



Huayen Chan

Translated by Dr. Tony Prince (Lungnan) of Australia

The origins of Chan can be traced back to ancient India, to the time when Sakyamuni Buddha held up a flower at the assembly on Vulture Peak and smiled. The Dharma he transmitted then has been passed down through the centuries, until now it has spread to almost every country in the world. All the turmoil and complexity of modern society leaves people with no chance to find peace in their hearts, so many have turned to the practice of Chan in an attempt to overcome their restlessness of body and mind.

In the course of time a great many religious traditions of both East and West have developed methods of practicing meditation. In the thousand-year transmission of Chan also there have been more enlightened masters and great teachers than one could count; but is the true significance of what they accomplished adequately described by the word 'meditation'?

Generally speaking, Chan should be based on the practice of meditation, but many people also see it as having some connection with the acquisition of psychic powers, the cultivation of *chigung* (*qigong*) and so on. In fact none of these phenomena have anything to do with Chan itself: they may sometimes occur as a side-effect of Chan practice, or they may even be quite incompatible with Chan.

In order to practice Chan properly one must understand its purpose, and this is especially true of Huayen Chan. Huayen Chan is also referred to as 'Huayen tranquility (*shamatha*) and insight (*vipashyana*)', or as the 'threefold contemplation of the Dharma realm'. Contemplation of the Dharma realm (*dharmadhātu*) by means of three levels of tranquility and insight is the ultimate goal of Huayen Chan. The practice of Chan is commonly understood to mean cultivating the four absorptions and the eight concentrations in order to achieve unimpaired wisdom and break free of the cycle of birth and death. For Huayen Chan however this still remains within the realm of tranquility (*shamatha*) rather than that of true insight (*vipashyana*).

According to the Huayen teachings there are three levels of tranquility and three of insight, as follows:

- the tranquility of emptiness beyond phenomenal attributes
- unimpeded tranquility in the nonduality of appearances and reality
- all-pervasive and all-encompassing tranquility
- insight into emptiness beyond phenomenal attributes
- unimpeded insight into the nonduality of appearances and reality
- all-pervasive and all-encompassing insight

These levels are not meant to be cultivated in any particular sequence. Different individuals will approach them in different ways according to their own temperaments, but in one way or another all six must eventually be completed.

What these six levels imply is that it is not enough to simply escape from the threefold realm (*trailokyadhātu*) of samsara: we must also be able to apply our wisdom skillfully and engage directly with the endless and inexhaustible flow of life. Of course, the practice of ordinary Chan is also capable of leading us in the same direction, but as a rule the development of this capacity is left to the temperament and ability of the individual practitioner, whereas for Huayen Chan it is emphasized as an essential part of the practice. This is because Huayen is based on the path and practice of a bodhisattva, so after realizing the truth of emptiness (*shunyata*), one must continue to develop one's practice along these lines. For Huayen Chan the ultimate task is to achieve all-pervasive and all-encompassing insight, and in order to do this we must keep deepening our tranquility meditation and increasing the clarity of our insight.

At the basic level, training in Huayen Chan is no different from that of ordinary Chan. In both cases one's aim is to experience the 'basic flavor' of Chan by counting the breaths and focusing the mind on the flow of breath through the nostrils in order to give rise to insight. It is not necessary to proceed through all the four foundations of mindfulness and the sixteen extraordinary contemplations, although these may also be useful as a support for one's practice, but the real key to Huayen Chan lies in 'emptiness beyond all attributes'. By training in accordance with this principle, the practitioner can shatter all attachments, transcend time and space, break through the limitations of the first stages of meditation and advance steadily towards the ultimate goal. But in order to accomplish this, practitioners must have a clear understanding of the basic discipline and requirements of Chan, for otherwise they may go astray. Here therefore we will briefly explain how Huayen Chan should be practiced.

The path of spiritual development leading to the practice of Huayen Chan can be divided into several stages, as follows:

1. Performing good deeds at the worldly level. Practice at this level requires a healthy mind and personality.
2. Non-Buddhist meditation. This presupposes the performance of good deeds and so is said to be conjoined with worldly virtues.
3. Meditation according to the practice of the Two Vehicles (of the Disciples and the Solitary Buddhas). This is based on methods common to Buddhist and non-Buddhist traditions.
4. Meditation according to the Mahayana. This includes the meditation techniques of the Two Vehicles.
5. Huayen Chan meditation. This includes Mahayanist methods of meditation.

