a deep impression on me. On the final day of the retreat, which was a Sunday,

I was filled with Dharma joy and was reluctant to leave the place. At the reception area, I met Venerable Guo Fang who was still a lay practitioner then. She was also emanating Dharma joy and we exchanged the insights of our practice. Venerable Guo Hui who was a postulant yet to be tonsured, saw the two of us staying behind and recommended that we join the evening meditation class. Only when the lesson began did I realize that Venerable Guo Hui was the meditation instructor.

Not long later, Shifu returned to Taiwan and started giving Dharma talks and sutra lectures. Every session of Shifu's Dharma talk was really joyful for me. Since then, I kept going to Nung Chan Monastery for lessons, sutra lectures, and voluntary services. It seemed that every monastic here had gone through similar experience.

After about one year, Venerable Guo Fang decided to take up ordination and moved in with the sangha. One day, Shifu asked me, "When will you move in with the sangha too?" I could not answer his question. Although I really wanted to be a nun and my wish was very strong, I felt that the timing was not right. However, Shifu's question started a drive that put causes and conditions into a quick motion

and I started to actively deal with this issue.

At that time, the one thing that I could not really let go of was my mother. Both of my parents were kind and benevolent. My father was a civil servant who was reserved and inarticulate. His love for the children was not expressed in words but by other means.

I was very close to my mother who was born at a time of extreme poverty. At seven years old, she was taken away during her sleep to settle my grandfather's gambling debt. She woke up as an adopted daughter of another family and could never return to her home of birth again. At her tender age, my mother was forced to cook, do the laundry and all kinds of tough chores. It was only when she turned 20 years old and got married with my father that she was able to catch a little breath. After that, in bringing up and providing for the children, she had taken all kinds of tough jobs and faced all kinds of hardship. But no matter how difficult life was, she had never wanted to give her children away for adoption.

My mother was intelligent and kind. Even when she had only a little money left in her pocket, she would happily give it to the needy she met. When I thought about

her hard life and her determination to keep her children, I could not bear to leave her behind.

As mentioned earlier, I had wanted to enroll in a Buddhist seminary. In fact, I had done all preparations for enrollment, including getting the required attires. However, on the second day of school, I heard that my mother was looking for me and had been crying daily. My heart ached and that was one of the reasons I quit the seminary.

This time around at Nung Chan Monastery, it was different. My desire for ordination was very strong but I was still not able to leave my mother behind. One day, a thought came to me, “If I were to die, wouldn’t mother need to accept it?” Surely she would have to. Since I was merely going to be a nun, it should be easier for her to face comparing to my death. With this thought, I transformed my mindset and moved into the monastery as a postulant. But I dared not breathe a word of it to my mother. As part of my plan, I visited her at home whenever I can.

On the day of ordination, my younger sister was the only family member who attended the ceremony. In the part when we bid farewell to our family, I had to prostrate

in gratitude to my parents but their seats were emptied. It was a feeling that I could not describe.

My mother was in tears daily after she received news of my ordination. She refused to take my call and I couldn't write to her since she could not read, not having the opportunity for education. I ended up recording my message in voice and sent it to her, hoping that it would help resolve her longing for me.

To this day, I still feel that recorded message is a pretty good idea. It is a good way to send words of gratitude to our family.

In the recording, I started with expressing my gratitude to my mother for all the hardship she has gone through in giving birth to me and bringing me up. I also told her that my wish for joining the monastic order was to fulfill my filial piety and pay my debt of gratitude. As I went on with the message, I became very moved myself. I heard that my mother wept when she listened to the recording. Later, when I went home for a visit accompanied by fellow members of the sangha, my mother still wept when she saw me. In fact, she was weeping when she prepared some of the best tasting vegetarian dishes for

us. To repay my parents' love, the best thing I can do is to really put in a good effort in practicing the Dharma. There is nothing better than using this body of mine which was bestowed by them to walk the bodhisattva path and benefit sentient beings. That's the greatest thing I can offer and the best way to repay my debt of gratitude to them.

In 2002, my father fell sick and passed away. Shifu was in the US but he specially wrote me a letter urging me to transfer all the merits I had accumulated since becoming a nun to my father. Shifu also asked me to send his condolences to my mother and family members. He wrote, "Please ask them to make an effort to recite the Buddha's name. Over here, Shifu will pray for them and will also pray for your father." I have kept the letter Shifu wrote and it still moved me whenever I read it. The debt of gratitude we owe to our parents could never be fully paid back. My physical body was given by my parents and it was Shifu who gave life to my dharma body and wisdom. Whenever I think of Shifu's compassionate vows, I will remind myself against slacking off. I will pull myself up and march forward with courage and renewed vows.

Through Suffering and Hardship, Empathize with Others and Benefit Others

At the time of my ordination, the monastic sangha was small in number. Shifu personally guided us on daily living routines such as cooking, laundry, vegetable planting and numerous other tasks. He was like a loving mother taking care of us in every way.

When Shifu was in the country, he would attend both morning and evening services with the assembly. In one of the morning services, I was in charge of the drum and bell. I was in a daze and kept missing the beats. After the session, Shifu came to me and asked me to kneel down. I fell to my knees immediately and tears flowed. I was deeply ashamed of myself and was moved by how Shifu nurtured us with discipline, support and protection. From then on, I have tried to keep a clear mind whatever I do. I have learned to pay more attention and be more careful.

On Chinese New Year eve, the monastery is especially busy. One year during the Chinese New Year festival, I was exhausted both mentally and physically from work. Shifu noticed it and summoned me to the guest room. There

was a Chinese physician providing consultation and Shifu requested the physician to have a look at me too. I was very touched. The care and attention shown by Shifu to his disciples were equal and it extended to monastic and lay practitioners alike.

I had served as Shifu's attendant and noted that Shifu slept little and ate little. He always had meetings, guests to greet, and many events to attend and I felt I should pay more attention to his diet and take good care of him. Whenever I noticed that Shifu had a small meal, on the next meal I would slightly increase the serving size and occasionally made some changes to it, hoping to provide a healthier and more balanced diet for Shifu. However, Shifu would only take a taste of the specially made food and drink. It was as though he was telling us not to spend too much time on such a matter. That was another thing that I felt deeply about.

I am a slow learner and often spend a lot of time trying to figure out Shifu's teaching. The year when the September 21 earthquake struck Taiwan, Shifu said, "Those who relieve others from hardship and sufferings are bodhisattvas; those who take on hardship and sufferings

themselves are great bodhisattvas.” I could not understand what it meant. I felt that swapping the two designations would make more sense. Why did Shifu exclaim it as such?

It wasn't until 2002 that I finally understood what Shifu meant. 2002 was the worst year of my monastic life as I was not settled in both mind and body. Assaulted by all kinds of adversities, I was in turmoil mentally and physically. I felt that the only way to face this was to go into hiding. Later on that year, I participated in the group pilgrimage tour to ancestral monasteries of the Chan lineage in mainland China with Shifu. It was by listening to Shifu's Dharma talks on the trip that I was able to slowly regain the peace of mind.

At times, during adversity, we may find ourselves confronted by all sorts of unfavorable situations that seemingly come from nowhere and for no particular reason. In reality, it is the ripening of karmic forces which explode all together. At that moment, we may not be convinced that we were at fault or in the wrong. I have had such an experience. Anyway, I was very grateful for the opportunity to join the pilgrimage tour as during that fourteen days, I was able to follow Shifu's footsteps and

listened to his Dharma talks. I was very moved by Shifu as he never thought about himself. His thought was always on sentient beings and on Buddhism.

Shifu gave a talk at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology after the pilgrimage tour. The topic was modern day application of the Heart Sutra. Shifu started by asking how individuals could keep their minds at peace in the midst of unstable macro-environment with economic recession and increasing layoffs. He then expounded the wisdom of the Heart Sutra and taught that by exercising this wisdom to contemplate things, we will find that our body and mind as well as the environment are impermanent. As such, they are always changing. Whatever situations we are in, be it getting hurt or tormented, we suffer because our minds are influenced by external conditions. *The Heart Sutra* teaches us to transform external conditions within our mind. I was deeply impressed with the following teaching of Shifu, “Bringing vexations to ourselves reflect a lack of wisdom; bringing vexations to others reflect a lack of compassion.” This teaching has helped me greatly. It is very useful.

