

Fo Guang Shan International Translation Center

The Essence of Chan

Buddhism in Every Step A11
（英文版）

Venerable Master Hsing Yun

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Written by
Venerable Master Hsing Yun

Translated by
Amy Lam and Jeanne Tsai

Edited and proofread by
Fo Guang Shan
International Translation Center

Calligraphy by
Venerable Master Hsing Yun

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The Essence of Chan

Among the eighty-four thousand teachings of Buddhism, Chan is the most enthusiastically studied and discussed in the world today. Although once confined to the East where it originated, the study of Chan meditation has captured the attention and interest of the West. For example, many universities in the United States have set up meditation groups. It is encouraging to see meditation spread from the confines of the monasteries into the modern world, where it is playing a very important role.

To describe Chan is not an easy task, for Chan is something that can neither be talked about nor completely expressed in words. The moment language is used to explain Chan, we are no longer dealing with its true spirit. Chan is beyond all words, yet it cannot be left unexpressed.

What is the origin of Chan? Chan is the Chinese transliteration of the Sanskrit term *dhyana;* it means quiet contemplation. Originating in India, legend has it that during an assembly on Vulture Peak, the Buddha picked up a flower and held it up to the assembly without saying a word. The millions of heavenly and human beings who were gathered at the assembly did not understand what the Buddha meant, except for Mahakasyapa, who smiled. Thus, Chan was imparted without utilizing any spoken or written language: it was transmitted directly from mind to mind. Later, Chan was introduced into China. During the time of the sixth patriarch, Huineng, Chan flourished and developed into five schools, which became the mainstream of Chinese Buddhism.

What is Chan? Chan Master Qingyuan said that Chan is the mind. This mind is not the one that discriminates and differentiates things. It is our "true mind." This true mind transcends all tangible existence, yet it manifests itself in all existences in the universe. Even the most ordinary things in the universe are full of the subtleties of Chan.

Chan Master Baizhang said that Chan is "everyday living." He said that chopping

firewood, carrying water, putting on clothes, eating food, standing, and walking are all Chan. Chan is not something mysterious. Chan is closely related to daily life. Therefore, every one of us can experience Chan.

Today, the internal world of people is often in conflict with the external world, and life becomes a burden and a nuisance for them. They cannot delight in and seize the opportune moments of Chan in everyday living. In contrast, Chan masters are very humorous and interesting. With just a few sentences, they can relieve us of our worries and troubles and thus guide us to true happiness. This transformation to happiness is very much like turning on a huge, complex machine by simply pressing the start button. No complicated knowledge or repetitious thinking is required. The Chan state of mind is very lively and vivacious.

What is the value of Chan? By practicing Chan, we bring color to our lives. It expands our minds, enriches our lives, elevates our character, helps us to perfect our morality, and leads us to a state where we will be at perfect ease, even when we are on the brink of life and death. What then are the wonderful teachings that the Chan masters have set down and passed on to

us? How can we understand the delight of Chan through the use of language?

I. Existence and Nonexistence

We are accustomed to thinking that all phenomena can be differentiated by names and related to in terms of duality. Actually, all things cannot be divided into distinct halves. For example, most people see "existence" and "nonexistence" as two opposing concepts: something either exists or does not exist. Something either is or isn't. The two seem as though they cannot come together.

But if we look at the speech and behavior of Chan masters, they transcend ordinary concepts like existence and nonexistence and are able to embrace both concepts to reach a higher level. Their view is different from that of ordinary people. If we use our typical way of thinking, then we will fail to understand the Chan masters.

When the fifth patriarch of the Chan School wanted to pass on his robe and bowl, the symbols of the Dharma, to a successor, he told each of his disciples to write a verse, so he could decide who among them had realized the Way. The robe and bowl would be passed on to the person

with the best understanding, and that person would become the sixth patriarch. His foremost disciple, Shenxiu, wrote the following verse:

The body is a bodhi tree.
The mind is like a bright standing mirror.
Diligently clean it at all times,
So it does not attract dust.

