



Book Review

Faith in Mind
A Commentary on Seng Ts'an's Classic
Chan Master Sheng Yen
Shambala Publications, 2006
Review by Zen Master Hae Kwang
(Stanley Lombardo)

Chan Master Sheng Yen (1930–2009) combined in his life serious practice, academic study (he had a doctorate in Buddhist literature from Rishi University in Japan), rigorous teaching and administrative responsibilities in Taiwan and New York. He believed that a Chan master should have a sound intellectual understanding of Buddhist teaching and impart it to his students as fundamental to the correct practice of meditation. Institutionally he realized this goal in founding Dharma Drum University in Taiwan as well as other centers for Buddhist education that functioned in tandem with his retreat and practice centers. His many publications (more than 50 books, and numerous articles in Chinese and English) have served to broaden his educational outreach. His autobiography, *Footprints in the Snow* (Doubleday, 2008), is a compelling account of his early life, training and later accomplishments.

Faith in Mind, his commentary on Seng Ts'an's Hsin Hsin Ming, is based on talks he gave during a series of four retreats in 1984 and 1985. The poem's 146 lines, taken in order a few at a time in the book's 20 chapters, are interpreted as a practical guide to meditation practice rather than simply as a philosophical discourse on such themes as unity, emptiness, interpenetration and suchness (which is how the poem is usually treated). So, for instance, the following two lines,

Merely stagnating in duality
How can you recognize oneness?

are explicated in this way:

Whenever you make distinctions, your mind is in opposition. How is this relevant to practice? . . . You must have faith in the fundamental unity in order to truly begin practicing. . . . Many of you are practicing counting the breath. The goal of this practice is to reach a, unified, single-minded state. After you get to the point where there are no thoughts other than counting, eventually the counting just naturally stops. . . . The only thing left is a sense of existence. (pp. 31–32)

This approach, going to the guts of actual meditation practice, is eminently useful, coming as it does from Master Sheng Yen's deep experience both as a teacher and practitioner, and it is in consonance with what seems to be Seng Ts'an's original intention (putting to one side some scholars' doubts about the poem's authorship). Overall Sheng Yen's comments work well simultaneously as an explication of the poem's meaning and as a guide to meditation, with emphasis sometimes shifting more to one or the other of these two complementary purposes. But he is at his best when using the text of the poem to shine light directly upon meditation practice. Following up on the notion of one mind suggested in the passage above, Sheng Yen continues apropos of the lines:

Two comes from one,
But do not keep even this one.
When one mind does not arise
Myriad dharmas are without defect.

[T]here are two meanings of "one" referred to in this line: "yet do not keep even the one." The first is samadhi and the second is the great self. . . . From the point of view of Ch'an, even though a person may reach samadhi or the great self, he will still be in samsara, the cycle of birth and death. The liberation that he feels is only transitory; it is not ultimate liberation. But "When one mind does not arise, myriad dharmas are without defect." That is to say, a person in the state of one mind still has problems, but when he loses even that one mind nothing can cause him any trouble. (p. 55)

Sheng Yen provides his own translation of the poem, one which, as he says himself, is by and large similar to other published English translations but also offers somewhat different interpretations of certain lines, interpretations that often came to him as he taught the poem to students on retreat. For instance, he translates "One thought for ten thousand years," in place of the more typical "One moment is ten thousand years." Both are valid translations. The Chinese word at issue here, *nien*, combines the characters for "now" and "mind." Sheng Yen wisely directs our attention not to the nature of time, but, as he does throughout this book, to the nature of mind as experienced in meditation. One can only feel that Seng Ts'an would have approved. ☸