The Heart Sutra says, “... he perceived that all five

skandhas are empty, thereby transcending all sufferings.” If we are able to contemplate the impermanence of our thoughts, suffering will cease to exist. However, although our own suffering may not exist any longer, sufferings of sentient beings are still there, experienced by them as reality. Such feeling and insight can only be gained by taking on and experiencing sufferings ourselves. Only then are we able to help others with empathy. Right then, I finally understood why “those who relieve others from hardship and sufferings are bodhisattvas; those who take on hardship and sufferings themselves are great bodhisattvas.”

Shifu also told a story of a disciple who was in real estate trading 30 years ago. He frequently went to the monastery and attended Shifu’s Dharma talks. Then came a real estate crash and the market never recovered. He was in great suffering and even told Shifu that he wanted to commit suicide. Shifu scolded him for being ignorant and said that as long as he practiced the Dharma, he could always find a way out. Shifu told him, “Always leave yourself a lifeline and leave others a lifeline too.” The man then disappeared and did not show up again.

It was fifteen years later that the man reappeared, bringing his family along to visit Shifu. The man spoke of the worst moment in his life when he couldn't find a way out. He thought of Shifu's word "always leave yourself a lifeline" and followed the advice. A friend came to his aid. His family of six lived in a small loft and day in, day out, they fed themselves with plain noodle. Later on, he found a job and his children all turned out very sensible. More than a decade later, the hard times were finally over and the good times came. On that particular day, the man brought his family to visit and specially thank Shifu for saving his life.

Sharing some words of Dharma can change someone's life. This story inspired me greatly. "Always leave yourself a lifeline and leave others a lifeline too." I have understood Shifu's teaching and I made a silent vow to practice even harder and never ever let Shifu down.

Kindness and Compassion, Equality for All Sentient Beings

If I am able to let others feel that they are cared of, it

all came about from Shifu's teachings. If I am credited with the slightest of merits, they all came from Shifu. All I did was following and learning from Shifu. The tiny smattering I learnt from him has benefited me endlessly.

A monastic colleague once asked me how to practice being caring? I said that it was simple. Rather than consider things from our own point of view, try to look at things from others' perspectives and needs. Everyone has a different standpoint. It is only when we look at things from the standpoints of others that we can understand his need and to truly help him and benefit him.

When I was first posted to the branch centers, I knew nothing. I only knew that when a devotee has a need, I will respond immediately. Although something might appear minor to me, it could be very important for the devotees. For example, when the elderly parent of devotees fell ill or was about to pass away and they asked whether I could go to their home and help their parent take refuge. I would go right away. What I gave was only a tiny bit. However, for the devotees, it was the help they needed the most.

From Shifu's biography, we learned that throughout his life since he was a child, he has faced constant adversity.

The suffering experienced by Shifu was truly deep and his compassion for sentient beings who were sufferings was profound. At all times, Shifu cared for his disciples and his compassion was equal towards all. His approaches towards those who were difficult were different from his usual approaches. Some people had said that Shifu “bullied the good ones but feared the bad ones.” To this, Shifu answered, “Of course I ‘bully the good ones and fear the bad ones.’ For the ‘bad ones,’ if you continue to condemn them, they will run away and their virtuous roots for Dharma practice will be cut off.”

For example, more than a decade ago, there was a terrifying kidnapping in Taiwan which shook the entire society. A policeman was killed in the incident and the main culprit also paid for his crime with his life. After the incident ended, Nung Chan Monastery happened to hold a seven-day Buddha recitation retreat and Shifu requested the monastics to put up memorial tablets for the deceased policeman and the culprit. The tablet for the policeman was positioned in front of that for the culprit. Shifu’s intention was that while the good must be saved, those who have done evil should be saved all the more. Great

bodhisattvas do not harbor antagonism or discrimination but it does not mean that they cannot distinguish good from evil. It is just that they are compassionate towards people who have done evil for they are in even greater need to be helped with Dharma. As for putting the culprit's tablet in the rear, it was done to prevent people from giving rise to vexation. In most people's minds, there are only the two extremes of right and wrong. However, the compassion of great bodhisattvas is equal towards all, transcending worldly duality.

Shifu brought our Dharma body and wisdom life to light. It is because of Shifu that we are able to learn the Dharma and practice the way of bodhisattva. In my early days as a Buddhist, I had no idea what the way of bodhisattva was. All I knew was chanting the Buddha's name to seek rebirth in the Western Pure Land. As for Dharma, I had more misconceptions than right understandings.

For example, I have wishfully interpreted the Dharma name Shifu gave me, "Guo Zhou" as a canoe to ferry myself. I dared not wish to be or imagined that I could be a vessel for others. It was due to Shifu's unyielding guidance

and admonition that we should not just think of ourselves but should generate the supreme bodhicitta to benefit all sentient beings that I began to realize the profound significance of my Dharma name.

Later, when I was posted to the branch centers, I frequently made caring visits to the hospitals and conducted Buddha-name recitation for the dying or deceased. Having thus witnessed all kinds of sufferings due to the death of love ones and family discord, I learned all the more to treasure the preciousness of the monastic life, and I vowed to help even more people through Dharma.

Honest Practice, Abiding in the Dharma

In recent years I have been posted to Vancouver. Although it is a Western society, the basic need and ability to depart from suffering and attain happiness is the same for all people, regardless of their cultural origins. Everyone has the same need for the Dharma. For now, meditation is the more readily acceptable practice for Westerners. If we can help provide the opportunities to enable more Westerners to practice meditation and thus slowly

influence the Western society, it will be a great merit.

The continuing transmission of the Dharma depends on the four-fold congregation of monastic and lay practitioners. Although Shifu's perspective may differ somewhat from that of the laities, the four-fold congregation needs to work together in a complementary manner in order to fulfill Shifu's compassionate vow and vision. Shifu had handed us a heavy responsibility. We should encourage and motivate one another to spread the vision and ideals of Dharma Drum Mountain all over the world and thus help to diminish worldly catastrophes.

I also hope that all of you here will come to participate in meditation retreats and Buddha-name recitation retreats, receive bodhisattva precepts, or take part in the Water and Land Dharma Service. Every Dharma Drum Mountain activity is an educational activity in nature. The Water and Land Dharma Service is very special and I attend the service every year. When tens of thousands of people practice diligently together with their bodies and minds coming into accord with precepts, concentration, and wisdom, the power of deliverance is extensive and far-reaching.

And what should you do when you encounter challenging situations out there and your mind is restless? Hurry back to our centers! By practicing the Dharma together, drawing the mind back, and learning to be in accordance with compassion and wisdom, your heart and mind will be at ease.

Let's all take it one step at a time – practicing the Dharma and the way of bodhisattva steadfastly and honestly, deriving happiness from the acts of giving, and feeling joy from our dedication – this is what we mean by cultivating wholesome affinity with others extensively. Let our mind and body abide peacefully on the Dharma and on Shifu's dharma body – his teachings. We should keep on familiarizing ourselves with his books and teachings as much as possible and practicing accordingly. In this way, we will be able to let our body and mind abide constantly on the Dharma in peace.

Homage to Amitabha Buddha!

*(Talk delivered on May 5, 2010
at the Sheng Yen Education Foundation)*

Repaying the Kindness of Shifu with Selfless Devotion Every Day

Venerable Guo Can

The rebuilding of Nung Chan Monastery into the Water-Moon Dharma Center was completed in just a few years. Many people felt that it was an incredible feat and asked me how it was possible.

I reasoned that it was all about one's will and aspiration, just like the founding of Dharma Drum Mountain by Shifu, blazing a new path out of wilderness, turning the impossible into possible with the power of his vows.

Nung Chan Monastery was the origin of Dharma Drum Mountain. The Water-Moon Dharma Center project was entrusted to me by Shifu and the sangha. I saw it as a marathon which I must complete by all means.



Introducing the Speaker

Venerable Guo Can

Venerable Guo Can became a nun in 1987. Throughout the years, she has served in various positions at Nung Chan Monastery, including general affair manager, dining supervisor, guest manager, Monastic Advisor of Association of Dharma Supporters, Monastic Advisor of Chan Practice Center, and director of the monastery. She is the oldest nun in the DDM sangha. In 2007, she was entrusted to lead and manage the Water-Moon Dharma Center project and was involved from ground preparation to the actual construction. Completed in 2012, it transformed Nung Chan Monastery into the first purpose-designed scenic monastery in Taipei.

My journey to become a nun was very winding but exciting. It was one that lasted more than ten years – a journey in which I have let go of mundane matters one after another, until I finally left home and became a nun at the age of 44. I am now the oldest monastic in our sangha.