Huayen Chan therefore encompasses all the various methods of worldly and non-Buddhist meditation, of the Two Vehicles and of the Mahayana. In addition there are specifically Huayen practices, also referred to as the 'distinctive practices of the Universal Vehicle'.

The practice of Mahayana Buddhism requires the use of the mind, but for Huayen it is essential to understand how to apply your mind correctly. In its emphasis on the mind, the Mahayana goes beyond the teachings of the Two Vehicles, but in its skilful use of the mind, Huayen surpasses the Mahayana. What is meant here by knowing how to apply your mind correctly or skillfully is a certain kind of flexibility. For example, when practicing mindfulness of breathing by observing the flow of the breath in and out of the body, if one simply counts the breaths from one to ten and back again, this corresponds to meditation according to the Two Vehicles. But if at the same time one cultivates awareness of the effect on the body of the alternation between inhalation and exhalation, then the mind is being used in a skilful or flexible manner.

Direct contemplation of the mind and its functioning is also a typical Mahayanist practice. But if, in our dealings with people and affairs, we can be aware of the nature and functioning of the minds of other beings, and then use that awareness to reflect simultaneously on the working of our own mind, in that case we can be said to be using our minds skillfully, in a truly clear-sighted and comprehensive way. Such awareness is much broader in scope than anything we can achieve by focusing on our own mind alone. So tempering and perfecting the mind through worldly experience is also said to be a distinctive feature of the practice of Huayen Chan.

I. Preliminaries

Huayen practice should be lively and wide-ranging, but most practitioners need to proceed step by step at first until they have found a secure footing, for only then will they be able to step out onto the main road of real practice. If we are constantly thinking about the result of our practice and neglect to cultivate the causes, we will achieve no more than a fortunate rebirth, either in this world or in a heavenly realm.

In Chan the mind itself is considered to be the essence (*ti*) of the practice, the method of meditation used is the outward form (*hsiang*) and the effectiveness of the practice is the function (*yung*). The essence is beyond words, but words are needed to explain the outward form. As for the function, this depends on the practitioner's insight into the essential nature of the mind and is ultimately known only to the buddhas themselves.

When working with the mind one must not be deceived by notions of magically acquired powers or sudden Enlightenment: nothing can be achieved without making a real effort and searching diligently for an understanding of the mind's true nature, of the scope of its activities and of the process by which it becomes spiritually mature. Only then will the practitioner be able to employ the mind as a means by which to realize the Dharmakaya. If one fails to commit oneself wholeheartedly to discovering the truth in this way, one's cultivation of the mind will remain at the level of 'verbal Chan', fine-sounding words divorced from real experience.

Because there are so many different ways of approaching Chan, the whole realm of Chan can appear to be somewhat complicated and confusing. This is not the fault of Chan itself but rather springs directly from the nature of life and is not something that our rational intelligence can readily comprehend. So although the various explanations of Chan that have been given from various points of view may often seem to be quite different from one another, there is not necessarily any real conflict or contradiction between them.

In this kind of situation practitioners who genuinely want to make progress must conduct their own spiritual investigation and try to find out where the truth lies. Great masters of the past endured many hardships and experienced much suffering through precisely such a process of trial and error. All this represents the price we must pay in the course of our spiritual quest if we are to realize the true meaning and value of life. Once we have found what we are looking for and know exactly where we stand, we will be able to put forth real effort and embark on the stage of authentic practice.

II. The Actual Practice

The actual practice of Huayen Chan requires the ability to apply certain techniques in a concrete and specific manner. In general the practice of Chan involves contemplation of the mind. In what is called Mahayana Chan one begins in fact by engaging directly with the nature of the mind, so it is important that one should already have a clear understanding of the essence (*ti*), qualities (*hsiang*) and activities (*yung*) of the mind, and of the mind as both subject and object, when one embarks on the stage of investigation and inquiry, for only then will one be able to practise effectively.

