

influence that is conducive to a democratic civic life. The millions of Buddha's Light Mountain devotees agree that they should help the poor and the weak, and they do not distinguish between deserving and undeserving poor. Devotees also listen sincerely to Hsing Yun's teaching that they should maintain the ecological balance of nature and that "ultimately, when we harm others, we are harming ourselves." However imperfect, their efforts to put such teachings into practice help provide the discipline and the sense of responsibility that make democracy possible.

## Dharma Drum Mountain

### *Transcendent Meaning in a Broken World*

Within days of the earthquake, a black-and-white picture of a thin, bespectacled monk, with thick prayer beads around his neck and head bowed deeply in prayer, started to appear in every sort of media, including full-page ads in the major newspapers and huge billboards along central thoroughfares. The image bore the caption "Get Going Taiwan." The monk was Sheng Yen, the master of Dharma Drum Mountain, who, along with Cheng Yen of Tzu Chi and Hsing Yun of Buddha's Light Mountain, is one of the best-known Buddhist leaders in Asia.

Dharma Drum Mountain has a narrower popular appeal than either Tzu Chi or Buddha's Light Mountain. Its lay membership is nonetheless significant (about three hundred thousand regular followers), its influence is deep, and in crucial ways it pushes Taiwanese political culture further than Tzu Chi and Buddha's Light Mountain toward a global vision of universal significance.

On the second Sunday after the 1999 earthquake, I attended a sutra-preaching session at the Nung Chan Monastery, the center of Dharma Drum Mountain's activities in Taipei. Regular prayer and meditation sessions are held every Sunday at Nung Chan—an adaptation to the day of rest provided in a workweek structured according to the Western calendar. All of the middle-class Buddhist groups that we have studied have adapted the styles of their rituals to Western-structured space and time, but Dharma Drum Mountain seems to have gone even farther than the others, which do not have regular Sunday services.

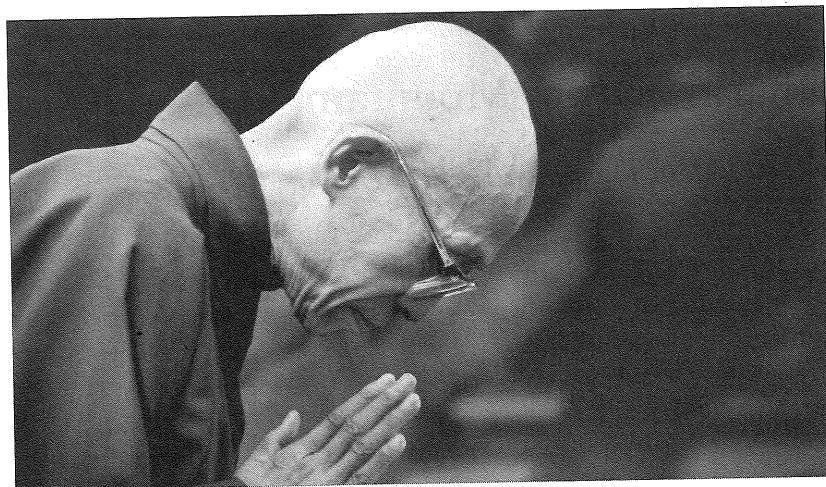


Figure 11. Master Sheng Yen. Photograph courtesy of the Dharma Drum Mountain Buddhist Association.

In its arrangement of space and style of presentation, the event I attended that Sunday seemed more similar to a Protestant service than the other Buddhist ceremonies that I participated in. The worship space was a large, simply furnished room, with sliding glass doors on all sides. There were neat rows of about three hundred steel folding chairs for the congregation. In the front was a simple altar table with large vases of flowers; behind this was a large statue of the Buddha. The ceremonies centered on an exposition of Buddhist scriptures by Sheng Yen.

Each congregant was given a hymn book and a book of sutras. The service began with an a cappella hymn sung by the whole congregation. Then a stately procession of lay devotees in black robes and monks and nuns in grey robes filed in, followed by Master Sheng Yen in a saffron robe. Tall, thin, and wearing large glasses, the Master both looked and talked like a scholar.

When Sheng Yen reached the front of the hall, he bowed deeply to the statue of the Buddha and was helped into a lotus position atop a raised platform facing the congregation. Those who accompanied him in the procession took seats on either side of the sanctuary at the front of the hall. Then he began his exposition of the scriptures.

He had an informal style of preaching, which aimed to engage the congregation as much as possible. He had the congregation open their sutra books to a particular page. "Where did I leave off last time? I think

it was here. It's been a number of weeks since I last preached on the sutras. Something happened during that time. What was it?" Everybody answered, "Earthquake." "Yes, the earthquake. Did you read about Dharma Drum Mountain in the newspapers? How many saw the articles about what Dharma Drum Mountain is doing to respond?" A large show of hands. "We don't have as many resources as other Buddhist organizations. So we're concentrating our resources on what we're best at: cultural work, healing the spirit, counseling, psychological work."