I often received scolding from Shifu in the 20 odd years since I became a nun. Shifu's scolding came in many levels. Sometimes it was meant to correct our words and actions; sometimes it was used as a means to teach others by example. Shifu often said that I was a busy body, yet he also said, "Our sangha could not do without Guo Can." When Shifu corrected his disciples, he always did it caringly. His care was always peppered with corrective guidance and his guidance was always peppered with loving care. I was always happy to receive Shifu's scolding in any form for I understood that there was always a purpose and meaning behind it.

Shifu once said that he devoted his life to serving wherever he was needed, and there was nothing he set upon himself that he must absolutely accomplish. I feel that I have been doing the same throughout my life too. Before and after I became a nun, I have always learnt and

picked up skills on my own accord, whenever there are new challenges and needs. Perhaps I have the good quality of having a simple mind, and a positive attitude. Thus, for me to tread the path of practice and cultivation cannot be more natural.

First Job and My Prayer before the Buddha

Since I only became a nun at an older age compared to others, I did have more experience with the mundane world compared to other monastics. About 50 years ago, I started a boutique trading business. For about 10 years, I was doing very well. Everything went smoothly and my income was very good. My last job before becoming a nun was serving as the headmistress in a kindergarten.

These undertakings enabled me to accumulate a lot of wealth but it was at the expense of my health. There were also problems with my partners. I was thus inspired to accept the truth of impermanence. The mind of renunciation arose in me and I decided that I should not live in such a manner again.

I got my first job at the age of 18 through a relative, doing maintenance work in a contractual sewing company. At that time, Taiwan was undergoing an economic transformation, where contractual sewing service was one of the emerging businesses. As a maintenance worker, my task was to prepare drinks and keep the office neat and tidy. I visited a temple with my mother before starting work and prayed to the Buddha, “Oh Lord Buddha, please grant me blessing. I prayed that my work will be smooth. I wish to remain single and to accompany the Buddha through this life.” It was a prayer that arose naturally. Even though I had not come across the Dharma then, for some unknown reason, I had a strong determination to accompany the Buddha in my entire life.

That such a wish came about was due to my experience growing up in a traditional Chinese family. I grew up in a time when most people were sexist-men were perceived to be more important than women. Eldest daughters like me tend to suffer more. I was not allowed to continue my studies after primary school and the reason given was – “for a girl, having no talent is considered virtuous.” I was in tears for 3 months. My mother loved me and could

not bear to see me in tears. She finally gave in and I was allowed to continue my study in lower secondary school. I came to accept my fate after finishing lower secondary study and gave up on my dream of continuing with my studies even though I was accepted by Taipei First Girls High School – the best girl school in Taiwan.

Having a job meant a lot to me, for it was the first time I could be independent and be responsible for myself. It was something I treasured a lot. Causes and conditions were very favorable to me that year. The company engaged a Japanese to train the staff on machine operation and sewing techniques. It was a course offered by the machine maker for its customers. My boss was very kind to me and allowed me to sit in the classes. Perhaps because I could focus well by nature, I was able to grasp what was taught very quickly, while most other colleagues were at a lost. As a busy body who loved to help others, I could not stop myself from providing advice to them. Nowadays we refer to this as “sharing.” When the Japanese trainer noticed this, I was recommended to be his assistant. My boss was very happy and accepted the recommendation right away as he now had an assistant trainer without paying anything extra.

The happiest person was me though. I was not afraid of tedious work or having to do more, as long as I had the opportunity to learn new things. After four months, the visa for the Japanese trainer expired and he had to return to Japan. But the training had to continue. Since I had learnt well, my boss decided that it was reasonable to promote me to be the trainer. And so, within just a few months, I became a trainer from a maintenance worker.

Starting a Business Having Acquired a Skill

I went all out at work, going to work early and returning late day in day out. I only focused on my work and barely looked after my own interest and well-being. I was very aggressive and strived very hard. After a year, I eventually fell sick. Such was my habit – charging forward very aggressively and only stopping when falling sick. Yet after I have rested enough and recovered, the cycle returned – charging forward, exhaustion, recuperation, and charging forward all over again.

Such was the case with my involvement in the Water-

Moon Dharma Center project over the last few years. I had worked very hard and fell sick as a result. The sangha made an immediate human resource adjustment which allowed me to put things aside.

I have been falling sick easily since I was little and I was also diagnosed with a kidney condition more than ten years ago. Although I have been mindful and have managed my health well, I was so busy this last year with the final stage of the project that I became too tense in body and mind. There was nothing I could do about it. It was like running in a marathon with the finishing line in sight. The only thing in mind was to go all out and charge forward. Now that the compound is completed, it is time for me to rest.

Returning to the time when I fell sick because of work in my twenties, my mother was shocked as she could not fathom how work alone could bring a young person down so badly. She insisted that I quit my job and rest at home. I attended classes in a fashion design school during that time and it changed my life.

After resting for half a year, I was offered another job. This time, the boss had heard that I studied fashion design and employed me as a fashion designer. I was tasked with

making one new design every day. That was relaxing for me but good enough for the company as my design was quite popular and well received in the market.

After all these experiences, I came to realize that doing business was not difficult. I could cope with and master many things – running things on my own, making sales pitches, and carrying out administrative and managing tasks. I never worried about the amount of work or the tediousness of work. With a fearless and ambitious attitude, I started my own garment export business at the age of 24, running the chain of designing, manufacturing, quality control and shipping all on my own.

I was very fortunate. My business grew extremely well, and was so profitable to the extent that I could afford to be selective in my business, declining deals that were not profitable enough for me. Not only did I buy a house, I was able to buy new properties every year. I could easily afford a good life just with rental alone.

An Accidental Turn of Event

I was 30 when my career was at its peak. However, soon

after I experienced the first failure too. There was a million dollar deal with a bad customer who not only refused to pay, but also refused to return the goods that were shipped. I drove through the night from Taipei to Tainan, and then from Tainan to Kaohsiung, in an attempt to halt the shipment and retrieve my goods. It was all in vain as the goods had already left the port. All the sweat and hard work was gone with no return. At that moment, I was like a deflated balloon. I somehow managed to drive back to Taipei in a stupor but the reality was too much for me.

I started to reflect on myself after this setback and realized that I was actually becoming increasingly unhappy although I was doing well with my career and wealth. I wondered if money was following me or I was dragged along by money. In retrospect, I was extremely frugal. Even a cheap 5-dollar bowl of plain noodle was considered expensive by me. I never bought new clothes for myself and never went for movies. I was singularly focused on making money. I did it not for myself but for my family members and my staff. With my good intention, how could such a bad incident happen to me?

The way my partners treated me made me feel even

more dismayed. They didn't really invest in the business and didn't really seem to help me. They acted more like my bosses, supervising me all the time. They always had a say whenever I wished to spend money for my family. They always found ways to stop me from doing what I wanted to do for myself. All these started to grow on me. I started to wonder if I should continue to live like this.

Just when I grew tired with my life, one of my primary schoolmates came to me for assistance. Her husband was diagnosed with liver cancer and she needed money urgently. Since it was a lifesaving matter, I did my best to help her without asking much about it.

One month later she came again, telling me that she was not able to repay the debt but her husband's medical cost was so high that she needed more help. She then asked if I would consider taking over her kindergarten business to help her and as a repayment of what she owed me.

That was how I got involved with early childhood education. It was not something I had planned but merely followed along. However, I did my best to ensure that I could handle it well. Once I decided to take over the kindergarten, I returned to school to get the necessary

qualifications. I first attended a high school which offered early childhood courses and received qualification as a teacher. I then received admission to a teacher training college by examination and eventually obtained qualification as a headmistress. I have always tried my very best in everything I do as that's the least I expect of myself. I am extremely grateful that causes and conditions had brought me to the field of education. Later on as I started to practice at Nung Chan Monastery, I felt all the more that education is the core of the Dharma.

Cultivating at Nung Chan Monastery

I began to visit Nung Chan Monastery in 1984 for health reasons. I often went down easily with flu. Since medications only helped temporarily, I thought that I should get to the root and recondition my body. I took tai chi and meditation classes and went all around looking for health practice. Meditation classes were rare then. I became very interested when my friends told me that Nung Chan Monastery was one of the rare places that offered “orthodox meditation” teachings.

Nung Chan Monastery was very different from other places of worship. I liked it very much as it was very pure and serene. The causes and conditions at that time were indeed special. Four of the students who attended the same meditation course joined the monastic order subsequently. They are Guo Fang, Guo Zhou and I, who are nuns, and Guo Xing who is a monk. After the meditation course, I went straight on to a 7-day Amitabha Buddha recitation retreat. One of the supervising monastics was Guo Qin Fashi. He told me very sincerely, “You must come here. Come as often as possible.” I was very touched by his sincerity and this was one of the reasons that I became a regular at the monastery.