Many read the verse and praised Shenxiu for his superior insight. But the fifth patriarch read the verse and thought otherwise. He said, "This verse is not bad, but the writer has yet to see the Way."

Huineng, who worked in the rice mill, asked someone that night to write his verse on the wall as well:

Essentially, bodhi is not a tree.
The bright mirror is also not standing.
Inherently, there is no thing.
Where can it attract dust?

After seeing this verse, the fifth patriarch knew that Huineng had seen the empty nature of all phenomena and had entered the Buddha's

path. So he passed on the robe and bowl of the Chan School lineage to Huineng, who became the sixth patriarch.

Everyone in the monastery had expected Shenxiu to become the sixth patriarch as he had a good grasp of the principles of Chan, was the head disciple of the fifth patriarch, and because the fifth patriarch had instructed the other disciples to practice according to Shenxiu's verse. Instead, the fifth patriarch chose Huineng, whom nobody had heard of before, to be his successor. Although Shenxiu had attained a high state of cultivation, his mind was still confined to existence; therefore, he did not have a supreme understanding of Chan. The supreme path is one that integrates existence and emptiness. This is the difference between the Chan mind and the ordinary mind. It is only when we can transcend the distinction between existence and nonexistence that we can realize the ultimate Chan mind and experience the wondrous truth of Chan.

Let me illustrate with another well-known case in the history of Chan. One day, someone asked Chan Master Zhaozhou, "What does 'Zhaozhou' mean?"

Zhaozhou answered, "East gate, south gate, west gate, and north gate."

This answer seemed to be totally irrelevant, but in fact, this answer about the four gates had a hidden meaning. It signified that the Chan of Zhaozhou was wide open like a city and was not limited to any particular school. Chan is not at all restricted by space.

Someone once asked Zhaozhou, "Do dogs have Buddha nature?"

Zhaozhou replied, "Yes."

Another person asked him the same question: "Do dogs have Buddha nature?"

This time Zhaozhou answered, "No."

Why did Chan Master Zhaozhou give two different answers to the same question? From the worldly point of view, this was rather contradictory, but to Chan Master Zhaozhou, this was a lively way of teaching. When he said "yes," he meant that dogs have the potential to become Buddhas. When he said "no," he meant that dogs have not become Buddhas yet. When answering a question, Chan masters are careful to determine the intention and the state of mind of the person who asks the question before giving the appropriate answer.

Emperor Wu of the Liang dynasty was one of the most devoted Buddhists in Chinese history. During his reign, he built many temples,

erected Buddha statues, and constructed roads and bridges. It was during this time that Bodhidharma came from India to China to spread the Dharma. Emperor Wu asked him, "I have done so many good deeds. What merits have I accumulated?"

Bodhidharma replied coolly, "No merits at all."

Emperor Wu was not very pleased with this answer. He pressed again, but Bodhidharma would not give him any further explanation. Eventually, Bodhidharma left because he could not communicate with Emperor Wu. How was it possible that the good deeds of Emperor Wu had produced no merit? When Bodhidharma said, "No merits at all," he meant that in the mind of a Chan master there is no such dualistic concept as "have" and "have not," as experienced by the ordinary mind.

Usually, we perceive and differentiate things through our senses. For example, when we look at a mountain or a river, we see it as only a mountain or a river. After we start practicing Chan, we begin to realize that all existence is illusive. At this point, the mountain is no longer a mountain, and the river is no longer a river. When we have attained complete realization, all

relative concepts of "is" and "is not," "mind" and "matter," have become integrated. At this point, the mountain is again a mountain, and the river is again a river. The mind of Chan has become unified with the external environment. The flowing sound of rivers becomes the wonderful Dharma. Green mountains become Buddhas' pure bodies. The world of Chan is limitless when the boundary between existence and nonexistence is destroyed.