#### GIVING MEANING TO AN UNSETTLED WORLD

Although Dharma Drum Mountain does indeed have fewer material resources than Tzu Chi and Buddha's Light Mountain, it has a proportionately higher level of cultural capital. It is especially attractive to knowledge workers, scholars, teachers, and creative artists—or to those who want to emulate such intellectuals. According to the theory of Mary Douglas, highly intellectual members of the middle classes tend to emphasize a religion of inner experience and "humanist philanthropy" over elaborate rituals. Dharma Drum Mountain exceeds both Tzu Chi and Buddha's Light Mountain in the simplicity of its rituals and the single-mindedness of its quest for individual enlightenment.

Sheng Yen seemed to see his role primarily in terms of alleviating the psychological trauma of the earthquake by providing meaning to a shaken population. "Did you see me on TV?" he asked the congregation. He had been giving television interviews making a case for a positive Buddhist understanding of the disaster. Why had such a terrible thing happened? One explanation from a Buddhist perspective was that the earthquake was the result of bad karma, a consequence of accumulated misdeeds of the Taiwanese people. But that was not the right way to think about it, said Sheng Yen. The earthquake was an opportunity for Taiwanese people to acquire good karma by responding generously to the needs created by this tragedy, and by warning other people in the world about the need to undertake ecologically friendly development that would minimize future earthquake damage. The people who had been killed or injured were not suffering retribution for past sins—they were bodhisattvas whose suffering would warn people about the need to be better prepared for natural disasters in the future. He pressed further his optimistic view of the human condition. He asked the congregation how many bad people they thought there were in the world. One in ten? One in one

hundred? One in one thousand? "I think," he said, "it's no more than one in a thousand."

"Did you see the posters 'Get Going Taiwan?'" Sheng Yen continued. The message of this exhortation, he explained, was that Taiwan would emerge from this terrible crisis strengthened in spirit.

After about forty-five minutes of back-and-forth dialogue about how to respond with a Buddhist spirit to the earthquake, Sheng Yen turned to his exegesis of the day's sutra verses. It was about transformation of light into darkness and vice versa. This led into a fairly abstract and complicated discussion about Buddhist epistemology. Our perceptions about the world were illusions. But there was a distinction between perceptions of "hard realities," like buildings falling down in earthquakes—these were not illusions—and interpretations of the meaning of these realities. The understanding of this earthquake as a disaster was an illusion. One needed spiritual healing to understand this event in a positive light, an understanding that would comfort the afflicted and produce good karma for generations to come.

At the end of his exposition, Sheng Yen announced that this would be his last session of the year. He spends only about a half year in Taiwan. The remainder of the time he is based in New York, either at a Chan (Zen) meditation center in Queens or a retreat center in upstate New York. He also travels frequently around the world. Among other places, he has recently given dharma lectures in Vancouver, Tel Aviv, and Moscow.

Both Tzu Chi and Buddha's Light Mountain have affiliates around the world, yet the roots of these institutions remain deeply embedded in Taiwan. Members of Tzu Chi centers in the United States, for example, often talk about their desire to return to their "spiritual home" at the Abode of Still Thoughts in Hualien. Monks and nuns at the Buddha's Light Mountain temples also look to the main temple in Kaohsiung for guidance. But followers of Sheng Yen in New York do not necessarily look to the temple complex in Taiwan as their spiritual home. The master, after all, spends half of his time in New York. Dharma Drum Mountain represents a cosmopolitan Buddhist space that has broken free from its geographical origins.

It also represents a form of Buddhist practice that pushes beyond its cultural environment. As we have seen, the social ethics of both Tzu Chi and Buddha's Light Mountain are heavily grounded in the Confucian tradition. Tzu Chi members constantly speak of themselves in familistic terms. The pure land that they want to create on earth is like an idealized big family in which the familial relationships that are at the heart

of Confucianism will be purified and expanded to embrace the entire world. The principles for social and political life promulgated by Buddha's Light Mountain are also Confucian, although a Confucianism expanded and enriched by a Buddhist religious vision. As we will see, there are indeed Confucian elements in the teaching and practice of Dharma Drum Mountain. But the prime focus of Dharma Drum Mountain is on Chan practice, which pushes the practitioner beyond conscious thought, beyond distinctions between self and other, and beyond commitment to bounded social institutions. Compared with the other two Buddhist associations we have studied, Dharma Drum Mountain is much more Buddhist than Confucian. It seeks to free the self from illusions of autonomy. But in doing so it paradoxically deepens the practitioner's self-consciousness. It creates an individuated self, separated from traditional attachments to family, ethnic group, or even nation—and then it strives to reintegrate that self with others on the basis of universalistic principles. It provides Taiwan's emerging civil religion with an important thrust toward transcendence.

To more fully understand why and how these qualities of Dharma Drum Mountain have been generated, we need, once again, to look more closely at how they developed.