But the main reason was that I managed to discover what practicing the Dharma was all about. Listening to Shifu’s talks and following him in practice, the Dharma was completely integrated into daily living. This, to me, was what I wished to learn and how I wanted to lead my life. During that time, I never missed a single talk Shifu gave. After a few months, Shifu started to notice my active presence and harmonious interactions with the monastics. He asked me if I was interested in becoming a nun. I

replied that I had my reservation. When he asked why, I answered, referring to folk sayings in a matter-of-fact manner, “Isn’t it often said that Buddhist and Taoist monks and nuns populate the gate of hell?” “And if I could not truly engage in cultivation and realize enlightenment in this lifetime,” I continued, “I fear that I would pay the price of rebirth in the animal realm. That would be worse.”

To this, Shifu gave me a scolding, rebuking such nonsensical hearsays. He explained that it was truly rare and fortunate for one to accumulate enough merits and virtues to become a monk or nun. Later on in a Dharma talk, Shifu used me as an example to point out the right view about the significance of becoming ordained. Even though I was scolded, I was very happy hearing his talk.

Awakening on Menam River

But was it really true that I didn’t want to become a nun? Well, although I verbally said that I was not keen or didn’t dare to do so, I found that I actually looked forward to it after Shifu asked me about it. It’s just that I could not make up my mind. I was also worried that if I got ordained

at Nung Chan Monastery, my colleagues would disturb me since it was in Taipei. With this in mind, I decided to leave Taipei for Hualian and return after one year.

When I returned to Nung Chan Monastery after one year, it took another round of cajoling by Shifu to help me make up my mind. He said, “You are looking around at different monasteries because your mind is not stable. Just settle your mind and get ordained as a nun here.” I could not agree more with these simple words. It was true that I was hunting around because my mind was not stable.

Now even when I was clear with my direction to leave home as a nun, I was still pretty unsteady and fickle minded. I applied for leave very often in the first six months of my training as a postulant. When the monastic director reprimanded me for my poor attitude, I argued, “I am the headmistress of a kindergarten, I need to give speeches on school opening and graduation days.” I did not let go of every worldly thing then. Half of my mind was preoccupied with the outside world. There was once I tried to apply for a week’s leave for a holiday in Thailand. The monastic disciple replied, “You can apply for leave, but if you take such leave, just don’t return.” I thought to

myself, “Ok, it is not that I don’t want to become a nun. But since you deemed me unfit, I will just practice as a lay person then.”

To take leave for one week, I needed Shifu’s approval. I had rehearsed what I would say when I walked up with the leave application form to the second floor to see Shifu. He took a glance at me and said, “Just this one time and no more.” That’s all! Good grief, this was completely unexpected and I was caught by surprise. I had never expected Shifu to give such a response and approved my application.

In Thailand, I took a cruise on Menam River, a popular tourist attraction, and that was a turning point for me. While many enjoyed the river cruise, it was an awakening experience for me. I could not fathom how people could live their entire life in a boat on the river. I started to ponder if it was possible for me to practice the Dharma if I were to live on a boat like them. If I were to die without having learned about the Dharma, could I return as a human being in my next life and practice the Dharma? I became unsettled as I thought about these. Suddenly, I awakened to the fact that it must have been a heavy karmic

obstacle that I had thought of giving up on becoming a nun although I had practiced the Dharma and was given the opportunity to be ordained. Right away, my mind was transformed and I decided to rush back and get ordained immediately.

When I returned to Nung Chan Monastery, I stayed on without taking any more leave. Half a year later, I was tonsured. Come to think of it, Shifu must have known of my heavy karma and that I needed to overcome them. Otherwise becoming a nun could not be a wholehearted thing for me.

Tonsured with Karmic Obstacles Dissolved

My family members and colleagues came to Nung Chan Monastery on the day of my ordination. They were not there to observe the ceremony. Rather, they were there to take me back by force! They tried to persuade Shifu that I should not become a nun as I was the main financial pillar of my family and was indispensable. Shifu could not deal with them and told them to take me back. That was probably the first time in the history of Nung Chan

Monastery that a postulant was taken away by force on the day of ordination!

The situation was very tense when I was forced into their car. As soon as I realized that they were about to get on the highway and take me away from Taipei, I spoke to them gravely, “You can confine my movement but you cannot control my mind. I no longer want my career and wealth. All I want is to lead a monastic life. I do not need you to control my life. If you do not let me go, don’t be surprised if I were to take an extreme measure.”

I was very firm. Once again, my mother was the key person this time. Even though she was very reluctant to let me go, she was soft hearted and asked my colleagues to send me back to my home in Taipei. When we returned to Taipei, my colleagues started to negotiate with me. I was truly upset with them and got truly angry. I reminded them of the heavy karmic retribution if they were to obstruct others from getting ordained. Just when they were caught in hesitation, I ran through the door, rushed to the junction, stopped a taxi and went straight again to Beitou. I arrived at the monastery at 8 pm. That was such an exciting and dramatic turn of events, just like a dream!

I woke up from this dream and could not believe what I have been through. I only remembered all the monks and nuns cheering when they saw me.

I was tonsured on that very day. The monks and nuns chanted Shakyamuni Buddha for me and I was so touched. Shifu returned to Nung Chan Monastery just after the ceremony was over. He said to me, “Guo Can, you have dissolved your karmic obstacles.”

The moment I put on my monastic robes, I told myself, “From this point onward I am a nun. I should let go of all my past.” That was indeed a reflection of what I had gone through over the years.

A Bowl of Noodle That Started Everything

My mind became very settled after I was ordained. I felt that I should cherish my monastic life which was precious and hard to come by. Also, I was no longer young. At the age of 44, I was the oldest to receive ordination at Nung Chan Monastery.

One of the more memorable things I recalled was about our blankets. When I first became a nun, the blankets

came in myriads of colours and designs, resembling those used by old village folks. Actually, we received a lot of plain-color fabrics from the devotees, which was just right for blankets. I suggested to Shifu that we should standardize all the blankets with a single color design. Shifu agreed and said that monastics should be using something plain and elegant. He asked me if I could make them. I told him it was a small matter and started to work on the cut-outs. With help from our volunteers, we remade every blanket for our monastics.

Since there were very few monastics back then, everyone had to take turn to prepare meals in the kitchen, and many became a laughing stock from time to time. There was a monastic who used a ruler for measurement while cutting vegetables; another one did not remove cucumber seeds but peeled off the skin of bitter gourds. As for me, my cooking was known to be too heavy in flavor. I was known as the “three-excess” nun, as I used too much oil, too much salt and too much sugar. However, all the other monastics were so kind that they only said good things about my cooking and I thought that my cooking was really not bad. When Shifu tried to correct me, he also

spoke in a subtle manner, “Guo Can, our dishes should be light in flavor. Your dishes are meant for lay people, not for monastics.” I was a bit confused and was not sure whether my cooking was good or not. It was only when a monk could not bear it anymore and began to pick on my cooking that I gradually changed the way I cooked.

After I had taken up the position as the dining supervisor, Shifu once commented openly that I was the one responsible for opening up the monastery, making it more accessible to the public. Some other monastics were of the view that I was the one who transformed the ecology of the monastery. The truth is, everything came to be when causes and conditions were mature.

In the early days, the monastery was always closed and visitors must first ring the doorbell to get in. Also, one must register in advance for meals. What I had done was to change these two unwritten rules.

Once, on the first day of Chinese New Year, we happened to receive a lot of visitors. Though we had prepared enough meals for the lunch hour crowd, visitors continued to come in at around 2 pm, after lunch time. I was concerned that they might not have lunch yet as

people normally visited one place after another on the first day of the New Year. They confirmed that this was indeed the case. Without hesitation, I invited them for lunch.

At that time, there was nothing left to eat and the kitchen volunteers have finished their shift. We did have instant noodle though. Getting instant noodle cooked was quick. With a little vegetable to go with it, it can be nicely served. It turned out that everyone enjoyed the noodle. A bowl of warm noodle was what everyone needed in on that cold and wet day. When the visitors met with Shifu, they told him, “Nung Chan Monastery has changed.”

Shifu said that with my creativity, the ecology of the monastery was transformed with a bowl of noodle. He also said that a monastery ought to be a place of convenience for others, not a place of rules and regulations. Rules and regulations, if any, should be used to regulate ourselves, not to be imposed on others. To me, Shifu said this to encourage us to truly care for the devotees, and to create good connections with as many people as possible. From then on, we have ensured that meals were provided for all visitors to Nung Chan Monastery, be it just a few people or a crowd. Gradually, the monastery became more popular

and we received more and more visitors. It was just a matter of responding to the environment and situations as they evolved.

