

CHAN PRACTICE AND BELIEF

By Ven Master Sheng Yen

People interested in Chan practice very often find it difficult to accept spiritual beliefs. Their emphasis is primarily on a personal secular cultivation and their aim is to gain physical and mental benefits and Chan meditation experiences from that cultivation. As spiritual belief itself is of an emotional nature they find this difficult to accept. This is actually a mistake.

Many people think that Chan practice depends only on oneself, a matter of self reliance. Others who practise Buddhism by reciting the names of Buddha depend on external forces. Both of these views are incorrect. In reality, Chan meditation needs the assistance of external forces and the practice of reciting the names of Buddha requires self reliance. A Chan practitioner cannot become accomplished solely by himself. In India, China and Tibet, Chan practitioners all need teachers, protector deities and blessings from the Buddha and Bodhisattvas. That is why Chan monasteries in China make offerings to Heavenly beings, Devas, Nagas and protector deities.

Ancient masters have all encouraged Chan practitioners to 'hand in one's body to the monastery and one's life to the protector deities' when practising meditation. You need not be concerned about the body since it will be taken care of by the masters on duty. You simply follow the routines of the monastery. However, to achieve a satisfactory result, one needs assistance from protector deities. Without such assistance, one may face physical and mental obstructions as well as demonic hindrances. To practise Chan meditation relying only on one's self without belief in external forces is not considered as a cultivation of Buddhadharma.

Furthermore, Chan practitioners need to keep in mind that in addition to meditating diligently, they have to accumulate merit. The idea that one can attain enlightenment or liberation simply through sitting alone is itself an obstacle. How can a self-concerned person become enlightened? Hence, Chan teaches the practice of giving and repentance.

Without the mindset of benefiting all sentient beings, of contributing towards others and of putting this into action, it will be very difficult to succeed in cultivation.

Chan masters in the past, before they attained enlightenment, had to perform all kinds of work for their masters and monasteries. It was called Xing Dan. Such work included carrying buckets of water to the kitchen, chopping wood, cooking, growing vegetables, cleaning up the vicinity of the temple, repairing and maintaining temple facilities.

Traditional monasteries have forty-eight types of work being carried out by monastic practitioners. Only during the seven days of a meditation retreat are monastic practitioners relieved from complex tasks so that they may avoid distractions. Otherwise, every individual has a long-term dedicated task. Thus Dharma Drum

Mountain encourages every Chan practitioner to carry out some simple chores during the seven day meditation retreat.

Chan monasteries expect practitioners to give up their spare clothes, money or belongings to the needy, keeping only the most basic necessities. In the past, a typical Chan monastic practitioner's belongings weighed as little as 1.25 kg having given away all but essentials.

A Chan practitioner must have the heart to make offerings and readily give away personal belongings to those who are in need.

Unfortunately, nowadays many Chan practitioners are egoistic, arrogant, selfish, petty-minded and lacking in belief. It is both pitiful and harmful. Why is it so? Chan practitioners arrive with an expectation to achieve physical and mental experiences such as stability, joy and health. Once they experience the effects of health, stability and joy, they credit this success to their own efforts. They do not believe it is due to the blessings of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas, or to support from the protector deities of monasteries. Neither do they believe it is due to the guidance of the master nor the technique taught by the teacher. Thus they become arrogant, self-conceited, complacent, egoistic and ignorant of belief and respect.

To believe is to have faith in the existence of the truth despite being personally limited in ability and knowledge. This is what we call 'beholding a high mountain in awe, or looking up to noble characters with high respect, unreachable though they may seem, yearning for it in the heart'. This is like viewing a majestic mountain. Even though one is unable to reach the peak, one believes that there must be great masters residing up there and that the scenery must be fascinating. The higher one scales the mountain, the more one discovers things which have not been seen before. This is admiration with belief. From below, we admire the above, and from admiration grows confidence, believing unknown forces within must benefit us. If there is insufficient belief, it will be impossible for one to believe the teachings of Buddhadharmā and the unknown, and one's cultivation will not be successful.

Chan Buddhism advocates the belief that everyone is able to attain Buddhahood, possesses the Buddha nature and is not lacking in any of the attributes of a Buddha. Chan Buddhism encourages the letting go of self-centeredness so as to instantly see one's original nature. One's original nature is the nature of Buddha. In this way, everyone can attain Buddhahood. This implies that enlightenment is natural and does not equate to cultivation. For this reason many people misunderstand Chan Buddhism and neglect the importance of belief.

