



32. STUART LACHS

Stuart Lachs was born in 1940 and raised in Brooklyn, NY. He attended Brooklyn College, part of the NYC college system, where he received a B.A. and M.S., majoring in mathematics. He worked at Bell Labs in the mathematical physics department for a year and afterward, in the ship design industry for a few years.

He started Zen practice in 1967 in NYC. That Spring he went to San Francisco because he had heard that the San Francisco Zen Center was opening the first American Zen monastery. With luck and the generosity of the Center, he was accepted and attended the first training period of Tassajara, their new monastery.

He returned to NYC and became a member of the Zen Studies Society. He remained a member for about two and a half years and then went to Maine to study with Walter Nowick at what became Moon Spring Hermitage. For many years, he was head monk, head of the Board of Directors, and in charge of new members, instructing them in meditation, zendo protocol, and the ways of the group.

After eleven years he left and returned to NYC. Shortly, he found the Chan Meditation Group under the leadership of Shifu Sheng-yen, a Chinese teacher from Taiwan. He did not become a member of the group at first, though after a few years he was given much responsibility, including the important task of giving private interviews during seven day retreats and running classes when Shifu returned to Taiwan, every other three month period. He eventually became a member. From 1982–1999, he traveled frequently, spending three months in a Korean Monastery (Songgwang Sa), some time in Japan at both a Rinzai and Soto temple, and two stays at Shifu's monastery in Taiwan. During one of the stays in Taiwan, he did a solitary thirty day retreat. He also visited the Diamond Sangha in Hawaii twice, and spent two months with the London Zen Group as a guest of Morinaga roshi, their Japanese teacher. He stayed at the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas in Ukiah, Ca. twice for a few months at a time, as well as visiting other places.

In the early/mid 1990's he became interested in an academic look at Zen, which included institutional history, myth making, and the interaction of Zen and the state. It was an eye opener, as he had seen much over the years that bothered him and did not make sense, but he could not put it all together. He also became interested in the sociology of religion. His articles are the result of years of practicing with Zen groups combined with his academic studies of Chan/Zen as well as the sociology of religion and institutions. Since 1999 he has practiced with a few friends or on his own.

INTERVIEW

Q: In the Chan tradition of Sheng Yen, how is dana practiced in terms of giving/receiving the teachings?

Stuart Lachs: I left the organization in the year 2000, so whatever I say is from before that time. Sheng Yen died Feb. 3, 2009 so things may have changed some after his death.

There was no specific solicitation for money or gifts in terms of giving or receiving teachings aside from reasonable monthly dues for members and whatever the charges were for attending retreats. I do not remember the word “dana” ever being used publicly, though shortly before I resigned there was some talk of teaching westerners “dana” or to more actively support the organization. I remember the retreat charges being reasonable. The retreat charges included all meals, which were always vegetarian. I think a few people with money problems were given scholarships to attend retreats while at other times, some people in a tight money situation were given work exchange arrangements so they could attend the retreats.

But the idea of “giving” or “donations” in the context of Chinese Buddhism is complicated; it is not a simple donation or giving with nothing expected in return, at least that is so for the Chinese. Something is expected in return and that something is “merit.” What I think is going on is a transaction exchange where “merit” is the expected gain by the person who “gives” to the support of the monks and nuns and to the support and especially the growth of the monastery.

All parties of the exchange, the monastics, the monastery and the giver have much to gain by the transaction. The laity gave money, gifts, etc. and received in return merit from the monastics/monastery. But there is also prestige, hierarchy, social connections and relations cemented, social

status, power, growth of the monastery, gaining benefits of this world, peer recognition, making up for bad karma, and so on involved. Being a good Chinese Buddhist means supporting the sangha and the monastery. In a sense, a Buddhist culture is created in this exchange for salvation.

