



Inspiration from 2007 Huayen Chan Retreat

Neng Xiu – Mississauga Meditation Class, Toronto Chapter

The Huayen Chan Retreat was held at the pleasant Emrich Retreat Center in Brighton, Michigan. This marvelous property consists of 26 acres of beautiful, diverse land and several simple buildings.

The spring weather was gorgeous, sunny and warm with a gentle breeze. I could smell the freshness of the grass as if the gardener had just mowed the lawn. I was amazed by my discernment of the beauty of the courtyard - the vast blue sky, the green meadows and especially those big flourishing trees. Mother Nature seemed supportive and inviting, as if she were embracing us all. Could this be what HeShang had been teaching all along - to sense the “Existence of Living”?

Most Chan activities were held indoors in the meditation hall. However, there were also some outdoor walking and sitting meditation sessions. The retreat programs were all rich in content, with activities such as yoga, warm-up exercises, meditation, presentation/lectures, and drinking-tea Chan. There are many rules and regulations to follow, including noble silence; punctuality for all activities, sessions, and meals; and even the use of washroom at designated times. These rules are there to make the retreat more interesting and challenging. Despite all of the restrictions of body and mind, I found myself very relaxed and engaged in the activities, people and the environment. I deeply felt contentment and peacefulness within me. It was far more joyous than taking a cruise vacation. How magnificent to find out that life could be so tranquil and soothing, original and simple and yet very enjoyable!

During the first three days of my sitting meditation at the retreat, I found it extremely hard to concentrate. I felt pain in my legs and knees. I was very sleepy and would just doze off within minutes. Shortly after dozing off, I would wake up with a startle, and feel totally lost. This unpleasant process could easily repeat itself a few times during one meditation session.

I was disappointed in myself - this was my second retreat, and yet the problem with pain had escalated. What had happened to my ability to focus? My first retreat was in Vancouver in April 2006, in which I made it through with less challenges. I was surprised that the training assistants monitoring the session did not catch my drowsiness. This type of behavior usually warranted a hit with the incense board (plank). However, I could not tolerate my behavior any longer and decided to do something to put an end to it.

That evening I told Mary, one of the training assistants from Taiwan, about my situation. She acknowledged my lethargy and asked gently: “Are you willing to accept being struck by the incense board?” “Yes”, I replied. As soon as she asked the question, there was a voice inside me that whispered: “you’re asking for a

strike...” Fortunately, I heard myself uttering the word “yes” promptly, leaving my unfinished thought behind. Well, since I agreed to it, I should be well prepared for whatever would happen.

If one has been dozing off during meditation and has been hit by an incense board, one will have experienced its impact. It is not just a wake-up strike, it is a warning that one’s mind is weak, unable to focus, one’s body is fatigued and one’s energy level is low... what a loser! One may feel embarrassed or even humiliated - like a child being punished by the teacher. The moment the board contacts “My” body I suffer the pain. I am the center of attention. What have I done? Why me? Does my action warrant the strike? My pride is choking me. I have disturbed others... Hundreds of thoughts will go through the mind in that split second. The reactions of the “SELF” are manifested. The emotions in that instant will be very difficult to swallow. But I was willing to be responsible for my actions, knowing that I needed the warning to remind myself that my mind has wandered off, to tighten my concentration and to surpass my weakness. That transcendence is necessary and is all worth it. With this realization in mind, I had an unexpectedly good night’s sleep.

The following morning (4th day) we had outdoor walking and sitting meditations. I was very refreshed. During the walking meditation, I was able to concentrate on my walking movement and observe my breathing. Then came the sitting meditation. It was my best session during the entire retreat. I remembered to apply the “Rules of Golden Triangle” which HeShang had taught us earlier – Relax the body, Focus the mind and Observe the breathing. I managed to relax both body and mind, to stay focused and to observe each breath. From then on, my drowsiness during meditation disappeared for the rest of the retreat. This inspiration is a small experience of what it is like to transcend from the Samsara realm of Suffering to the realm of Uttermost Joy.

I was blessed to have the opportunity to participate in this retreat. Throughout the retreat, I was appreciative of HeShang (Venerable Haiyun Jimeng), Master Pu-Kuan, all the Dharma brothers and sisters, the facility, the environment, the dust, and everything...everything within or out of my reach.

This remarkable experience is priceless and I wish everyone would be able to attend the next retreat!

