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### Zen and Compassion

#### Lecture by Master Sheng-yen

*The following was the inaugural lecture given by Master Sheng-yen to the Meditation Group, the Chan Meditation Center's Manhattan affiliate, on May 15, 2001. It was translated live by Rebecca Li, transcribed by Stacey Polacco, and edited by David Berman.*

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Good evening. This evening's topic is Zen and compassion. Zen is wisdom; why is it also compassion? A lot of people don't understand what Zen is. Many people think that Zen is sitting meditation. Actually, in the Chinese tradition, Zen does not necessarily require sitting meditation. As long as one's mind is free from emotional afflictions, free from vexations, free from contradictions and free from suffering, that is Zen, or in Chinese, Chan. So before talking about compassion I'd like you to have some idea of what it's like to have a mind free from vexations -- without any burden, without anything bothering you.

In the Sixth Patriarch Huineng's Platform Sutra, there's a line that says, "There is no good; there is no bad." This means that when one looks at what has happened in the past, and at what's going on right now, one does not say, "I like this," or, "I don't like that." "There's no good; there's no bad," doesn't mean that there is no good or bad, right or wrong in the world. It means that when one encounters the good, one does not give rise to the mind of craving; when one encounters the bad, one does not give rise to the mind of hatred. That state of mind, that neither clings to the good nor rejects the bad that's Chan.

For example -- take the flowers here. Some people look at them and say, "Oh! Yellow flowers! I like them!" Others may say, "I don't like yellow flowers, I like white flowers. How come they don't have white flowers?" When you look at phenomena, what is the reaction that arises in your mind? You can observe that you often have these emotional reactions, and when that's the case, that is not wisdom. We cannot say that it is vexation, but it is some kind of self-referential knowledge or judgement, and that is not wisdom.

Another example. Here, right now, I'm actually wearing a lot of clothes underneath my robe. When I left the Chan Meditation Center in Queens this afternoon, my disciple told me, "Shifu, it's very cold this evening. Wear more clothes." So I wore all these clothes here, and now I'm really hot, and I want to take them off. And what happens? If I'm sitting here thinking, "I'm really hot and I want to take off these clothes, but it's embarrassing," -- that's problem. If I'm just sitting here thinking, "I'm hot. I need to take off these clothes," and I just do it, then that's not a problem. It's not discrimination or judgement, it's just a reality -- that's the way it is. No problem.

(Shifu removes his robe, removes some layers, and puts his robe back on. Giggles from the audience.)

So what I did just now, did it cause you a lot of suffering? For me, it certainly gave me some joy, because it was hot, and now I've taken these extra layers off. When I feel hot and I need to take off clothes, I take them off, and when it's cold and I need more clothes, I put them on -- that's Chan.

Sometimes I see gentlemen in suits and ties. They look very nice and proper, but sometimes they get very hot, and you see them sweating all over, sweat dripping off their heads, and they still feel, "No, I'm a gentleman -- I can't loosen my tie or take off my jacket. It wouldn't be polite." Just as it's not very proper for a monk to take off his clothes in front of an audience. Maybe I should have just sat here getting hotter and hotter. If I thought that way, it wouldn't be the action of a Chan Master. As a Chan Master, if I need to take off some clothes, I take off some clothes. If I need an extra layer of clothes, I put on some clothes. I just do what needs to be done, whatever the situation calls for.

Once there was a woman with her little boy, 5 or 6 years old, who came to me very excited, and wanted her little boy to come and pay respect to me. She kept saying, "Bow to Master Sheng-yen!" Instead the little boy started crying, and started peeing in his pants. The woman became greatly embarrassed; her son totally embarrassed her in front of the Master. I told her, "Your son did not embarrass you. It's normal for kids to cry, and it's normal for kids to pee -- he's just doing what needs to be done. In fact, you embarrassed yourself, because you were the one thinking, 'My son is not supposed to cry in front of Master Sheng-yen; my boy is not supposed to pee in front of Master Sheng-yen!' and you became embarrassed -- what he did was entirely natural for him."