#### THE CREATION OF DHARMA DRUM MOUNTAIN

The early career of Sheng Yen, the founder of Dharma Drum Mountain, parallels that of Hsing Yun of Buddha's Light Mountain. He was born near Shanghai in 1930 (about four years after Hsing Yun) and sent by his parents, who were too poor to support him, to a monastery at the age of thirteen. The monastic training was similar to Hsing Yun's experience, a harsh routine of strict rules with little attempt to explain the meaning of spiritual practice to the young monks. After two years, he ran away to a Buddhist academy in Shanghai founded by a student of the humanist Buddhist reformer Tai Xu. About three years after that, when the Communists occupied Shanghai, he fled to Taiwan, where he was conscripted into the KMT army.<sup>1</sup>

Here his career path diverged from that of Hsing Yun. He served in the army for about ten years—outside of the framework of Buddhist institutions inhabited by Hsing Yun, who was steadily developing his career as a monastic teacher. Nonetheless, Sheng Yen continued reading the Buddhist scriptures and practicing meditation. In his autobiographical

writing, he describes himself as a “big ball of doubt.” Since his time in the monastery on the Chinese mainland, he had felt a strong desire to follow a Buddhist path, but he had no idea how to do so. “There were many contradictions in Buddhist teaching that I could not resolve. This was very disturbing since I had deep faith in the Buddha’s teachings and believed that the sutras could not be wrong. I was burdened with such questions as ‘What is enlightenment?’ ‘What is Buddhahood?’ Questions like these were very numerous in my mind and I desperately needed to know the answers.”<sup>2</sup>

Finally, in 1959, at the age of twenty-eight, he achieved “the deepest spiritual experience in his life.” In his own words,

I was visiting a monastery in southern Taiwan, where I sometimes lectured. I learned that a famous monk, Ling Yuan, was also visiting. That night we happened to share the same sleeping platform. Seeing that he was meditating instead of sleeping, I sat with him. I was still burdened by my questions and was desperate to have them resolved. He seemed to be quite at ease, with no problems in the world, so I decided to approach him.

He listened patiently as I spoke of my many doubts and problems. In reply, he would just ask, ‘Any more?’ I continued like this for two or three hours. I was extremely agitated and anxious for answers. Finally he sighed and said, ‘Put down!’ He slapped suddenly on the bed, and shouted ‘Put down!’ These words struck me like lightning. My body poured sweat; I felt like I had been instantly cured of a bad cold. I felt a great weight being suddenly lifted from me. It was a very comfortable and soothing feeling. We just sat there, not speaking a word. I was extremely happy. It was one of the most pleasant nights of my life. The next day I continued to experience great happiness. The whole world was fresh, as though I was seeing it for the first time.<sup>3</sup>

For all of its drama, this passage fits a common pattern of Chan enlightenment experiences: years of painful doubt in spite of constant efforts at meditation, and then a sudden insight triggered by an unexpected remark from a master. In itself, having a deep experience of enlightenment does not make one a Buddhist master. The experience must be personally certified by other masters, who then agree to make one a member of their line of dharma transmission. This certification and dharma transmission would not be given until sixteen years later.

First, Sheng Yen had to leave the army and “take on the monk’s robes again.” He undertook training at the Buddhist Culture Center in Peitou, a suburb of Taipei, under Tung-Ch’u, a master who, though “seeking neither fame nor followers,” was “widely known and respected.” As

was common with traditional Chan masters, Tung-Ch’u was a harsh taskmaster.

My stay with him turned out to be one of the most difficult periods of my life. He constantly harassed me . . . For example, after telling me to move my things into one room, he would later tell me to move to another room. Then he would tell me to move back in again. Once, he told me to seal off a door and to open a new one in another wall. I had to haul the bricks by foot from a distant kiln up to the monastery. We normally used a gas stove, but my master often sent me to the mountains to gather a special kind of firewood that he liked to brew his tea over. I would constantly be scolded for cutting the wood too small or too large. I had many experiences of this kind.

In my practice it was much the same. When I asked him how to practice, he would tell me to meditate. But after a few days he would quote a famous master, saying, “You can’t make a mirror by polishing a brick, and you can’t become a Buddha by sitting.” So he ordered me to do prostrations. Then, after several days, he would say, “This is nothing but a dog eating shit off the ground. Read the sutras!” After I read for a couple of weeks, he would scold me again, saying that the patriarchs thought the sutras were good only for cleaning sores. He would say, “You’re smart. Write an essay.” When I showed him an essay he would tear it up saying, “These are all stolen ideas.” Then he would challenge me to use my own wisdom and say original things.<sup>4</sup>

This kind of arbitrary, almost sadistic treatment toward disciples was indeed common among traditional Chan masters. According to Sheng Yen, “Although it was hard to think of his treatment as compassionate, it really was. If I hadn’t been trained with this kind of discipline, I would not have accomplished much. I also realized from him that learning the Buddha dharma was a very vigorous activity, and that one should be self-reliant in practice.”<sup>5</sup>

Only a religious virtuoso could have endured such harsh treatment and found it meaningful. However, in the atmosphere of Taiwan during the late 1950s and early 1960s, such discipline might not have seemed abnormal. This was still a period of heavy-handed military dictatorship, resented by many Taiwanese, but at least partially legitimated by the need to fight the cold war. People—especially low-ranking troops in the army—were used to the experience of submitting to capricious authorities. As Taiwan’s authoritarianism became more routinized in the late 1960s, as an entrepreneurial urban middle class began to form in the 1970s, and as Taiwanese began to absorb messages of individualism through their interaction with the West, such arbitrary discipline would have increasingly

come to be seen as pathological. When he became an established master himself, Sheng Yen would continue to emphasize the need for hard work and self-reliance that he had learned from Tung-ch'u—this, after all, fit the emergent ethos of a cosmopolitan, middle-class society. But he would not impose on others the harsh treatment he had endured from his master. He would rather emphasize the necessity for the hard work of focused study and the discipline of consistent meditation.