II. Active and Passive

One of the essential doctrines of Buddhism is a group of teachings called the "three Dharma seals." The three Dharma seals are three absolute and universal truths that can be used to measure against other philosophies and ideas to certify whether they are true or not. The three Dharma seals are "all conditioned phenomena are impermanent," "all phenomena are without an independent self," and "*nirvana* is perfect tranquility." The last of the three Dharma seals describes the ultimate goal of studying Buddhism: to attain the perfect tranquility of *nirvana*.

This kind of "perfect tranquility" is not the same as ordinary motionlessness or passivity.

In our everyday life, when we say that a certain object is active and another object is passive, it is due to the action of the mind. All phenomena are created by the mind. Actually, phenomena themselves do not make the distinction of being active or passive. What makes the distinction is the clinging in the mind caused by delusion. If we can free ourselves from this clinging, the mind will then be at peace, and everything will be in harmony.

After Huineng, the sixth patriarch, received the robe and bowl from the fifth patriarch, he went into seclusion for fifteen years before beginning to teach. One day, when he came to a temple, he saw two people having an argument in front of a banner. They were arguing about why the banner was moving. The one said, "If there is no wind, how can the banner move? Thus, it is the wind that is moving."

The other said, "If the banner does not move, how do you know that the wind is blowing? Therefore, it is the banner that is moving."

Huineng listened patiently to the argument. Finally, he said to them, "Please don't argue anymore. Neither the wind nor the banner is moving. It is your minds that are moving."

From this exchange, we can see how Chan masters look at the world: they look within themselves

rather than dwelling on the superficial appearances of phenomena. After all, phenomena exist in a transient and fragmented manner. Differentiation arises in the mind because of the stirring of our thoughts. When the mind is tranquil, objects are not capable of making distinctions on their own. However, when the mind is stirred, we differentiate phenomena, causing distinction and separation between others and ourselves. Therefore, the key to realizing the state wherein active and passive are in harmony and no longer differentiated lies in whether we have indeed eliminated all the discrimination arising out of perceived differences. In this way, we can reach perfect peace.

Emperor Xianzong of the Tang dynasty was a very devoted Buddhist and wanted to send someone on a trip to Fengxiang to bring back some of the Buddha's relics. Han Yu, a government official, tried to dissuade the emperor from such an undertaking. The emperor was very angry with Han Yu and demoted him to the post of provincial governor of Zhaozhou.

Zhaozhou was located in the southern part of China, which at the time was not very civilized. However, a well-educated and highly cultivated monk named Chan Master Dadian was living there. He was highly respected by the local people.

Being an educated Confucian scholar, Han Yu was prideful and looked down upon the Chan master. However, since there was no one else living around Zhaozhou with whom he could have intelligent discourse, he reluctantly went to visit the Chan master.

When Han Yu arrived at the temple, the Chan master was in meditation. Han Yu did not want to disturb him, so he decided to stand to the side and wait. After a long time had passed, the Chan master was still motionless. Han Yu started to become impatient. Seeing this, the Chan master's disciple whispered to his master, "First, influence through meditative concentration; then eradicate arrogance through wisdom."

This was said to the Chan master but, in fact, it was really meant to be overheard by Han Yu. What the disciple was indirectly saying to Han Yu was: The master's meditation is a wordless teaching for you; he is testing your patience. The moment you succeed in passing his test, he will use his words of wisdom to rid you of your arrogance. At this point, Han Yu was convinced that the Chan master's erudition and cultivation were profound indeed. They eventually became very good friends.

From the above examples, we can see that in the minds of Chan masters, active and passive are united as one. This understanding is reflected in the way they teach. In the course of their teaching, Chan masters sometimes instruct through silence and at other times through powerful preaching, like the roar of a lion. Every single movement of a Chan master is full of the subtleties of Chan—be it a short, gentle reminder or a forceful rebuke; an advance or a retreat in stance; a question or an answer; a frown or a smile; the drinking of tea or the eating of rice. To most of us, our everyday living experiences tend to convince us that activity and passivity are two distinct states. However, activity and passivity as realized through the meditative concentration of Chan are indeed unified, perfectly free, and natural.