Now I'd like to talk about compassion. In order to have compassion, one must have wisdom. If one has wisdom, then one will not give rise to emotional afflictions when one encounters difficult or problematic situations in life. There will not be a lot of movement in one's mind, or ups and downs in one's emotions, so one's point of view will not be full of judgements like, "This is really good," or, "This is really bad." When individuals without wisdom encounter difficult circumstances, they tend to create lots of conflict and struggle within themselves, and consequently they also see opposition between themselves and others. Here opposition doesn't necessarily mean bad relations, it means seeing others as opposed to yourself. Some people you like, you perceive them as good, you want to be close to them and even possess them; others you hate, you see them as bad, and you reject them. This is self-centered behavior; it is the behavior of those without wisdom, and why, without wisdom, one will not be able to treat others with compassion.

Very often when we think about compassion we think of two things: sympathy, or pity, which means feeling bad for others; and empathy, which means feeling what another person feels. Actually, compassion, in Buddhism, means unconditional love. Love means concern for the welfare of others (not romantic love), and unconditional means without regard for recognition, reward, or receiving anything in return. There are different levels of this compassion. The first is compassion for those close to us, our families and friends. At the second level, we have ceased to distinguish between family members and strangers, or friends and enemies, and we manifest compassion for all people. But we are still distinguishing between the self (the one who is compassionate), the act of compassion itself, and the one who is the object of that compassion. At the highest level of Chan, compassion is just giving that occurs naturally, with no sense of self, or of other, or of being compassionate. You understand so far?

Now I'd like to talk about the method of practice. What kind of method do we use to attain this level of practice -- the compassion we just talked about? Being compassionate in that way is not easy, and we must rely on a method of practice to reach that goal.

Methods of practice fall into two main categories. The first is gradual practice and gradual enlightenment, and the second involves either gradual practice that leads to sudden enlightenment, or sudden enlightenment followed by gradual practice. A lot of you may have been thinking of sudden practice and a sudden enlightenment. But there's no such thing.

The most common method is that of gradual practice and gradual enlightenment. So I will talk a little about this. I'd like to ask how many of you have experienced sitting meditation, or have learned how to do sitting meditation already? More than half... most of you.

The main function of sitting meditation is to concentrate and then unify the mind. Unified mind can manifest in three ways. First is unification of body and mind, body and mind fused into a single stream of clear concentration. Second is unification of inside and outside, so that there is no distinction between self and environment. Third is unification of the previous thought and the following thought -- the mind stays on one thought, and we enter what is called samadhi.

It's difficult to go right to unified mind, so in the beginning of practice, one has to try to concentrate the mind. And in the beginning even concentrating the mind is not so easy, so one has to work on relaxing the body and mind and eventually the scattered thoughts will lessen, the mind will begin to settle down, and concentrating will be easier. Once the scattered thoughts in the mind cease, then one has entered the unification of body and mind.

Earlier today, when I was riding into Manhattan from Queens, I was talking with someone in the car. After a while I stopped talking, but she continued -- she kept talking and talking, reacting to everything in the environment... everything interested her. And I was there listening to everything she said. I'm using this individual as an example of someone with a scattered mind, whereas my mind was in a unified state. I heard everything she said, but did not give rise to any reaction. I did not give rise to craving or to hatred. This was a state where the body and mind were unified. When the body and mind are in a unified state, they are not bothered or moved by what's going on in the environment. (This is the stage where the mind, body and environment are unified, but not the previous thought and the following thought.)

All of you have probably had some experience like this, when you have been aware of what's happening in the environment, but your mind was not moved by it. But this state of mind may arise only occasionally. In order to maintain this state of mind, one must practice constantly, and then it is possible that in this state of unification one will experience enlightenment. If one has not studied the Buddhadharma then this is very unlikely, but if one has diligently studied the Buddhadharma, and has been able to maintain this state of unification, in which the mind is very calm, and one's responses to others are without either hatred or craving, then this experience of enlightenment is very possible.

