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# Review

## ***Essential Chan Buddhism: The Character and Spirit of Chinese Zen.***

Chan Master Guo Jun. Rhineback, NY: Monkfish Book Publishing Co., 2013. 175pp.

Owen G. Mordaunt<sup>\*</sup>

This book embraces the essence of talks Guo Jun gave at a fourteen-day retreat at Chan Forest in the hills of Jakarta in 2010 as well as subsequent conversations the editor and his wife had with him. It is highly readable and accessible to the reader. It has poetic, spontaneous and witty qualities, providing deep insight into Chan (also spelled Cha'n) Buddhism. Chan is the Chinese form of Zen and is not well-known in the West as Zen is, but it derives from the traditions of India. It has flourished and continued to develop through many masters and its teachings have parallels to Korean Son, Vietnamese Thien, and Japanese Zen. But it has its own flavor in how it presents wisdom to admirers and practitioners. Chan is not the only Buddhist tradition connected to China.<sup>1</sup>

Unlike Shunryu Suzuki, who never talks about his past in his book *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*,<sup>2</sup> Guo Jun provides some information about when he started learning Buddhism at fourteen, attending his first retreat at seventeen, and being involved with other retreats of varying lengths when he was in his teens and early twenties. He makes a point of mentioning the rigors of Buddhist training as reflected in his experiences in retreats in monasteries in Singapore, Malaysia and Korea. The training was so demanding that some aspiring dharma did not make it.

Guo Jun is Chinese but was born in Singapore and raised in centers of Chan teaching in Korea and China. He trained as a scientist and is the youngest dharma and

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heir to Master Sheng Yen, one of the most renowned and successful Buddhist teachers of the late-20th century who died in 2009. Guo Jun has taught Chinese Buddhism in different parts of the world, such as Australia, Canada, Indonesia, U.S., and Singapore.

The book is divided into 47 chapters, ranging from a half page to ten pages of nuggets of Chan teachings and insights. Chapter 1, the shortest, references the impermanence of life: “Our life is only as long as one breath” (1). The notion of “breath” (chapter 3) is inherent to Chan practice, and you supposedly fall in love with your breath, the “meditation of love,” and loving your breath parallels loving others. But Chan teaches devotees “to love with no attachment [and] to care without imposing [and] to love in the way we love the breath” (10). Breath should be regarded as your “closest friend,” something you want to make a part of your life. Guo Jun also makes reference to womb breathing and turtle breathing in Chan meditation. Womb breathing, associated with a baby in the womb, involves our whole body and happens accidentally, but Chan does not make a big deal of it. Turtle breathing is deep breathing and can happen by chance. Experiencing peace, focus and presence all start with the breath.

Guo Jun elaborates on the significance of “sitting,” an aspect of meditation that is crucial to thinking, just like a “child must learn to sit before he can stand up” (13). Sitting is a human characteristic that enables us to “concentrate,” then “recover,” become “stable,” “give ourselves comfort, and experience the “the feeling of coming home” (13–14). Concomitant with this, Guo Jun states that practice is relaxation, not laziness; it entails relaxing, calming down, clearing the mind, breathing and coming back to the present. This provides clarity, sharpens our senses and makes us open up our minds. But all this, however, does not bring liberation. Suzuki, on the other hand, puts it a little differently: When you practice zazen [lotus posture], your mind should be focused on your breathing. This activity is the basic activity of the universal being. Without it, “it is impossible to attain absolute freedom.”<sup>3</sup>

Guo Jun stresses that enlightenment comes with connecting to the world: “Only by going deeply and fully into the world do you attain liberation . . . the meaning of the star—the sudden illumination of our connection to the rest of the universe” (19). An example is provided in chapter 34 about monks reaching out to laypeople and teaching them about the benefits of Chan and being cognizant of the stresses and problems experienced in the outside world. If we start with friendliness and loving kindness, then true love will result, and true love accepts other people’s strengths and weaknesses. Lay

people also have human needs, so sexual activity is permitted but in moderation, according to Chan.

The notion of “floating” (chapter 8) is a notion that is rather difficult to understand since one is advised to float—an idealistic part of Chan relevant to having “no fixed way, no fixed form, and the method of no-method” (26). Chan is a merger of Buddhism with Chinese culture, so practices relevant to art, such as martial arts, painting, music, calligraphy, etc., need to be incorporated into Buddhism. Chan has no method, and as a result, it has numberless methods. It is creative, alive and can adapt to change.