Since I have started out as a volunteer myself before becoming a nun, I know how important volunteers are and treasure them very much. Volunteers are very supportive. They come to the monastery to give and serve. Therefore, whenever we had volunteers, I would always assign some tasks for them to cultivate blessings - cleaning windows, moving things, gardening and etc. There was always something for them to do. When I was serving as the dining supervisor, I had invited a few volunteers to serve as chefs during Dharma services. Not only was the food they cooked delicious, the volunteer chefs had a great sense of achievement too. As such, we managed to accomplish a few things with one deed.

Another thing that I thought of was to organize the kitchen systematically. For example, we re-shelved the kitchen utensils and labeled the compartments with photos of the utensils, making everything clear in a glance. We hope to make life easy with new ideas.

The “Complete Triple Gem” Caring Tour

Of all my assignments, I felt that I was most blessed to have served in the Dharma Support group. It was also the department in which I have served the longest.

In 1989, when we were about to set up the Association of Dharma Supporter, Shifu instructed me to be the mentor, since I was familiar with our devotees. On the weekend after the Qing-Ming 7-day Buddha-name recitation retreat, a meeting was held in the dining hall at Nung Chan Monastery. A crowd of 70 to 80 devotees packed the venue. In Shifu’s talk, he explained why we were looking for a new piece of land, why we were forming the Association of Dharma Supporter group, and how to conduct fundraising tasks. That evening, everyone received a copy of the fundraising record book. This crowd became the earliest cadres of the Association of Dharma Supporter.

Soon after that, more and more practice centers were set up around Taiwan, starting from Taichung, Kaohsiung and Tainan. Practice centers in Taipei were established a bit later but their number grew to 28 eventually. Shifu paid special attention to all these centers. Every time when he

returned to Taiwan, he would make touring and extending his care to these centers a priority.

As related in his books, Shifu held many fellowship-gatherings in the homes of the local fund-raising leaders in the early days. Normally, around 20 to 30 fundraising members attended these gatherings. The number of participants was not large but people got along really well and the atmosphere was always very warm and receiving.

Shifu's talks in these fellowships were often different at different locations and times. Normally he would start with a talk, followed by a question-and-answer session, and a final conclusion. He called this the "complete triple gem" model, since everyone was learning to emulate the Buddha by learning about the Dharma delivered by the Sangha. I benefited and learnt a lot from this process.

When Shifu went overseas, I would take his place to host these fellowships. Our devotees were lovely. In Shifu's absence, they were very happy as long as a monastic was present. I hosted these gatherings using Shifu's model and invited people to ask questions. The sort of questions raised include: "What should I do with my husband who is not interested in Buddhism?" "How is the feng shui of my

house?” “What should I do now that I have a quarrel with my husband?” Fortunately, I could cope with all these.

In the second year, we make adjustments to the caring-tour program by incorporating additional activities to extend our outreach. For example, we held refuge taking ceremonies or Dharma talks, depending on the location. I realized that Shifu was exploring and always making adjustments to meet the diverse needs of the locals. Shifu had always made changes and adaptation to promote the Dharma in an effective manner.

I headed the Association of Dharma Supporter for two terms, amounting to 7 years of service. Some people said that I “entered and left twice.” In the fifth year of my first term, Shifu summoned me one day and instructed me to go to Taichung with the task of setting up the Taichung branch. I remembered these words from him, “Guo Can, after your stay in Taichung, you will travel south and set things up in Tainan and Kaohsiung. This will take at least 7 or 8 years, if not 10 years.” When I heard this, I realized that it was going to be a long term and important mission. And so I packed up and ended up sending two carloads of materials – mainly Shifu’s books, to Taichung. As Shifu

mentioned, I expected to be gone for many years.

However, four months later, I received a call from Shifu and returned to Nung Chan Monastery the next morning. This time, in a very serious and cautious tone, Shifu wanted me to return to the Association of Dharma Supporter. I refused and explained that things had just started to pick up in Taichung, where the devotees had just learnt to handle the Dharma instruments and were all ready to go. But no matter how hard I tried, I could not convince Shifu, and ended up being persuaded by him.

So I returned to the Association of Dharma Supporter again. Once again, I did it with gratitude. It was a great blessing to participate in meetings with him and went on caring tours with him. I remember an incident in Kaohsiung where we stayed in the house of a devotee. When we were about to leave on the next day, Shifu asked if I have tidied and cleaned up the room. I told him I had done so. Without a word, Shifu turned around, walked into the bathroom, picked up a piece of dry cloth and took a swipe at the washbasin. “How can you say it is cleaned? There is still water here.” Right then, I understood what he wanted us to do – tidy and clean up the place so that

we can hand it back in the same condition as when it was handed to us. I quickly worked to clean up everything – the washbasin, bathtub and even the floor. This was Shifu’s way to teach us by example that we should cherish and be grateful to everything and place offered to us for temporary use.

The Marathon of Monastery Rebuilding

I have learned the Dharma passed down by Shifu. I have also learned and followed Shifu’s spirit. To repay his kindness, I devote myself to performing every task wholeheartedly. As long as I live, I will dedicate myself day after day and do whatever I can, until I could not work anymore.

In 2007, Shifu and the Sangha assigned a new task to me – to serve as the monastic director of Nung Chan Monastery and manage the new Water-Moon Dharma Center project. I was grateful to be given this opportunity. This project was like a marathon. It was full of challenges, and yet we managed to overcome each and every one of them.

Monks and nuns with “Guo” as their first Dharma

name started their monastic life at Nung Chan Monastery and had a very strong bond with it. Since the Dharma Drum Mountain compound was completed, it has been the venue for major events and that was to be expected. On the other hand, Nung Chan Monastery was designated as a historical site by the Taipei city council in 2004. We also expected that it would turn into a construction site during the rebuilding process. The first thing I needed to do was to make sure that construction and Dharma practices could be held concurrently in the monastery ground. Dharma activities such as the weekly Buddha-name chanting and group meditation practices, and annual events such as the Qing-Ming 7-day Buddha-name recitation retreat, the 7-day Amitabha Buddha recitation retreat and the Emperor Liang's repentance assembly were carried out as usual.

The second stage was land clearing and relation building with our neighbors. Clearing the land was needed to resolve our parking problem. In the past, parking had always been an issue whenever we had big events, causing a lot of inconvenience to our neighbors. We foresaw the problem to worsen with the rebuilding project. Therefore,

building a bigger parking area was a priority for me. At the same time, we actively engaged our neighbors, starting by greening the surrounding and working hand in hand to improve our common environment.

Once we settled the human and environmental issues, we moved on to the third stage –the main construction project. I knew little about architecture and coordinating such a project was very complex. As a result, I was always looking for supports and resources. On weekends and holidays, I would consult with relevant experts. The singular aim was to complete the project and open the new compound by 2012 which was the year of dragon. It was my wish that we complete our project in the year of dragon since dragon and elephant are the symbols that signify outstanding teachers of the Dharma. That would be an auspicious beginning for Nung Chan Monastery to become an incubator for excellent and outstanding Dharma teachers for generations to come. Indeed, we managed to complete the project on time.

The fourth stage was to prepare for the opening with a series of thanksgiving events. The Water-Moon Dharma Center at the Nung Chan Monastery is a collective

attainment – the result of enormous support and collective wisdom of all those who have followed and practiced with Shifu over a span of 20 to 30 years. It was an extremely moving experience for everyone when the rebuilt monastery was open. I was most joyful at the sight of the congregation of supporters spanning three generations – the elders, the middle-aged and the young ones.

The rebuilding of Nung Chan Monastery into the Water-Moon Dharma Center was completed in just a few years. Many people felt that it was an incredible feat and asked me how it was possible. I reasoned that it was all about one's will and aspiration, just like the founding of Dharma Drum Mountain by Shifu, blazing a new path out of wilderness, turning the impossible into possible with the power of his vows. Nung Chan Monastery was the origin of Dharma Drum Mountain. The Water-Moon Dharma Center project was entrusted to me by Shifu and the sangha. I saw it as a marathon which I must complete by all means.

Now that the monastery has been rebuilt, my mission is completed. I am very grateful to the Sangha for allowing me to take a break so that I can start anew and to look after

my body and mind. I vow to repay the Buddha by offering my mind in its depth and entirety to the infinite universes. My mind has become more and more open and expansive. In the past, I used to feel that I was very important and was indispensable for the project. It was such an ignorant thought. There are so many talented people in our organization. Surely there will be people who can lead and shoulder different tasks and missions at a different time.

