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# **The Essence of Chan**

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Written by Venerable Master Hsing Yun

Translated by Amy Lam

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Translated by  
Amy Lam

Edited and proofread by  
Venerable Yi Chao, Louvenia Ortega

Cover design and book layout by  
Mei-Chi Shih and Wan Kah Ong

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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 has captured attention and interest in 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 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

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quiet contemplation. Originating in India, legend has it that during an assembly on Vulture Peak (Grdhrakuta), the Buddha picked up a flower and held it up to the assembly without saying a word. The millions of celestial 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 our “mind.” This mind is not the one that discriminates and recognizes 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 very 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.

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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? When applied to everyday living, Chan adds colors. It expands our minds, enriches our lives, elevates our characters, helps us to perfect our morality, and leads us to the 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. Have and Have Not**

We are accustomed to thinking that all existence 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 usually

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think that “have” and “have not” are two opposing concepts: if one “has,” then he/she cannot be in a state of “not having”; if one “has not,” then he/she cannot be in a state of “having.” To them, “have” and “have not” cannot coexist. The speech and behavior of Chan masters transcend the ordinary concepts of “have” and “have not,” embracing both of these seemingly opposing concepts and reaching a higher level of “have” and “have not.” Their view is different from that of ordinary people; if we use our customary approach to such a way of thinking, we will fail to truly understand the Chan masters.

When the Fifth Patriarch wanted to pass on the robe and bowl, symbols of the Dharma, to a successor, he told each of his disciples to write a verse by which he could decide who among them had realized Truth. The robe and bowl would only be passed on to the one who had realized Truth, and that person would become the Sixth Patriarch. His eldest 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.*

After seeing the verse, everyone praised Shenxiu, saying that his state of mind was indeed superior. The Fifth Patriarch thought otherwise and said, “Not

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bad, but the writer of this verse has not yet seen 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 dharmas and had entered the Buddha’s path. So he passed on the robe and bowl of the Chan School lineage to Huineng, who went on to become the Sixth Patriarch.

Everyone in the monastery had expected that Shenxiu would surely become the Sixth Patriarch as he had a good grasp of the principles of Chan, was the headmaster among the disciples of the Fifth Patriarch, and the Fifth Patriarch had also instructed the other disciples to practice according to Shenxiu’s verse. Instead, the Fifth Patriarch chose Huineng, whom nobody had heard of before, as his successor. Although Shenxiu had attained a high state of cultivation, he was still confined to the mind of “having,” and his understanding of Chan was not yet supreme. The ultimate path is one that integrates

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“have” with emptiness (sunyata). This is the difference between the Chan mind and the ordinary mind. It is only when we can transcend “have” and “have not” 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 and was not limited to any particular school. Chan is not at all restricted by space.

Someone 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 of becoming Buddhas. When he said “no,” he meant that dogs have not become

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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. Actually, 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.

Ordinarily, we perceive and differentiate things through our senses. For example, when we look at a mountain or a river, we see it only as a mountain or a river. After we start practicing Chan, we begin to realize that all existence is illusive. At this point,

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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 relative boundary of “have” and “have not” is destroyed.

## **II. Motion and Motionlessness**

The basic doctrine of Buddhism is the Three Dharma Seals, which says that “All samskaras (composite things) are impermanent”; “All dharmas do not have a substantial self”; and “Nirvana is perfect peace.” The ultimate goal of studying Buddhism is to attain the state of perfect peace, nirvana.

This “perfect peace” is different from the ordinary concept of motionlessness. In our everyday life, when we say that a certain object is in motion and another object is motionless, it is due to the action of our mind. All phenomena are created by our mind. Actually, phenomena themselves do not make the distinction of being in motion or being motionless. What makes the distinction of being is the clinging in our minds that is caused by delusion. If we can free

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ourselves from this clinging, our minds 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 he started 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 in motion." 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." In the meantime, Huineng listened patiently to their 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 dwell on the superficial appearance of phenomena. After all, phenomena exist in a transient and fragmented manner. Differentiation arises in our minds because of the stirring of our thoughts. When our minds are tranquil, objects are not capable of making distinctions on their own. However, when our minds are stirred, we differentiate phenomena, causing distinction and separation between others and ourselves. Therefore, the key to realizing the state wherein motion and motionlessness are in harmony

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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. Xianzong 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 was not very civilized at that time. However, a well-educated and highly cultivated monk called Chan Master Dadian was living there. He was highly respected by the local people.

Being a highly educated Confucian scholar, Han Yu was very proud of himself and, of course, 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,

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“First, influence through meditative concentration, then eradicate arrogance through wisdom.”

This was said to the Chan master but, in fact, it was meant for 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, motion and motionlessness 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 motion and motionlessness are two distinct states. However, motion and motionlessness 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. This is a correct assessment from an intellectual point of view; 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 religious practice of Buddhism. To a true Buddhist, to carry on intellectual discussions of Buddhism in the absence of practice is only 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 emphasized. In the Chan School, what is important is experience from actual practice, and not a reliance on 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 Buddhist sutras serve as a compass for guiding us toward truth. After we understand them, we need to practice accordingly

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in order to taste the sweet dew of the Dharma for ourselves. The following saying reminds us that practicing is “like drinking water—only you will know for yourself 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 community of the sangha 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, waking, sleeping, and even going to the bathroom.

The beginning of the *Diamond Sutra* describes how the Buddha led a life of prajna 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 it 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

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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 existing phenomena of this universe arise 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 requisite efforts.

From the teaching of dependent origination, we can infer that all beings are equal and have the Buddha Nature. All beings have the potential of becoming 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.

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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 and not be centered on ourselves.

#### **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 makes 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” and deluded by the outward appearance of all phenomena, preventing the pure nature of all dharmas from being seen. The minds of realized Chan masters are pure and unobstructed. Their minds are the Buddha Mind, 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.

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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 compare himself to 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.

One day, Chan Master Ikkyu went out with his disciple. They came to the shore of a river where a woman stood, hesitating 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

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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 indiscriminating. 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**

We have discussed Chan at length today. 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.

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### 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. Without 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<sup>1</sup> and huatou<sup>2</sup> are devised to arouse the doubts of the Chan practitioner; for example, “What was one’s original face before being given birth by one’s parents?”; “Do dogs have the 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 ask,

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1. Stories of the teachings of prominent Chan masters.

2. A word or sentence used as a tool for cultivation in Chan.

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“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 not me?”; “If the mouth is me, then is the body that prostrates 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!