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III. Practice and Understanding

Some people say that Buddhism is a philosophy. From an intellectual point of view this is a correct assessment; however, the real essence of Buddhism is practice. Truth can be realized only through practice.

The real spirit of Buddhism will be lost if we limit ourselves only to the study of the doctrines and neglect the practice of Buddhism. Carrying on intellectual discussions about Buddhism in the absence of practice is a form of frivolous debate and should be avoided. If one treats Buddhism merely as a philosophy, one will never experience the essence of Buddhism. This is because in Buddhism, understanding and practice are equally important, especially in the Chan School. What is most important is the experience that is derived from one's practice, and not relying upon written or spoken language.

In the Chan School, cultivation and realization of the Way are personal endeavors. To whatever extent one cultivates, one is that much closer to awakening. If one dwells on theory alone or simply parrots what one has heard, then one will not realize any results. It is like leading a thirsty horse to water; if the horse refuses to drink, it will eventually die of thirst. Similarly, all the teachings in the Buddhist sutras serve as a compass to guide us toward truth. After we understand them, we need to practice accordingly in order to taste the sweet dew of the Dharma for ourselves. It is said that Buddhist practice is like drinking water—only the person who drinks the

water truly knows whether it is cold or warm. If we want to truly understand Buddhism and Chan, it is up to us to practice personally and attain realization. No one else can tell us what Buddhism and Chan truly are.

How do the Chan masters practice and attain realization? They attain realization by living in the monastic community and practicing in every waking moment of their daily lives. The virtuous ones of the past always said, "Gathering firewood and carrying water are all Chan." In our everyday life, we can practice while putting on our clothes, eating our meals, walking, sleeping, and even going to the bathroom.

The beginning of *The Diamond Sutra* describes the Buddha's daily routine, as he put on his robe, carried his bowl, and went on his alms rounds. Just like all of us, enlightened persons have to put on clothes and eat food; however, they do these in a markedly different way from the rest of us. Thus, it is said that Buddhism is not to be found outside of the mundane world.

We often foster the misconception that we have to go deep into the mountains or wilderness to practice and attain realization. Actually, we do not need to isolate ourselves from the community in order to practice. If we

can extinguish the fires of anger in our hearts and minds, then every environment in which we find ourselves will be a cool, comfortable place. We can even practice right in the midst of the noisiest marketplace.

If we have a thorough understanding of the teachings of Buddhism and if we practice accordingly, we will be able to make twice the progress with half the effort. For example, a basic teaching of Buddhism is dependent origination, which means that all phenomena in the universe arise into existence due to the coming together of the appropriate causes and conditions and will cease to exist when the necessary causes and conditions are no longer present. There is no such thing as a creator of the universe; in order to shape the events in our lives, it is our responsibility to put in the necessary effort.

From the teaching of dependent origination, we can infer that all beings are equal and have Buddha nature. All beings have the potential to become Buddhas. The process leading to the fruition of this potential is dependent upon the determination and practice of the individual. Our own actions determine our future. Thus, correct understanding and diligent practice of

this Buddhist teaching will help us to develop a progressive and positive outlook on life.

From the teaching of dependent origination, we can also infer that this universe is in harmonious unity. All phenomena and all beings are interdependent. With this understanding, we can easily see how self-centeredness is contradictory to harmony and why the distinction of self versus others should be abolished. In order to live in harmony with others, we should direct our care and help toward others, striving not to be centered on ourselves.

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IV. Purity and Impurity

Nature itself does not make any distinction between purity and impurity or prettiness and ugliness. It is our subjective likes and dislikes that make the distinction. It says in *The Vimalakirti Sutra*, "When one's mind is pure, the land will be pure." Ordinary minds, however, are clouded by the five sense objects of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch and are deluded by outward appearance, preventing the pure nature of all phenomena from being seen. The minds of enlightened Chan masters are pure and unobstructed. Their minds are like the mind of the Buddha,

and they can see the real nature of all things. To them, there is no difference between good and evil, beauty and ugliness, or right and wrong. While an ordinary being sees the world as corrupt and impure, Chan masters see the world as a pure Buddha Land.