People certainly made donations but they were voluntary; there was no tithing. Along that line, it appeared to me that the Chinese members were much more used to giving and appeared to give much from what I could tell. It seemed that the westerners were not used to giving and my guess is that what was given by them was nothing like what the Chinese members gave. But the western members did not really believe in receiving merit in exchange for giving, as did the Chinese members. This is what I think was going on in New York City. In addition, most western members had no idea of the scale of Sheng Yen's operation in Taiwan. I had some idea as I stayed in his monastery in Taiwan on two different occasions.

To get a sense of the financial scale of what was transpiring, the Dharma Drum Mountain complex in upstate New York cost on the order of \$3 million which almost entirely came from Chinese donations. Whether that was from foreign Chinese or Chinese living in America I do not know. There were some wealthy Chinese people from across America who gave much.

Taiwan of course was a different picture as was what happened when Sheng Yen visited other parts of Asia. Sheng Yen was one of the four leading Chinese Buddhist leaders in Taiwan. When he gave a public talk in Taipei, it was a major event. He filled the Taipei Convention Center auditorium which has 3,100 seats to more than capacity when he gave a public talk there, while there were major traffic problems on the streets outside the Center. The Taiwanese heartedly supported Sheng Yen and his mission. Building Dharma Drum Mountain complex in Taiwan was a vast

undertaking taking many years and tens of millions of dollars. I have heard it cost in the neighborhood of a hundred million dollars. Sheng Yen indeed, was a successful fund raiser.

Sheng Yen's organization had a vast outreach in Taiwan and probably in other parts of the East. I believe they had a computer file of 75,000 names and that was early in the 1990's. Sheng Yen also ran retreats for VIP's in Taiwan with maid service and special bedding and food. No doubt, at least some of these VIP's if not all of them gave heavily to the building and support of Dharma Drum Monastery.

But in my experience there was never an appeal for funds directly connected to teaching. I do not remember hearing any solicitations before or after a retreat or at any classes that Sheng Yen gave. Sheng Yen kept his fund raising and teaching activities totally separate.

Q: Why do you think the Chinese members were more used to this tradition of dana than western members?

Stuart Lachs: I think early in Chinese Buddhism the idea of cultivating a "field of merit" that is, giving to the sangha took hold. By supporting the sangha and the monastery, that is, cultivating a "field of merit," the crop so to speak one received is "merit." China being an agricultural society at the time used agricultural terms like cultivating, planting, seeds, and so on. The idea of merit was and is strongly believed in Chinese Buddhist culture. Though it may seem nebulous to Westerners, to the Chinese, merit is as real as a brand new Cadillac to a Westerner. Not only could merit be gained this way but it also could be transferred to others and thereby gain in value. This idea of gaining merit, when combined with Chinese culture being based on genealogy - that is, family lineage, created a culture of giving to monastics and the monastery and thereby gaining merit for oneself, family and deceased family members in return. In Chinese culture, if one does not

care for and honor deceased family members, it is believed bad things will happen to you and your relatives. At times, in Chinese history, giving to the sangha became so extravagant and competitive, that the state stepped in to control it and at times keep families from being ruined. The development of Buddhism in China as a religion in general, is complicated. Buddhism was not strictly only religious but had a large economic component to it.

For a most fascinating view of Buddhism in China see, *Buddhism in Chinese Society: An Economic History From The Fifth to the Tenth Century* , by Jacques Gernet, Columbia University Press, 1995.

For a discussion of merit in Chinese Buddhism, see Walsh, Michael J., "The Economics of Salvation: Toward a Theory of Exchange in Chinese Buddhism", in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, June 2007.

In China, there is a long history of supporting a monastery and monastics. It appears to me to be a commodity exchange. The laity gives money or goods or land to the monastics and in return, receives merit which can be banked and importantly, transferred. The irony of this to me is that once you believe in receiving merit for giving donations, as is the case with most Chinese Buddhists, you cannot be entirely generous or even give gifts to the monastery. There seems to be an inherent exchange component in that the giver expects some thing in return for giving, that is, merit, which mitigates gift giving or simply being generous.

Q: What are your thoughts on some contemporary lay Buddhist type teachers that give satsangs, but do not use the Sanskrit language or practice "dana", but use more of a Western terminology

or business modal, ask up front for a "suggested donation" or "contribution" of some kind for a satsang or meditation class?