After two years with Tung-ch'u, Sheng Yen embarked on a solitary retreat. He lived as a hermit in a hut in the mountains of southern Taiwan. He ate one meal a day, consisting of sweet potato leaves that he cultivated himself. He spent his days reciting sutras, prostrating (going from upright to facedown for hours on end), and meditating. He says that he had originally planned to stay for three years, but he liked it so much that he continued on for six.<sup>6</sup> His time in the wilderness parallels that of Cheng Yen—it was a part of establishing one's credentials as an authentic Buddhist master at that time. But unlike Cheng Yen, who traveled with a companion and later gathered a small band of lay followers, Sheng Yen emphasized self-reliance. Before he embarked on his retreat, his Master Tung-ch'u had told him, "The Master cannot worry over his disciple like a mother. The master just leads the disciple onto the Path; the disciple must walk the Path himself."<sup>7</sup>

After six years, Sheng Yen returned to Taipei, but there wasn't a place for him within the Buddhist establishment there. Thus, he concluded that "to teach Buddha dharma in this age, I needed a modern education and degree. So I made plans to study in Japan." A year later, at the age of thirty-eight, he began doctoral studies in Buddhist literature at Rishso University in Japan and received his LLD in 1975.<sup>8</sup> He has more formal academic education than any other major Buddhist leader in Taiwan.

In 1975, he received formal dharma transmission in the Tsao Tung (Caodong or Soto in Japanese) Chan tradition from his former master Tung-ch'u. In 1978 he received transmission in the other major Chan school, the Lin Chi (Linji or Rinzai in Japanese) tradition, from Ling Yuan, the monk who had inspired his first enlightenment. But in the mid-1970s, there wasn't yet an opportunity for him to become a master of a large temple in Taiwan. The only such opportunity was in the United States, at the Temple of Enlightenment in New York. Even though he couldn't speak English, he became abbot there in 1977. When he expressed misgivings to his Zen teacher in Japan about going to America—"But Master, I don't know English"—his master replied, "Zen doesn't rely on words. Why worry about words?"<sup>9</sup>

In 1978, however, he was back in Taiwan as a professor in the Chinese Culture College (at the time not a fully accredited university) and as president of the Chinese Institute of Buddhist Culture in Taipei, an institute for publishing Buddhist books and magazines that had been founded by his old master, Tung-ch'u, who had died in December 1977.<sup>10</sup> Connected with the Institute of Buddhist Culture was the Nung Chan Monastery, which Tung-ch'u had established in 1975. Like Tung-ch'u himself, the monastery was well respected but somewhat marginal to religious life in Taiwan. It was originally a simple two-story farmhouse, built on land that was not zoned for religious buildings. This was eventually expanded into a six-thousand-square-foot compound.<sup>11</sup> The main worship space was constructed with sliding glass doors on all sides and with a partition that can shut off the Buddhist altar from the rest of the building—so that it could be classified as a shed rather than a temple. The local authorities were willing to tolerate the existence of the monastery partly because it was located in a marginally inhabited district on the outskirts of Taipei.<sup>12</sup> However, new roads (and by the late 1990s, a subway line) provided convenient transportation to the temple. With charismatic leadership under Sheng Yen it was poised to grow.

A major thrust of Sheng Yen's work was to provide advanced education in Buddhist scholarship. He began a graduate program in Buddhist studies at the Chinese Culture College. In 1984, the college received formal accreditation as a university—but because laws discouraging Buddhist activity were still in force at the time, the price of becoming an accredited university was the termination of Sheng Yen's program, which was not purely academic but aimed at training students for advanced religious practice. This led Sheng Yen to reestablish the program in advanced Buddhist studies at the Chinese Institute of Buddhist Culture.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, he expanded the Nung Chan Monastery. His reputation as a highly cultivated Buddhist educator was increasing. This led to a rapid growth in participation in the Nung Chan Monastery's activities after the end of martial law in 1987.

Sheng Yen was also developing Chan practice in New York and gaining an international reputation. A Chan meditation group was established in the late 1970s at the Temple of Enlightenment in New York. As this grew, Sheng Yen moved it to a Chan meditation center in Queens. In the 1980s, he also established the Chan Retreat Center in upstate New York.<sup>14</sup>

After martial law ended in Taiwan, the political restrictions on publicity were abolished; at the same time, advances in information technology provided multiple vehicles for mass communication. Like the

other Buddhist masters discussed in this book, Sheng Yen steadily expanded his reputation through multimedia publicity—books, pamphlets, audio and video tapes, CDs, a regular television program, and multilingual websites. The era of reticent masters like Sheng Yen's mentor, Tung-ch'u, who gained powerful influence while "seeking neither fame nor followers," was over. The future seemed to belong to masters who could ride the tidal wave of the new media.