The Chan state of mind is not something that one can either feign or argue about. Once, Chan Master Zhaozhou made a bet with his disciple, Wenyan. Whoever could declare himself to be the lowest and most worthless thing would be the winner.

Chan Master Zhaozhou said, "I am a donkey."

Wenyan said, "I am the rear end of the donkey."

Zhaozhou said, "I am the excrement of the donkey."

Wenyan said, "I am the maggot inside the excrement."

Chan Master Zhaozhou was stumped and could not continue, but asked, "What are you doing in the excrement?"

Wenyan answered, "I am cooling myself off from the summer heat!"

As the minds of Chan masters are pure, they are at ease even in places that we consider the filthiest. To them, everywhere is a pure land; therefore, they can feel free wherever they go.

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One day, Chan Master Ikkyu went out with his disciple. They came to the shore of a river where a woman stood, hesitant to cross the fast-flowing water. Out of compassion, Chan Master Ikkyu carried the woman across the river on his back. Having done so, he eventually forgot about the matter. His disciple, however, was bothered by his master's act of carrying a woman on his back. One day, the disciple said to Chan Master Ikkyu, "Master, something has been bothering me for several months. Can you help me to solve this problem?"

Chan Master Ikkyu asked, "Oh! What is it?"

The disciple said, "You always teach us to keep our distance from women. But several months ago, you carried a woman across the river. Does this not contradict your teaching?"

After hearing this, Chan Master Ikkyu exclaimed, "Ah! I only carried that woman from one side of the river to the other and left her there, but you, poor fellow, have been carrying her around in your mind for several months!"

From this story, we can see that the state of mind of Chan masters is open and undiscriminating. Chan masters do not discriminate between the pure and the filthy or male and female. They understand that the mind, the Buddha, and all beings are equal.

V. The Practice of Chan

Now that we have discussed Chan at length, I hope you have been able to taste a little of the wonderful flavor of Chan. However, Chan is not something that can be experienced through mere words; it needs to be practiced. I would like to offer some suggestions on how to practice Chan.

A. Investigate Chan through doubts

In other religions, there is no room for doubt; one has to believe unconditionally. But Chan encourages one to begin with doubts. A little doubt will lead to a little realization. Great doubt will lead to great realization. With no doubts, there will be no realization.

B. Seek realization through contemplation

Once doubts are aroused, one needs to contemplate them in order to attain realization. *Gongan* and *huatou,* stories and questions to contemplate during meditation, are devised to arouse the doubts of the Chan practitioner.

Some examples are “What was one’s original face before being born to one’s parents?” “Do dogs have Buddha nature?” and “Who is reciting Buddha’s name?” Diligent contemplation of *gongan* and *huatou* will eventually lead to realization.

C. Study Chan by questioning

When contemplating *huatou*, the most important thing is to continue questioning until realization is attained. It is like trying to catch a thief; one must tirelessly keep up the pursuit until the thief is apprehended. For example, when contemplating “Who is reciting the Buddha’s name?” one can respond with a whole slew of questions:

“Is it the mind that is reciting?”

“Who is the mind?”

“If the mind is me, then is it the mouth that is reciting the Buddha’s name, and not me?”

“If the mouth is me, then is it the body that bows to the Buddha, and not me?”

“If the body is me, then are the eyes that pay respect to the statue of the Buddha not me?”

Complete realization will be attained if one pursues such inquiry.

D. Realize Chan through personal experience

In order to practice Chan, one has to start with doubting, contemplating, and questioning. However, the final and most important stage is the personal experience of Chan. Chan is not something that is expressed in words nor contemplated with our hearts and minds. In fact, we must let go of all these to experience Chan. Realization is a state of mind that cannot be described with words. Chan can only be experienced by those who have attained it.

Have you ever listened to a rippling brook? That is the sound of Chan! Have you ever looked at the green leaves of a willow? That is the color of Chan! Have you ever seen the heart of a lotus blossom? That is the mind of Chan!

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