I am very happy that I finally have time for myself to contemplate and settle my mind. This perhaps, is the message from the Buddhas and bodhisattvas that I have completed my mission of that particular phase and now is the time to devote myself diligently to my practice. This little insight means a lot to me, as it reinvigorates me with a great deal of energy and Dharma joy, inspiring me with spirit of fundamental practice as profound cultivation. I feel incredibly great with such an arrangement made by the Sangha.

*(Interviewed on July 22, 2013
at Yunlai Monastery by Hu Ligui. Edited by Hu Ligui)*

Educating and Nurturing Us in All Aspects of Life

Venerable Guo Kai

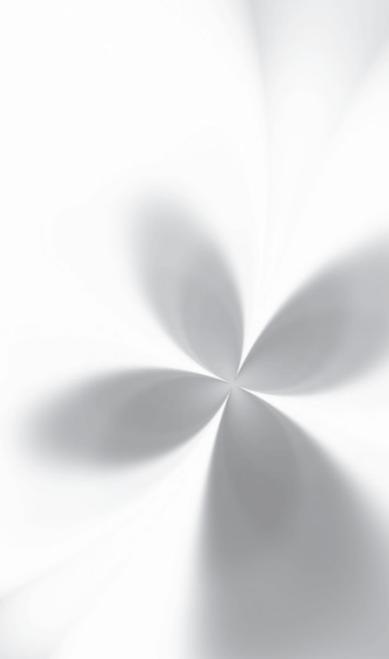
Shifu once said,

“A master or shifu should bear the responsibility for guiding, educating, nurturing and protecting all his disciples.”

This ranges from their spiritual practice to their daily living.

Shifu taught and nurtured us, the newly ordained disciples on everything we need to know meticulously.

The nitty gritty of everyday life, including how we should put on our cloth, how to use the scarfs and how we should walk, had to be taught.



Introducing the Speaker

Venerable Guo Kai

Ordained at Nung Chan Monastery in 1994, Guo Kai Fashi currently leads the project for the research and education outreach of the Water and Land Dharma Service. She is also the director of the Sangha Education Department. Reflecting upon her youthful naivety in the past, which created a lot of problems, Guo Kai Fashi is full of gratitude to Shifu for patiently coaching her and nurturing her growth. She feels blessed for the opportunity to join the Sangha. With her deep vow, she has time and again helped Dharma Drum Mountain accomplish major reformations of Dharma services.

Although the story that leads to our encounter with Shifu is unique for each of us, we were all very fortunate to have been able to learn the Dharma under his tutelage. I was ordained at a relatively young age – right after I graduated from college. In fact, even before I graduated, I was already thinking about becoming a nun. However the monastic in charge did not support my aspiration. She felt that I had not given enough consideration into this. She wanted me to finish my study first. So, I dwelled on it for one more year and as soon as I graduated, I went for the monastic life immediately.

Getting Grounded in a 7-day Amitabha Buddha Recitation Retreat

I was the youngest child in the family. I passed the years studying in schools and successfully gained admission into a technical college. In college, other than studying, I spent my time having fun. But there was always a feeling that I was not grounded, as if my feet were floating in the air, not stable at all. It was mentally difficult for me. Inside, a voice often screamed that “this is not the life I want.”

It was at this point that religion entered my life. I explored Protestantism and Catholicism, hoping to find a direction for my future. Later on, I had the opportunity to participate in a 7-day meditation retreat at Nung Chan Monastery. The only experience I could relate throughout the entire retreat was bodily pain. However, it was strange that after experiencing so much pain, I still felt like attending a retreat again. Thus right at the heel of that retreat, I attended a 7-day Amitabha Buddha recitation retreat. And at the end, when we were prostrating to the Buddha in the main hall, I felt, for the first time, a sense of fulfillment, that my feet were finally touching the ground. It was as if I had finally found my home. I was 21 years old then, and the thought of becoming a nun sprouted.

My family members were simple people. My parents never had any formal education. Therefore it would be really difficult for me to convey to them my wishes to become a nun. As a result I prepared myself for the worst without much hope of getting my family's consent. As long as they didn't object to it, I would take it as if they had agreed. My father had passed away by then. The only people with whom I need to communicate were

my mother and my elder brother. I told my brother that I felt miserable. He asked me, “You have been studying since young. What is there to be miserable about?” I said that I had never felt grounded. But for the first time in my life then, I felt that my feet were solidly touching the ground. Therefore I wanted to become a nun. My mother was wailing in front of our ancestors’ memorial tablets, “She has been possessed and she wants to be a nun. What should we do?” I supposed it was hard for every mother to part with her daughter for such a reason. My elder brother was even harsher. He said, “If you walk out of this door, don’t ever come back again.” My mother added, “You can become a nun, but don’t ever come back to beg for alms.”

My lay family lives in Wanli, very close to Jinshan where Dharma Drum Mountain is located. In Chinese history, it was believed that when Da Yu was working around the country to control the great flood (ca. 2150 BC), he didn’t visit his family even when he passed by his home three times. For me, that was not unusual. I passed by my home often without going in, as I had always remembered what my mother and elder brother said to me when I told them I wanted to be a nun.

It was 10 years after I became a nun that I realized that their attitudes had changed. My mother and other family members have said positive things about my choice, at different times and places, to different people. My mother said, “My youngest daughter was smart to become a nun on her own accord.” My elder brother said, “If I had a chance to start all over again in life, I would choose to become a monk.” My elder sister said to me, “If I could turn back the clock, I would become a nun with you.”

That was my story in becoming a nun. The original intention was not to depart from afflictions, to transcend the cycle of birth and death, or to deliver sentient beings. It was simply to lead a different way of life – a well-grounded one.

Shifu’s “Transformative Dharma” and Opportune Lessons

I brought along my afflictions when I moved in with the Sangha. As a result, I created a lot of problems for the community. Not many people know about this part of my history. The moment I moved into Nung Chan Monastery, I started to feel, “Why are there so many idiots? How

could things be done this way?” I was living in my own fantasy about how things should be. This was aggravated by the fact that I have just started out on my monastic life. Moreover, as I was still very young, I was brimming with energy. My outlet was to quarrel with others for all sorts of matters.

One time, Shifu had enough of my antics. Half way through the morning service, he called me aside to speak to me. We went to the reception area and Shifu said, “Do you know that you’ve been a trouble maker? People have been complaining to me about you for minor and major matters alike.” I was nonchalant and told Shifu, “I am the most amenable and have never complained about others.” Looking back, I really feel ashamed of what I did. You can tell how annoying I was when I started out as a monastic and how tough it was for Shifu to manage someone like me.

Shortly later, Shifu wanted to speak to me again. At that time, I was working in the kitchen. Although the situation wasn’t as bad as if I were brandishing a knife against others, I had an opinion against everything I saw and couldn’t bear the way others did things, thus making my own blood boil all the time. I didn’t know that when

a person was driven by the force of negative karma, she would be totally incapable of getting out of the situation on her own. It was not my intention to create troubles for others. But what could I do? Shifu said, “Okay, let me teach you something. Go and make three prostrations to the Buddhas. I will help you with a ‘transformative dharma’ ritual.”

It happened at breakfast. After the meal, the monastics would return to the main hall to pay respect to the Buddhas. Shifu instructed me, “After breakfast, I want you to come out of the assembly and kneel at the center between the east and west wing. First of all, confess the wrongs you have done and whom you have done wrong.” I asked immediately, “What comes after that?” During the breakfast, I didn’t eat anything. All I had in my mind was what to say first, what should be next, and so on.

When the time came, Shifu announced, “Now, we are going to perform a karma (ecclesiastical proceeding) for a postulant.” He looked at me and I quickly trotted out. That was another silly thing I did. For the first 10 years of my monastic life, my heels were never grounded the way I walked. There was once I walked by Shifu and he asked

his attendant to call me back. “Guo Kai, is that how you walk? That is running, not walking. Monastics don’t walk like that.” That was when I learnt that I should not walk the way I did. After that incident, I would avoid Shifu the moment I saw him from a distance.

After breakfast, I stepped out from the assembly and knelt in the middle between the east and west wing of the hall, right in front of the Buddha statue, and started to speak. As I spoke, I suddenly felt really sorry for letting Shifu down and stopped following my script. I said, “Shifu, I am really sorry. How could I make you worry so much about me?” Then I looked at the rest of my peers in the hall. At that moment, I felt my tiny little seed of virtue sprouted. For the first time, I really understood what repentance was all about. It was a wonderful feeling. When one was engulfed by afflictions, the body felt very heavy. The moment I finished my repentance, I felt that my body was as light as cotton. It was exactly the same as the sense of lightness one might experience in meditation.