An interesting aspect of Chan is that when Buddhism spread from India to China, it took on an unquestionable Chinese character. Buddhists in India were ascetics and exchanged teaching for alms. This however did not work in China since Chinese have no respect for beggars. In chapter 7 “Farming Meditation,” reference is made to Confucius teaching that you have to give back to your family and society. Furthermore, Confucius stressed the work ethic. Monasteries in China, therefore, supported themselves through agriculture. Monks practiced meditation while they were farming—while they broke ground and planted seeds. The metaphor of the mind as a field and the softening of the field’s soil, removing rocks, etc., is associated with softening our hearts which become receptive to the seeds of Buddhist teaching. So farming meditation is a powerful Chan religious lifestyle: “If you want to help sentient beings, you have to get your hands dirty” (25).

Also, incorporated into Chan is the Chinese idea of wisdom. Guo Jun’s take on wisdom is that wisdom in Chan and Buddhism consists of four stages: acquiring wisdom through listening and reading, reflecting on the knowledge acquired, practicing this wisdom, and when you fully experience what has been taught, you attain wisdom. This achievement makes you and wisdom one and the same thing, as well as your actions, words and thoughts—this is consistent with Buddha’s teaching. Another interesting notion mentioned, relevant to learning, has to do with starting with the basics by spending time sharpening your axe.

The main focus of Chan, according to Guo Jun, is the acquisition of knowledge and the practice of meditation. In this connection, he uses further metaphors: the hen hatching an egg just sits and sits, the vow he makes to use his whole life in the spread of Buddhism if he recovered from his illness, and emptying the cup and filling it with good things. Other teachings are mindfulness, meaning being attentive; posture and how it

activates energy; returning to the present moment by returning to the breath; crying or shedding tears when feeling a connection and being thankful for life, and being aware and making several attempts to come back to the present moment. A person, according to Guo Jun, can pursue meaningless supernatural endeavors during meditation, but this practice is contrary to and frowned upon by Chan. Also, Chan does not seek enlightenment: Chan masters only think about constant practice; and, instead, one is awakened and enlightenment comes when least expected. A final point with regard to meditation is that proper mediation is relaxing, so one may get less sleep but the result is quality sleep.

Chapter 47, even though important, should perhaps be indexed as a coda since it presents information about Guo Jun's first master. Chapters 45 ("Our Birthright") and 46 ("A Taste Like the Ocean") provide crucial concluding information about Chan. In chapter 45 reference is made to Buddhist practices being mainly geared to people living in monastic, sheltered communities, and practicing contemplative lives but also states that Buddhism is also relevant to the layperson. Even though suffering is stressed, Guo Jun wants to make it clear that Buddhism is about freedom, about living. *Dukkha* (suffering) prevents us from living full and fulfilled lives, but the "vitality and joy of life" is our birthright. What he suggests is that we should "rest the body and mind from wandering and scattered thoughts" and not "engage with hurtful impulses and emotions. The more we relax, the more our minds will rest [and] we will be able to rest our bodies and minds in the present moment" (156). Chapter 46 summarizes what Chan is: "a happy life with wisdom and compassion" (156). Chan is not formal teaching but experiential. It is typically Chinese—the teaching of heart and mind.

On the whole, Guo Jun's presentation of Chan Buddhism is thoughtful, informative, and accessible to those who are not familiar with it. Chan Buddhism has parallels to Zen and other forms of Buddhism, but it is clearly Chinese in that it incorporates aspects of Confucianism and Taoism. Confucius stressed the work ethic and giving back to family and society. So, while Chan Buddhism focuses on meditation and the acquisition of knowledge, it transcends the typical monastic lifestyle by being self-supporting: Guo Jun aptly uses the term 'farming meditation.' For dharmas, as well as practitioners, connection to family and society is necessary and is a means to enlightenment. The "my brother's keeper" metaphor is so evident in this tradition.

### NOTES

1. Jonathan Landow and Stephan Bodian (2003: 99, 109) list the following as some of the most important schools of Buddhism that flourished in China in the past:

**Tien-tai.** Based on the *Lotus Sutra*, and was named after a famous mountain in China.

**Flower Ornament.** Based on a sutra by the same name as Hua-yen in Chinese.

**True Word.** A short-lived tradition in China, survived in Japan as Shingon Buddhism.

**Pure Land.** Based on the *Land of Bliss* sutras, a tradition that inspired the development of Jodo and Jodo Shin Buddhism in Japan.

**Meditation.** Called Chan (Cha'n) in China and Zen in Japan, the meditation of a direct confrontation with the present moment and is capable of bringing about a penetrating insight into the true nature of reality.

2. Suzuki 1993: 16.
3. Ibid., 31.

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