There are two ways of approaching the practice of contemplating the mind. One is called 'recollecting the mind' and is the characteristic method of Mahayana Chan; and the other is called 'employing the mind' and is the characteristic method of Huayen Chan. In the first case one focuses on the essence, qualities and activities of the three aspects of mind (i.e. the contemplating mind, the contemplated mind and the mind of realization), while maintaining intuitive awareness of their fundamental unity. It goes without saying that this is a very concrete method of practice, and many historical records and traditional case studies testify to its effectiveness in a way that discerning people can easily understand. Historical examples of Chan masters 'employing the mind' are also quite numerous, but they can be easily overlooked even by people with discernment.

Employment of the mind in the above sense refers to the ability to understand the nature and functioning of the mind of sentient beings through active engagement with society, by observing phenomena as they arise in the course of one's daily life or work. Practitioners who know how to be aware of other beings in this way will be able to use that knowledge to reflect on the nature and functioning of their own mind and will perceive their own blind spots clearly. Having gained this awareness they can then proceed to apply their insights to the subjective and objective mind according to the methods of 'recollecting the mind'. In this way they will be able to recollect, train, discipline and mature not only their own mind but also the minds of all sentient beings. This is

a distinctive feature of the practice of Huayen Chan.

Through the practice of either Mahayana Chan or Huayen Chan one can become a 'teacher of gods and men' like the Buddha, put an end to the cycle of birth and death, transcend the three realms (of desire, pure form and formlessness), fully understand the mind and discover one's own true nature. But all this comes later, after the preliminary stage of investigation and inquiry has been completed, for it needs a degree of control over the mind that beginners have not yet been able to acquire.

According to the *Avatamsaka* (Flower Adornment) *Sutra*, the preliminary stage of practice also involves cultivation of ten types of faith which provide the essential preconditions that make the effective practice of Chan possible. Although the Huayen School goes on to distinguish forty-two levels of achievement in the stage of actual practice, in fact this stage is one of continuous growth, for the three realms have already been transcended at the moment when the process of spiritual maturation begins.

III. Transcendent Practice

The third stage of Chan practice is called 'transcendent practice', which means that one practices without appearing to practice. Thus one continues to mature and develop according to circumstances as they arise, helping sentient beings and transcending one's limitations over and over again, but without displaying the outward signs of a practitioner. Hence it is said that transcendent practice has no fixed form.

As the word 'transcendent' implies, this type of formless practice is not something that can be described in words. One can speak of its essential nature and its effectiveness, but it has no definable attributes. Its effectiveness arises directly from its essential nature and can be seen in the practitioner's increasing spiritual maturity and in his or her ability to teach and benefit other beings. So it is said that such a practitioner can be a teacher even to the buddhas.

Although the above is intended to be a simple introduction to Huayen Chan, it is possible that some readers may still find it difficult to follow. The problem is that the 'original face', the essential nature, of life is not something that falls within the scope of the rational intelligence, and Chan is a shortcut that will take us straight to this realm which is our true home. But even though Chan, if we describe it in these terms, may seem to be something lofty and unattainable, if we rely on the guidance of a wise teacher and proceed step by step according to his or her instructions, we will certainly be able to make progress towards our goal.

Chan can be regarded as a technique for transforming our life, and even in the initial stages it can have a beneficial effect on our physical health and mental stability. As we continue to train ourselves, our life-energy and capacity for discernment will steadily increase until our practice has deepened to the point where we can actually enter the gate of realization.

So even though it is not possible to achieve complete Liberation at a single stroke, we can at least improve our physical and mental health and strengthen our immunity to stress and illness. These are fringe benefits that come in the early stages of cultivation, and if you continue to practice sincerely according to the instructions you have been given, the day will eventually come when you will be able to transcend the cycle of birth and death and enter on the boundless contemplation of the Dharma realm (*dharmadhatu*). Huayen Chan really does have the power to accomplish this, but only if you yourself make the effort to put it into practice!

(Translated from the article on page 52-55 of "The Huayen Worlds" –

「華嚴禪法」華藏妙海【中華民國佛教華嚴學會】)