As Taipei's building boom continued in the 1980s, the marginal land on which the Nung Chan Monastery was located became expensive real estate, and the city government grew less willing to tolerate the presence of an illegally zoned building. To begin to provide a more permanent home for his growing Buddhist community, Sheng Yen acquired a declining temple in 1989 in the mountain valley now called Dharma Drum Mountain, and began efforts to acquire more land for building a major Buddhist center there. It was at this time that all of the institutions directed by Sheng Yen, in both Taiwan and the United States, received the common name Dharma Drum Mountain.

It was also at this time that Sheng Yen began systematically to organize lay volunteers to aid in the development of the organization. Tzu Chi, with its organized commissioners and its networks of supporters throughout Taiwanese society, had shown how effective such lay groups could be in fund-raising and outreach. Under the leadership of Sheng Yen, Dharma Drum Mountain established the Dharmapala Organization to help raise the funds that would be necessary to build a monastic and educational complex at the Dharma Drum Mountain site.

This organization carried out fund-raising meetings. As with Tzu Chi, core supporters were each urged to recruit ten other supporters. They developed a computerized system to identify and keep track of this network of donors and volunteers—by 1999 there were three hundred computers available for this purpose. Volunteers were organized into sixteen groups with specialized functions ranging from hospitality, publicity, security, construction, and environmental cleanup. These groups provide support for the large retreats and other events carried out by Dharma Drum Mountain. The basis for this interlocking set of lay organizations was the large network of followers who attended Sheng Yen's lectures, retreats, and meditation sessions. Now such people were being transformed from disciples into partners and given the resources to shape the future of Dharma Drum Mountain.

Dharma Drum Mountain expanded steadily in Taiwan during the 1990s. By the end of the millennium, it had about three hundred thou-

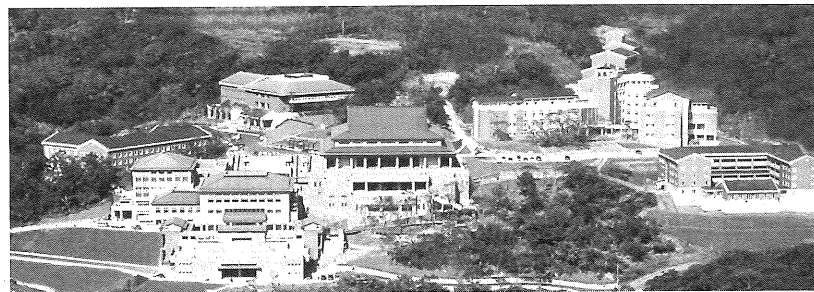


Figure 12. Dharma Drum Mountain. Photograph courtesy of the Dharma Drum Mountain Buddhist Association.

sand lay members, in addition to about one hundred monks and nuns at the Nung Chan Monastery. In the mid-1990s, construction began on the monastery complex on the 120-acre site on Dharma Drum Mountain. The cost of building this complex was about US\$30 million. It now includes a Buddha Hall, a Chan meditation hall, a lecture auditorium, retreat facilities, and a Buddhist university. It was officially opened with a solemn ceremony in October 2005. Meanwhile, the study courses, retreats, books (Sheng Yen himself has published ninety books), magazines, and videos (all of Sheng Yen's dharma talks are televised) of Dharma Drum Mountain have extended its influence well beyond its formal membership.<sup>15</sup>

#### RELIGIOUS VISION

Sheng Yen would say that the primary purpose of all of this building and organizing is education. Cheng Yen and Hsing Yun would say the same of their organizations. But Dharma Drum's education is more academic in emphasis—more about thinking than acting. Although Sheng Yen would insist that the ultimate aim of this education is to produce right attitudes and to lead to an enlightenment that transcends words, he still emphasizes a thoughtful study of Buddhist doctrines, the kind of study that goes beyond learning the content of the doctrines, and enables the student to extend them creatively to new situations. The Chinese Institute of Buddhist Studies has an international faculty and has educated about two hundred graduate students in advanced Buddhist studies. The monks and nuns in Sheng Yen's monastery tend to enter with higher levels of education than those of Cheng Yen's Abode of Still Thoughts and Hsing Yun's Buddha's Light Mountain. The nun who arranged my

visits to Dharma Drum Mountain had a PhD in economics from a top-tier American university. Sheng Yen, like Hsing Yun, has arranged for many of his monastics to study for higher degrees abroad. Several were studying at Yale University at the time I did my research. By encouraging this higher education, Sheng Yen encourages the monastics to think for themselves, even to question the master. Lay followers I interviewed also seemed more willing and able to think originally about the religious basis of their commitments—not just (as in the case of many Tzu Chi volunteers) to think creatively about the practical means of carrying out their work.