One of the very important things one must understand from the study of Buddhadharma is that the experience of unified mind is not liberation. It is an experience that can be very profound and joyful, but the Dharma teaches us not to attach to the feeling of joy and mistake it for liberation. What we must understand is that there is something beyond unified mind, and that is no mind.

And what about the unification of previous thought and following thought? What is this like? It is as if you were inside of a big, clear crystal ball, but you do not see the crystal, because you are as clear as the crystal around you. The mind is very clear and bright and solid. Will one get enlightened while in this state? No, as long as one is in this state one will not get enlightened. But after one leaves this state and returns to normal activities, one may become enlightened. One should not attach to the experience, and should not give in to cravings to repeat the experience, and should simply go about one's daily life, and some simple thing may happen that leads to enlightenment.

This is the approach of gradual practice and gradual enlightenment. So you see there is no sudden enlightenment, where after one experience everything is resolved. One goes about practice gradually, then one becomes enlightened gradually. How is that related to compassion?

After enlightenment, one is able to put down the burdens in one's mind. This is a very great joy, different from worldly happiness -- it is the joy of liberation. And when enlightened beings see others they see all the suffering others experience, the contradictions between previous thought and following thought, the constant struggle in their minds, and inevitably give rise to compassion for others.

Now I'd like to ask you to think of your family members, or perhaps your friends. When they experience struggles in their minds, and those struggles manifest in their speech and manner, they may do or say things that are difficult or unpleasant for you, things that cause you to suffer. But if you have been engaging in practice, and are aware that their behavior is the result of their suffering, you will probably not do anything that causes them more suffering, right? You may react, but instead of fighting back and increasing the suffering, you might comfort them, or might find it's best to get out of their way... but you certainly wouldn't want to do anything that causes them more suffering.

As practitioners, we should practice concentrating the mind, and also practice compassion when interacting with others. We should not wait to have the experience of unified mind before treating others with compassion. We should find ways to benefit and to bring joy to every person we come across. To make the other person happy -- that is the practice of compassion.

It's interesting though, that there are some people who are compassionate to everyone else, but harsh on themselves, constantly oppressing themselves, and causing themselves a great deal of suffering. This is because they lack wisdom. It is important to be compassionate with oneself as well with others, to reduce the suffering of others, but also to reduce one's own suffering. Have you met people like that, who are compassionate to others but not to themselves? This is a problem -- often such people will work hard to help others, but eventually, because of their own suffering, they will cause others to suffer more. Without wisdom, it is difficult to practice compassion.

To cultivate wisdom one needs to practice a method. What is the method of practice? Be aware of your breath. Whenever you encounter any stressful situation, or tension, or any form of suffering, simply relax all your muscles and nerves, relax your body, and just put down whatever it is that is stressing you, and go back to enjoying the breath. You just go back to your breath, and say, "Oh, this is so joyful, this breath, and it's so wonderful to be alive and enjoying this breath." As long as you're alive, there are infinite possibilities. And this way you can come to understand that there's no need to suffer. Whatever needs to be done, you simply do it, but it's not necessary to suffer. And if you always practice this way, then it's very possible that this practice can lead to enlightenment.

I'd like to tell you a gongan (koan) that comes as a dialogue between a Chan Master and a monk. One day the monk said to the Master, "I would like to know Buddha." The Master answered that the Buddha is someone who is riding on an ox and also looking for an ox.

Do you understand the meaning of this? You're asking, "What is Buddha?" but you yourself are Buddha. Do you understand?

Then the monk asked the Master, "So what happens after I know of the ox? After I know that I myself am the Buddha?" The Master said, "Then just ride the ox home."

Even after you know you are the Buddha, it doesn't mean that you have returned to the Buddha. Even though you know you are inherently the Buddha, you are still just a baby Buddha -- you haven't completely become the Buddha yet.

Then the monk asked again, "What should one do when one has ridden the ox all the way home?" And the Master replied, "Then, like a herdsman, tend to the ox, so that it doesn't trample over other people's meadows and fields."

Even after enlightenment, one does not become lazy about practice, but continuously cultivates compassion and wisdom so as not to cause harm to oneself or others.