After getting up, I felt very embarrassed about myself and quickly returned to the dormitory room to hide. I later learnt that the rest of the monastics were also hiding

and asked why they were doing that. A senior said to me, “Wow! What a great opportune lesson! What a successful karma!” I was told that many other monastics were deeply moved by the repentance and hid in the bathroom to cry. From then on, I was very certain that I have found a Shifu with “Dharma,” not wizardry, but true Dharma. My faith in Shifu became deep and irrevocable.

I am now teaching the sila (precepts) and vinaya (disciplines) in the seminary, and there is a very important type of karma called “rehabilitation” that I have taught. This was none other than the proceeding of coming out with my confession taught by Shifu. The only thing was that I didn’t know exactly what I had done wrong.

I recently shared some of my experience with the students at Dharma Drum Sangha University. I told them that I used to be a trouble maker. When I was still a postulant, I approached Shifu one evening as he was going upstairs after the bedtime board has been struck, telling him that I wanted to repent. Shifu said it was already very late and went upstairs. A few minutes later, Shifu came down and asked me in a serious manner what it was that I wanted to repent. After hearing my confession, Shifu

asked, “Guo Kai, if Shifu were to ask you to leave Nung Chan Monastery, would you leave?” I replied that I would leave if Shifu were to say so. Shifu said, “No, that’s wrong. You should kneel down immediately and repent, not just leave if Shifu asks you to leave.”

After learning about the sila and vinaya, I came to know that not accepting another monastic’s request to repent is considered a violation of the precept. That’s why when I requested to repent, Shifu accepted my request although he was already exhausted. From the perspective of bodhisattva precepts, rejecting someone’s request for repentance is against the spirit of compassion.

As part of his coaching, Shifu gave me a special assignment – chanting to the frogs every day. In the early years, there were a lot of frogs by the hills and streams on Dharma Drum Mountain. At sunset, the frogs would be croaking and it was very noisy. Shifu instructed me to chant to the frogs and compete with them vocally. Otherwise, I would be quarrelling with others day and night. After chanting to the frogs for one and a half years, I somehow managed to master and memorize all the chants.

That’s why it is very important to have a shifu or

master. For monastics or serious lay practitioners, having a shifu who understands the conditions of our body and mind is very important. Although reading books and studying the sutras can be beneficial, a shifu who can provide timely guidance is indispensable. Anyway, after the repentance incident, other monastics in the Sangha discovered that I have changed tremendously. I was at least no longer as troubling as I used to be.

I am very grateful for my years with Shifu since my renunciation. He coached and nurtured me in a meticulous manner until I became “more like it.” The process took about ten years.

Educating and Nurturing Us with Inexhaustible Loving Kindness

After Shifu passed away, I would sometimes ponder over his leadership. Shifu was ordained when he was a teenager and didn't get to spend much time with his family. Yet he was able to lead the Sangha. From the early days when there were 50 to 60 disciples of the “Guo” generation to more recent time when there were two to three hundred

monastics, his tireless efforts were underpinned by his hopes on us. Shifu once said, “Being a shifu, I have to be responsible for educating and nurturing all my disciples.” That covered our daily living as well as our spiritual practice.

Speaking for myself, some of the experiences were funny. Shifu taught us how to mend our clothing and how to wash our clothes with just three basins of water. He also instructed us on how to cook dishes for different occasions, showing the differences between the so called mass-meals and guest-meals. When I was new to the monastic life, I used to think that Shifu liked to dine with guests. Shifu said, “It is not that I like to dine with guests. Have you ever seen me eating while I was with the guests?” Indeed, Shifu never ate when his guests were having meals.

Shifu has carefully taught our bunch of newly ordained disciples in all aspects of our daily living in detail. This includes how to dress, how to put on the scarves, and how to walk. Everything had to be taught. During one summer retreat, Shifu showed us how we should walk. He had every of his disciple walking in front of him, as he corrected them one by one.

In many situations, we only looked at things on the

surface and thus harbored a lot of questions. But if we understood Shifu's intention and rationale, we would be very touched. For instance, we used to argue with Shifu that the monthly allowance of 500 Taiwanese dollars was too little for monastics staying with the main sangha, as those at the branches were getting twice as much. We thought that it was really unfair. Shifu replied saying that the monastics at the branches were on their own without much support. The two should not be compared. Unlike those with the main sangha for whom 500 dollars were enough, the monastics at the branches had more expenses and therefore they were given a larger allowance. True enough, everything we needed for our daily living-food, clothing, room and getting around – was well taken care of. We didn't need money at all. Anyway, if we had questions about things and asked Shifu about them, he would patiently told us the reason in detail.

Shifu also told us that since we have left home for the monastic life, we should not visit our lay family too frequently. As long as there were people who could care for our parents, we should not worry about them. It would be no good if monks and nuns kept going home to visit their

lay families. But I remember an occasion when a fellow monastic had to go home to visit her mother who was sick. When he was done giving the morning talk after breakfast, Shifu took out a red packet with money inside and gave it to the monastic, along with a basket of fruit he had asked the dining director to prepare. Shifu asked her again if she had money with her and whether it was enough for the bus fare. It was quite touching for us to see that. Now that I am serving as the monastic director, whenever I come across monastics who need to visit their lay families, I will remember the example shown by Shifu and will show them my care and support. That's a good example of the way Shifu taught us.

Of course, Shifu was very strict with his monastic disciples. He used to admonish us, "You don't talk like a monastic, eat like a monastic, walk like a monastic, or dress like a monastic. None of what you do is like a monastic." We would reflect on ourselves and question if we were really as bad as what Shifu said we were. Shifu held the principle of "personally coaching the disciples," which I truly respect. Although Shifu had never lived in a populated monastery or with a monastic sangha, he was

able to set up such a large sangha. In the recent history of Chinese Buddhism, there is hardly any portrayal of eminent monastics establishing monastic sangha. That's because it's a very tough job. I eventually understood that eminent monastics made compassionate vows to take in disciples and engage in monastic sangha building to ensure the continuity of the true Dharma and the wisdom tradition of Buddhism.

In the past, I used to think that Shifu spent too little time on the monastic sangha. Looking back on all that had happened, I realize that Shifu had spared no effort to nurture the Sangha. Unfortunately, we as his disciples did not live up to it.

All Dharma Affairs, Big or Small, Are Spiritual Practice

In the sangha, I had followed Shifu's instructions on all affairs, whether big or small. I was merely the executor of the task. From setting up camps for high school dropouts and short term monastic life retreats more than ten years ago, to organizing the Liang Emperor's Repentance Ritual

at Nung Chan Monastery, and the Water and Land Dharma Service at Dharma Drum Mountain, Shifu handed all those tasks to me so that I could learn from the experience. The most memorable was designing the procedure of the Dharma transmission ceremony that Shifu handed to me when he fell sick in September 2005 and which I was asked to complete in three days.

I suppose everyone still remembers the Dharma talk given by Shifu regarding the transmission of Dharma. Shifu told us that the spirit of Dharma transmission lied not in the formality of receiving transmission, but that whoever shared his vision and made an effort to propagate the vision of Dharma Drum Mountain could all be considered his Dharma heirs. Although I am not a formal Dharma heir, I was very happy to take part in designing the transmission ceremony. The tasks included researching for information, training the volunteer cadres in chanting, and providing guidance to the master of ceremony. It was very hectic but very fulfilling.

Shifu spent his whole life bringing renewal to the traditions by endowing it with innovative ideas in accordance with contemporary needs. Nowadays Buddhist

groups carry out Dharma transmissions in all sorts of manners. What distinguishes Shifu from others was that while he followed in the footsteps of the older generations, he had adapted the practice to suit the modern society. Instead of abolishing the thousand-year old system or adopting it completely, Shifu had sought to reform it. As such, he was able to inspire others with what he had inherited. Some examples include ideas such as “protecting the spiritual environment,” “fivefold spiritual renaissance” and “six ethics of the minds.” Although these are not conventional Buddhist terminology, they are none other than the Dharma.