Nonetheless, the speeches and writings of Sheng Yen remain the primary source of Dharma Drum Mountain's vision. At the heart of the vision is the practice of Chan. According to Sheng Yen:

Chan is often referred to as the "gateless gate." The gate is both a method of practice and a path to liberation; this gate is "gateless," however, in that Chan does not rely on any specific method to help a practitioner achieve liberation. The methodless method is the highest method. So long as the practitioner can drop the self-centered mind, the gateway into Chan will open naturally.

The primary obstacle to attaining wisdom is attachment to the self. When you face people, things, and situations, the notion of "I" arises immediately within you. When you attach to this "I," you categorize and judge everything else accordingly: "This is mine; that is not. This is good for me; that is not. I like this; I hate that." Attachment to the idea of self makes true clarity impossible.

But how might we define non-attachment? According to Chan, non-attachment means that when you face circumstances and deal with other people, there is no "I" in relation to whatever may appear in front of you. Things are as they are, vivid and clear. You can respond appropriately and give whatever is needed. Clear awareness of things as they are, in this state of selflessness, is what Chan calls wisdom. Giving what others may need with no thought of the self is what Chan calls compassion. Wisdom and compassion describe the awareness and function of the enlightened mind. In Chan, these two cannot be separated, and both depend on putting down the attachment to the self.<sup>16</sup>

The way to shedding oneself of such attachments is to practice meditation, achieved with the help of exercises to concentrate the attention and to control one's breathing. Beyond this, one tries to transcend one's thoughts.

Transcending your thoughts . . . is a method that consists of maintaining the attitude of non-involvement with yourself or others. The goal of this method is roughly described as a phrase that translates as, "Be separate,

or free, from the mind, from thoughts, and from consciousness." To be free from all of this is to be in a state of enlightenment. In such freedom of mind it might be said that we see the world.

No matter what method you choose, you must remember that when we practice in the Chan tradition, we refrain from using words and speech. . . . Nonetheless, you will notice that Chan masters talk a lot. They sometimes write a lot too. But the import of what we talk or write about is to convey that whatever you think or say is wrong. That is the content of all my talks. No words or description will suffice to describe a state of realization. Anyone who attempted to describe such a state would be considered by a Chan master to be a smart devil, not an awakened being.<sup>17</sup>

Sheng Yen does indeed write a lot, but at the core of his teaching is a demand that his followers transcend his words. Each individual must follow his or her own path. This helps to create an open, evolving community of individuals who think freely yet are committed to connecting compassionately with one another—a community with at least the beginnings of a democratic ethos.

This outlook drives Sheng Yen toward quite radical pronouncements about current cultural and political problems. To worries about the "clash of civilizations" he proposes a basis for tolerance and cooperation between opposing faiths.

When people maintain what they believe is the best religion in the world, they should not forget that others also have the right to say that their faith is the best. . . . Therefore, I would like to make a sincere proposal: if you find that the doctrines of your faith contain something that is intolerant of the other groups, or in contradiction with the promotion of world peace, then you should make new interpretations of these relevant doctrines. Why? Because every wholesome religion should get along peacefully with other groups so that it can, step by step, influence humankind on earth to stay far away from the causes of war.<sup>18</sup>

In a speech delivered nine days after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Sheng Yen pushed further his insistence on simultaneously respecting and relativizing all religions.

Once on an airplane, I was sitting right next to a Christian missionary who was piously reading the Bible and praying. Seeing that I had nothing to do, he gave me a Bible and showed me how to read it. I praised his good intentions and enthusiasm, and agreed with his statement that Christianity is the only religion through which one can attain salvation. He immediately asked me, "If this is the case, why are you a Buddhist monk? Isn't that a pity?" I said, "I'm sorry, but for me, Buddhism is most suitable. So I would say that Buddhism is the best religion."<sup>19</sup>

Sheng Yen's position is that all religions are part of a single ultimate reality that is expressed in different ways in different religions, a position that will not be acceptable for a fundamentalist monotheist, but which has a strong foundation in the Chan tradition.

Adding a touch of sociology to a classical Buddhist analysis, he distinguishes between a culturally relative "sacred" and the ultimate truth.<sup>20</sup>

The definition of the "sacred" varies according to time, place, and individual. This is something we must be aware of in a modern, pluralistic, and globalized society. . . . The supreme truth revered by every religion should be absolute and flawless. It is definitely sacred. But once secular elements and outside agendas are incorporated into the interpretation, it becomes a subjective notion and thus generates diversity. For example, the theory of causes and conditions is the utmost sacred in Buddhism. But we do not deny the value of monotheism. While we neither identify with nor accept monotheism, we can understand and respect it. We acknowledge that all virtuous religions have room for continuous development and also have the right to proclaim themselves to be the world's best religion. Likewise, I myself would say that Buddhism is the best religion.<sup>21</sup>

Such thinking makes sense from a Chan perspective that holds that mere words and concepts can never express the ultimate truth.