In theory this is correct, but in practice it may not be so. Just as every human being may become a parent, does that mean a new-born baby is a parent? He has yet to grow up and reach adulthood. He is not a parent yet and is still a baby. Will a baby become a parent in the future? Not necessarily. Those who renounce the world at an early age will not become parents, and there are those who are married who cannot become parents due to infertility. In theory, it is not wrong that everyone can be a parent, but in reality it is not necessarily so.

Similarly, in a democratic society, every citizen has the right to vote and be voted for. However, whilst the majority have the right to vote, few have the opportunity to be voted for. Due to a lack of ability or insufficient causes and conditions, one can only vote but not be voted for by others. However there are those who hear the Chan saying, 'everyone possesses the Buddha nature' and consider themselves equivalent to the Buddha with complete wisdom. They are, in fact, worthless and arrogant beings. They then, upon seeing the image of a Buddha, not only refuse to prostrate, but exclaim in mockery that present Buddhas do not prostrate to clay, coloured and carved images of Buddha!

Such people only believe that their own mind is Buddha and that there is no Buddha outside of themselves. When they see other people prostrate, they call it attachment. When they see people prostrate to Venerable Masters, these so-called 'Chan practitioners' shake their heads and sigh: "There is no need to prostrate to the Buddha let alone the Sangha."

Once a person, while prostrating to me, was pulled up by a layman who said to that person, "Don't prostrate! Don't harm the master!"

I, being prostrated to, was being harmed? I was puzzled. I asked, "What do you mean? How can he harm me?"

He said, "If you are really an accomplished and great monk, why do you still need people to prostrate to you? If you do, that means in your mind there is attachment. The more he prostrates the more you feel like a great monk. You'll never attain liberation and enlightenment in this life."

Oh! I thought he has a point.

He continued, "If you really have attained liberation then when he prostrates to you, you should reproach him: don't be attached to form, no form of self, no form of others, no form of sentient beings and no form of longevity, obviously no form of master and disciples. Why are you prostrating then?"

Oh! This layman really has sharp tongue. I asked him, "Do you prostrate to the Buddha?"

He said, "I prostrate to the Buddha in my mind."

I asked, "How do you do that?"

He replied, "I don't use my body to do it, I use my mind."

I asked, "How do you use your mind to do it?"

He said, "Having my mind liberated is prostration. Having no hindrance in the mind is prostration." He implied that there was no need to prostrate to Buddha and Bodhisattvas and he believed in nothing other than himself.

Actually, this is neither Buddhism nor Chan but a type of arrogance, an erroneous view that lacks faith. This type of person may have had some experiences in meditation and developed a kind of pride and overconfidence. After having read some so-called Chan text, they become 'bound' and they think that they have attained liberation.

Those with great merit will be reborn into the heavenly realm after death. However, if they do not have the right view and understanding and do not believe in the Three Jewels, even though they enjoy positive karmic effects in the heavenly realm, once they exhaust their positive karma they will descend to the lower realms of existence.

If one's mind is not upright, does not adhere to precepts and always engages in unwholesome matters, one will fall into hell as fast as a shooting arrow.

Therefore Chan masters believe in heaven, hell, Buddhaksetra (Buddha Land) and samsara. Only to those who cultivate themselves diligently, with advanced meditation practice and are attached to nothing in their minds, would the Chan master say, "There are no Buddha, no Dharma, no Sanghas, no heaven and hell." If the mind is attached to the Three Jewels, to heaven and hell, liberation will not be attainable.

On the other hand, for beginners in Chan practice it is a must to have a clear understanding of the karmic law of cause and effect and to differentiate properly between mortal and sage. Otherwise, talking about being detached only results in inverted views of karma, using mortality to fake sainthood. Mortals are mortals. We should not consider ourselves as being equal to all Buddhas of the past, the present and the future.

Chan meditation is not merely sitting meditation and empty talk. Nor is it only seeking enlightenment and wanting to be equal to all the Buddhas of the past, the present and the future. The propagation of Chan teaching entails advocating beliefs which make an individual's cultivation easier and brings us one step closer to self-perfection. Furthermore, Chan practice must begin with getting rid of self-centred attachment. This starts with faith, almsgiving and upholding precepts. It needs a sense of contrition, humility, gratitude and repentance. It also needs belief in the Three Jewels, all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, Dharma protectors and deities, lineage Masters and teachers who guide one in cultivation. When entering Chan practices, if you do not prostrate to Buddha, do not respect the Dharma and Sangha, do not believe in Dharma protectors and deities, with such arrogance, neither will it be possible for you to attain enlightenment and see the true nature of self.