For example in the case of a teacher like adyashanti, he says "Contribution per satsang is \$10, paid at the door"

Stuart Lachs: I think this is straight up. Many people do not know the word "dana" so it makes things clear and in a sense demystifies Buddhism. As the person giving the teaching is a layperson, is not a monastic, asking for "dana" as in supporting a monastic who was not supposed to work, but in return, studies Budd., meditates and whatever, and then gives the teaching, this is being honest. As many teachers today are laypeople and Buddhism is moving into new western capitalistic culture, things will change. In a sense, the job of these lay teachers is teaching. So it seems reasonable to ask for some thing in return. Also, there are no monasteries with support by families with a history of supporting a given place or government support in some places in Asia. There is always a need for money. I think a suggested donation of \$10 sounds reasonable. I assume people are being honest about "suggested donation" so that if someone felt they wanted to give \$5 or nothing, they could still enter.

Q: Or if Adyashanti asks for a "Contribution per satsang is \$10, I don't see the problem. I hope Adyashanti makes exceptions for people who have trouble coming up with the \$10.

I think the financial aspect of teaching Eastern traditions in the West is in transition.

Traditionally do Chan or Zen monastery's charge for teachings? For room and board etc.? This place called daibosatsu I went to charges 75 dollars a day up to seven days, or 45 dollars for more than 7 days.

"The fee for a full three-month kessei is \$2,000. For those who cannot come for the entire kessei period, a one-month (\$750) or two-month period (\$1,500) can be arranged."

Stuart Lachs: From my experience Chan and Zen monasteries do not charge for teachings. In Taiwan, Korea, Japan and the USA, on Sundays very large numbers of laypeople come to monasteries for services, to hear teachings, and for some, to meditate. I know in some monasteries people could stay for three days as a guest for no charge, if they arranged it in advance. Of course for week retreats there were charges for room and board that varied in amount from place to place. In some places in the Far East, I was able to stay a few weeks or longer and was never charged. Of course I gave a donation when I left for which no amount was suggested. But these places often have a large donor pool, often from families with a history of support. Well known teachers in the Far East attract many followers, often high ranking government people, business executives, and dignitaries and many give/donate much.

But at the very least, if someone thinks Dai Bosatsu or any other place is charging too much for what they give, they can go somewhere else. There are many Zen places to choose from these days as well as practice centers/monasteries associated with other sects of Buddhism besides Zen. "Too much" is a subjective decision. There exists today a competitive market place for religious seekers in America.

However, I think Dai Bosatsu needs some contextualizing. Dai Bosatsu monastery was started by Eido Shimano in 1976. Shimano has a long history of being accused of sexual and monetary scandal going back to 1965 or so in Hawaii. In fact Shimano's own teacher, Soen Nakagawa roshi

did not attend the opening ceremony of Dai Bosatsu most likely because of scandal swirling around Shimano at the time. This history of scandal around Shimano is well known in Zen circles and just last year I believe, the N.Y. Times did an article on him. Shimano stepped down amid more scandal somewhere around New Years, 2012. If someone is interested in reading about his history, go to <http://www.hoodiemonks.org/ShimanoArchive.html> . There is very much material there. For a truncated and condensed version one can also read the paper "The Aitken-Shimano Letters" at http://www.thezensite.com/ZenEssays/CriticalZen/Aitken_Shimano_Letters.html written by Vladimir K. and Stuart Lachs.

At any rate, Dai Bosatsu and its city center, the Zen Studies Society have over the years lost many if not most of its large donors. It has also lost many members while they have a large financial responsibility for Shimano's and his wife's retirement package, which by most measures is considered very generous. They also have the up keep and maintenance of two large practice places. Shimano's handpicked replacement as abbot, Sherry Chayat, known as Shinge roshi, has been a loyalist of Shimano through years of scandal. It is hard to see her bringing in the donations that Shimano was able to do from both wealthy Americans and Japanese.

In a word, they need money.

END OF INTERVIEW