The days of monocultural societies are long gone and will not return again; and fortunately so, otherwise the destiny of humanity would be a very tragic one! Therefore, I would like to make this appeal here for all humanity: humankind must understand that the notion of *sacred* is interpreted differently in a multicultural pluralistic world, and that we should strive to seek for harmony. Such harmony is not to be found in dogmatic homogenization or elimination of difference. It can only come through a grassroots discovery of commonality within difference, and difference within commonality.<sup>22</sup>

For Sheng Yen, this leads to a strongly held conviction that all divisions between nations, ethnic groups, and even families must be transcended. "In an open society, one may find several different faiths even within a family. We must respect, even support, each other's choices with an attitude of appreciation, and should never criticize other faiths based on our own subjective standpoint. We should cooperate to create a harmonious, peaceful, happy, and warm community in which to live."<sup>23</sup>

When applying this vision to the practical problems of global conflict, Sheng Yen combines pacifist idealism with a resigned realism. In an interview given soon after the attacks of September 11, 2001, he stressed that the best response would be nonviolent. Yet he notes that "it is well

recognized that under such attack the U.S. could not possibly just endure without retribution." Nor is he against all use of force. "The non-violent approach Buddhists take is not weakness without the backing of strong force. We are in favor of deterring the rogues with strong military backup and then steering them to the right path."<sup>24</sup>

In general, however, he is in favor of positive measures to alleviate the poverty that breeds international resentment and to build bridges of cross-cultural understanding. Moreover, he calls on "all people of love and wisdom, to employ all means and approaches to actively interact with, understand, and empathize with every ethnic group, region and individual who is prone to terrorism." And he advises "all religious and spiritual leaders that while they should pay attention to politics, they should not harbor ambitions in politics. Furthermore, they should warn their followers not to be provoked, manipulated, and controlled by politicians and become their tools."<sup>25</sup>

After the United States invaded Iraq, Sheng Yen declared "As a religious teacher, I do not support any kind of war." He prayed that the war end soon with minimal death and destruction, and he pledged to use the resources of Dharma Drum Mountain to help reconstruct Iraq. Like their response to the Taiwan earthquake, Dharma Drum Mountain's aid to Iraq mostly took the form of "calming and easing the minds of the people."<sup>26</sup>

The other Buddhist leaders we have studied in this book have not engaged as much as Sheng Yen in global dialogues about issues of terrorism and war, and their statements are not as directly challenging to hegemonic ideologies. Cheng Yen is focused more on the practical means to relieve the suffering caused by wars. Hsing Yun said that "all religions endorse peace but sometimes peace is attained through force. War is a means of last resort and can be transformed into a force for compassion. In fact there are other means that can be employed besides war. For example, compassionate persuasion, wise guidance, the censure of public opinion, and restrictions on travel. . . . Only by overcoming violence with compassion can permanent peace be achieved."<sup>27</sup> It is not that these other two Buddhist leaders would have major substantive disagreements with Sheng Yen, but the style of their responses is more practical or diplomatic than intellectual.

As such, their approaches embed them more deeply in the Confucian ethic of compromise than does the intellectualism of Sheng Yen. The practical concerns of Hsing Yun and Cheng Yen work hard not to offend anyone. The intellectualism of Sheng Yen pushes him toward a vision that is



somewhat more challenging to the Confucian ethics or the nationalist sentiments that shape Taiwan's political culture.

#### THE EXPERIENCE OF PRACTITIONERS

But how deeply does Sheng Yen's vision affect his lay followers? Besides having a number of casual conversations with participants on a daylong bus excursion to the Dharma Drum Mountain site outside of Taipei, I interviewed five active volunteers, including the head of the Dharmapala Organization. Although most of them had read or listened to many of Sheng Yen's teachings, they did not cite these teachings very much, and they did not attempt to apply the teachings directly to practical life circumstances. They talked instead about the experience of being a part of Dharma Drum Mountain.

They talked first and foremost about the effects of the experience on their personal lives and then on its effects on their social relationships. According to those I interviewed, they joined Dharma Drum Mountain to resolve personal difficulties, not to propagate Sheng Yen's broader pronouncements on social morality and world peace. Their personal difficulties were not of the dramatic kind that one sees in Tzu Chi testimonials; most of them had stable families and successful professional careers: radio broadcaster, dentist, teacher, lawyer. They had not encountered major life crises but had felt harried by the pressures of life and dissatisfied by the superficiality of consumer culture. Dharma Drum Mountain had attracted them because of its emphasis on Chan meditation. Some said that they had started practicing Chan because they thought it would be good for their health. They also saw their involvement with Dharma Drum Mountain as a good education, and they had been impressed with the quality of Sheng Yen's books. As they participated in Chan sessions and in educational sessions, they were gradually recruited into one of Dharma Drum Mountain's volunteer groups, eventually participated in its retreats, and then took refuge at the monastery. They spoke of their embrace of Buddhism as a slow process rather than a dramatic conversion. "Before I became involved with Dharma Drum Mountain," one of them said, "I started every day by looking at the newspapers about where to go for entertainment and shopping." She was encouraged by a monk to volunteer for one of Dharma Drum Mountain's service groups and her life slowly became more meaningful and happy. "What I learned, I slowly gave to other people."