Since 2002, the DDM monastic sangha has started doing research on the Water and Land Dharma Service. In 2004, I was assigned to head this project. Shifu once remarked, “It was fortunate that we have assigned this task to Guo Kai. She’s not smart but she knows how to ask people.” He also said, “Guo Kai has the will and courage but it’s a pity that the quality of her work is kind of coarse.” I didn’t know whether this was a compliment or a criticism. But I did understand Shifu’s intention. He wanted me to find a worki partner who had a keen eye

for detail, so that we would complement each other and get the project done. Shifu was right to say that I was not smart. That was precisely why I went around seeking guidance from others, including scholars in the Academia Sinica, the National Palace Museum, as well as relevant institutes and departments in universities. Through this process, bit by bit, the Dharma Drum Mountain Water and Land Dharma Service took shape.

Shifu was very clear with the direction of Dharma Drum Mountain Water and Land Dharma Service. He said, “The Water and Land Dharma Service at Dharma Drum Mountain should be a Dharma service of the 21st century. It is not a restoration of an ancient ritual as mere restoration is meaningless. We should be forward looking and innovative.” When I started out, I didn’t know anything about the Water and Land Dharma Service. After seeking advice and guidance from various people and visiting a number of monasteries, we produced a report with over forty pages, complete with pictures and videos, and did a presentation in a meeting. I think the toughest part was the mass burning of paper idols and boats, polluting the environment. This was against Shifu’s vision

of environmental protection. The question was whether the devotees would accept the change if we were to do away with such a practice.

At the moment of decision making, Shifu gave a very clear directive and clearly stated the principle to which we should adhere. He said that since Dharma Drum Mountain was a community of practice, all activities we organized must be caring and educational in principle, and none of the two – care and education – could be neglected. [We should do away with traditional practices which were not environmentally friendly and educate the devotees about it.] I was very touched when he said that, realizing that Shifu was a truly rare and great teacher. I renewed my vow to follow Shifu life after life. Since I am not sure whether I would have the ability to follow Shifu if he were to go to another space to deliver sentient beings, I have to nurture the same karmic cause as he did by following in his footsteps. Hopefully, that will enable me to be with him again in future lifetimes.

In an article written by Shifu in his younger days decades ago, he pointed out that all ritual practices in Buddhism must adhere to the spirit of cultivating the

Dharma, regardless of the historical backgrounds that brought about their creations. There was however, no practicing community with which he could implement such ideas. Now the time has come and Dharma Drum Mountain is ready to implement ritual practices [such as the water and land dharma service] according to Shifu's early vision. All we need to do is to put in all our effort and follow the direction pointed out by Shifu. Such visions are what distinguish Shifu from others.

Nurturing Dragons and Elephants and Not Abandoning Sentient Beings

Shifu was very imaginative. In the past, we never recognized this uncanny ability of his. Now when I walk on the hills in quietude, I can see his vision. In the past, Shifu used to tell us while taking a walk after light dinner, "Come here, do you see the elephant's ears over here? The middle is the elephant's back and there's its tail." We were puzzled. Weren't these just hills? We felt that Shifu was far too imaginative. After pointing out the "elephant," Shifu continued, "Do you see the tail of the dragon, its claws

and head?” None of us could see what he saw. Some were even giggling in the back, wondering why Shifu seemed to have become more imaginative as he grew older. Now when I walk past these places, I understand that Shifu’s vision of dragon and elephant was an expression of his hope that everyone at Dharma Drum Mountain could aspire to be dragons and elephants [which were symbols of accomplished monastic practitioners who shoulder great responsibilities.] The names Shifu gave to all the places at Dharma Drum Mountain were endowed with profound significance.

There is another story to share. On the eve of one Mid-Autumn Festival after the monastic sangha has moved to Dharma Drum Mountain, I bumped into Shifu on the campus. Shifu asked me if there were any activities on the festive evening the next day. I said, “Yes, we are holding the precept recitation practice.” Shifu was astonished, “Why are we reciting the precepts on the Mid-Autumn Festival?” I said, “Mid-Autumn Festival falls on the 15th day of the 8th lunar month. Surely we have to recite the precepts on the 15th day as usual.” Shifu explained on the spot that Mid-Autumn Festival was a very important festival for

Chinese and many people would be visiting Dharma Drum Mountain. We could hold the precept recitation practice earlier or postpone it. He said that we should be more flexible with our schedule and try to infuse Dharma practices into festive activities.

During one Chinese New Year, Shifu was already ill and his stamina was visibly low. I suggested to Shifu that we should arrange for the public to visit him en masse, instead of coming to see him in batches. This would allow him to get more rest. I ended up getting a scolding from Shifu. He said that the public came here mainly to visit him. No matter how tiring such meetings were, he would not change them.

On another Chinese new year, there was such a large crowd heading up the mountain that the traffic jam extended all the way to the boulder emblazoned with the DDM icon at the foot of the hills. It was near noon time and Shifu had to head down the mountain for other activities. I advised Shifu to stop receiving visitors and getting some rest. Shifu refused and insisted that he would wait until all the visitors arrived on campus before he would leave. He didn't want to leave anyone disappointed. That was his spirit of not

abandoning any sentient being.

During the construction of the Dharma Drum Mountain Complex, Shifu frequently inspected the construction site. At one time, after touring the site, he attended a meeting immediately. He stretched himself and then said to us smilingly, “It’s so busy and tiring. Yet, I feel really happy despite being busy and tired.” To these days, I am still savoring these words of his. If I had not become a nun, I would never live such a fulfilling life. Now after waking up each day, I will work according to my schedule, attending to one task after another. There is never a moment of time wasted or any complaint of exhaustion.

Interrelations of Causes and Effects at Critical Moments

Shifu’s teaching has been a breath of fresh air for many of us, whether it’s his living example or his verbal guidance. However, the critical thing is whether we can carry on with his legacy. Shifu has said that whether Dharma Drum Mountain continued to exist as a practice center a thousand years down the road depended on the second

and third generations of its sangha. These two generations had the toughest jobs cut out for them. I am really glad to see that this series of talks titled “Encounters with Master Sheng Yen” are being organized. Through the sharing of disciples who have practiced with Shifu, the future generations can get a glimpse of Shifu’s guidance and the little stories in daily living that are so touching.

Today I have brought an heirloom, a collection of letters which Shifu had written to his monastic disciples while he was abroad. Shifu always wrote to his disciples when he was abroad. When I received a letter from Shifu, I would kneel in front of a Buddha statue to read it, with joy welling up in my heart. In these letters, Shifu conveyed his hopes and expectations of his disciples, his visions of Dharma Drum Mountain, the role of Dharma Drum Mountain on the world stage, as well as our positioning in the global Buddhist community. They are all very moving.

The scripture says, “Parents’ love for their children lasts only one lifetime; Buddhas’ love for sentient beings lasts forever.” I always think of Shifu whenever I read this passage. The love and care Shifu extended to his disciples were just like that of great bodhisattvas who returned to

our world on the power of their vows, as described in the scriptures. Shifu has studied the precepts and vinaya in depth, attained profound insights in cultivation, and was well learned on the history and doctrines of the Dharma. Without such a well-rounded accomplishment, it would be very hard for him to succeed in establishing a monastic sangha in accordance with the Buddha's original intention. We are really fortunate to be able to practice the Dharma under Shifu's guidance. I have been telling myself that if I want to be Shifu's disciple in future lifetimes, I need to nurture the same karmic cause as he did and follow his footsteps. Otherwise, I would probably miss the opportunity of practicing with him again when I come upon a fork in my cyclical sojourn.

I have a very deep karmic affinity with Shifu in this lifetime. I have joined the Sangha because of Shifu. In the past, I used to seek Shifu's guidance for all sorts of matters and let him make the decisions. I was so blessed and happy. Now that Shifu is no longer around, I have to take ownership of all matters and it is only now that I know how tough it is. If we think of Shifu and wish to be with him in future lifetimes, the only way is to nurture the same

karmic causes that he has nurtured. Only then would it be possible for us to be Shifu's Dharma companions again. Shifu has built Dharma Drum Mountain through thick and thin and carried out the mission to share the Dharma relentlessly. As his disciples, we should live the mission and values of Dharma Drum Mountain. By doing that, we are nurturing the same karmic causes as he did. May we be able to practice with Shifu again and again in our future lifetimes.

*(Talk given on April 7, 2010
at the Sheng Yan Education Foundation)*

Appendix

DDM 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

E-19 Encounters with Master Sheng Yen III

E-20 Encounters with Master Sheng Yen IV

Books in English by Venerable Master Sheng Yen :

- *Attaining the Way*
- *Catching a Feather on a Fan*
- *Complete Enlightenment*
- *Dharma Drum*
- *Faith in Mind*
- *Footprints in the Snow*
- *Getting the Buddha Mind*
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- *Illuminating Silence*
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- *Subtle Wisdom*
- *The Infinite Mirror*
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