Many of them then developed what a Westerner might call an evangelical attitude. "My main goal is to share this harmony and happiness." But it was not a kind of proselytizing that put them in sharp conflict with the world. It was based on a desire to improve the lives of others, not rescue them from damnation. Although the lay followers claimed that their outlook on life had changed, they did not want to disrupt their primary social relationships. "After I took the bodhisattva vows," said one woman, "my husband took a look at a copy of them—and he wouldn't speak to me for a week. But then he saw that I didn't neglect to cook for him and take care of him. I would go out to practice meditation after he left for work in the morning and be back before he returned home. Then he accepted me." She thought that her Chan practice made her a better wife. The lay followers in Taiwan thus were more inclined to transform themselves so as to better adapt to the world, rather than to attempt to change the world.

The world was first of all a Confucian social sphere based on idealized families. Indeed, like Tzu Chi and Buddha's Light Mountain, Dharma Drum Mountain begins its pedagogy by stressing traditional Confucian conceptions of mutual responsibility within the family. At a day of retreat for parents and adolescent children that I attended in 2005, the emphasis was on getting children to appreciate and express gratitude for the sacrifices that their parents had made for them. But then they were told to appreciate the importance of this interdependence in all realms of life. After a string quartet played a piece of classical Western music, there was a sermon by a young layman, who explained that "Buddhism is like music." It requires that different people work together to produce harmony. Even though the people in this string quartet weren't from the same family, they came together to make beautiful music.

The Dharma Drum Mountain way of understanding such social interdependence, however, also pushes them to cultivate a deeper sense of their individuality. Although his followers had enormous respect for Sheng Yen—attributing to him an almost supernatural wisdom—they seemed to rely on their own informed consciences when presented with problems rather than rigidly seeking to apply the Master's teachings. When I asked doctors at the Tzu Chi medical center if they allowed animal experimentation, they replied that their Master had told them that it was acceptable. When presented with a question at Dharma Drum Mountain, a dentist said that the problem was very complicated, there were many angles to the dharma, and since he wasn't a fully enlightened Buddhist he could not be sure of the right answer.

Thus, participation in Dharma Drum Mountain's activities brings with it a certain kind of powerful experience: the experience of a slow, steady cultivation of the self through Chan practice; an experience of developing a deep sense of self, even as it stresses that the self is an illusion. This emphasis on self-consciousness was apparent in a dialogue session attended by fifteen hundred people in Taipei between Sheng Yen and one of his celebrity disciples, the martial arts movie star Jet Li. Jet Li credited Buddhism for giving him the "wisdom and strength to break the bond of fame that has tied him down for many years." Asked by Sheng Yen to give advice to the audience, Jet Li said, "The one big problem with human beings is that we blame everybody and everything else for our problems, but never reflect upon ourselves."<sup>28</sup>

Such self-consciousness could isolate practitioners in narcissistic self-absorption, but Dharma Drum tries to avoid this by linking self-cultivation with participation in a well-ordered group life within Dharma Drum Mountain's web of voluntary associations, which pull the practitioner out of the matrix of familial and national bonds and into an international community of practitioners.

In the end, Dharma Drum Mountain cultivates a kind of disciplined detachment coupled with a sense of impersonal connection with everything. Such a state of being was symbolized in the walking meditation I participated in at the Nung Chan Monastery in December 1999.

About two hundred of us dressed in black robes stood in a large simple room lit only by dim natural light. We began by prostrating ourselves a hundred times (which was like doing calisthenics) while reciting the name of Buddha. Then a procession formed in which we walked two-by-two back and forth within the room, while continuing to recite the Buddha's name. We began at a normal walking pace, but gradually the person leading the procession began to slow down, until finally we were walking no faster than a snail. The mind, though wishing to move forward, was gradually focused into the present. The procession finally ended with everyone back at their original places. Sitting in the lotus position in near darkness, we began chanting faster and faster. The effect was hypnotic. Everything melded together, and we seemed to become one extended self.

It was a powerful lesson on Buddhist emptiness—the individual self as an illusion, the true reality of the world subsisting in our interconnection. At the same time, such practices lead the individual's consciousness to become intensely focused. It is perhaps a consciousness particularly suited to modern middle-class life in Taiwan's knowledge-intensive industries,

in which individuals have to take initiative for thinking through problems while being acutely aware that they are part of a collective enterprise.

Although Sheng Yen is from mainland China, his followers in Taiwan reflect the ethnic composition of the island as a whole; that is, they are mostly Taiwanese. Yet like cosmopolitan knowledge workers everywhere, they see themselves as global citizens as much as Chinese or Taiwanese nationals. Sheng Yen takes no formal position on cross-strait relations, and Dharma Drum Mountain, like Tzu Chi, resolutely stays out of partisan politics. Yet the practice cultivated there among influential professional elites may contribute an important measure of calm objectivity into Taiwan's raucous political debates.