

In roughly 975 CE, a document, entitled the *Regulations of the Chan School*, was published. This is the first known writing regarding the Chan School of monasteries that arose in China during the Tang dynasty. Baizhang Huaihai is attributed with founding this school Buddhism in China and he is also credited with authorizing the first set of monastic orders for the Chan monasteries (CP 66). With these monastic orders came the vinaya. Vinaya are the rules of discipline for the individuals as well as the monastic communities. Many of the vinaya were brought to China from India where they originated. Difficulties arose in the translation and application of the traditional Indian vinaya in the Chinese world due to both language barriers as well as the fact the some of them when directly against Chinese doctrine (CP 65).

The above information forms the foundation of our story.

Dear My Darling Mother and Loving Father,

*I hope all is going well at home on the farm and that everyone in the family is healthy and prosperous. Today was my first day in the Chinese Chan monastery. Upon my entering the monastic order, I was given a copy of *Daily Life in the Assembly*. In this book I found everything that I would need to get me through the daily rituals in the monastery. I learned all about what was viewed as acceptable and not, allowing me to be careful not to offend anyone. I knew that I did not want to offend anyone, especially the first week in the monastery. With my copy of the *Daily Life in the Assembly*, I was able to avoid the embarrassment that any social blunders would have caused.*

My day started just as the day of the rest of the monks began. We all rose before the sounding of the signal board, and went about our morning routines. I carefully got up before the bell and doing my best not to make any noise, I placed it under my knees as I

began to awaken my spirit and get it ready for the day ahead. I drew the blanket around my body, careful not to disturb those around me or hit anyone in the face. I sat in this position for a moment and then I realized that it was going to take me a little while to get used to the time schedule of the monastery. Knowing the wisdom that was possessed in the rules that Zongshou had compiled, I knew that the best and most acceptable way to wake myself up would be to carefully and quietly grab a hand cloth and walk to the sangha hall doorway with the cloth draped over my left hand as I recited these words in my head, "From the wee hours of dawn straight through to dusk, | I will make way for all living beings. | If any of them should lose their bodily form under my feet, | I pray that they may immediately be born in the pure land" (CP 68, 259). Once I had carefully, and quietly exited the sangha hall without dragging my footwear or coughing, I took up a basin and commenced washing my face in the approved manner of the monks. Careful not to use too much water, I used two dabs of tooth powder, careful to make sure that neither hand dipped into the powder twice for fear of the spread of infection, and then carefully rinsed out my mouth without splashing water into the basins around me. Once I had finished properly washing my face, I returned to the sangha hall, because I was located on the lower level I entered with my right foot first, if I had been on the upper level I would have entered with my left. Once I had reached my blanket, I folded my mattress in half and sat in meditation.

The *Daily Life in the Assembly* told me that it was appropriate to burn incense and make prostrations in the time before the bell rang, however I was supposed to be careful that I never walked between a monk and the image they were bowing toward. Once the bell

signaling the fifth watch rang, I folded up my blanket and gathered my pillow, taking care not to make a breeze or fold it incorrectly. Then I wandered about the tea hall for a few minutes before returning to fetch my bowl.

Once I was seated with my bowl in front of me, I silently recited the following verse, "I am now able to set out | The Tathagata's bowls. | May I, together with all beings, | Be equal in the threefold emptiness [of giving]" (CP 70, 262). Once I said my verse, I removed the bowl cloth and placed it on my lap. Then I spread out the bowl mat, placed the bowls upon it, and then using my thumbs, removed the bowls from the other bowl, setting them out, smallest first. Luckily I happened to remember, just before I made the mistake to, "always hold back your fourth and fifth fingers; as impure fingers, they are not to be used" (CP 70, 262). As I set out the rest of my belongings, preparing myself for the morning meal, I was careful to make sure that the "pure place" of the utensils, where your hand grasps them, was pointed toward the person on my left.

Once everything was set out as it ought to be, I gathered up my six grains of spirit rice to offer to the hungry ghosts – the grains of spirit rice are not to exceed seven, but if they are too few the ghosts will be offended. Once the rector had chanted the buddhas' names, I lifted my bowl with both hands to receive my food, and recited this verse silently, "Upon receiving this food, | I pray that living beings | shall have as food the bliss of Dhyana, | and be filled to satiation with joy in the dharma" (CP 70, 262). "Dharma is the doctrine, the universal truth common to all individuals at all times, proclaimed by the Buddha" (EB). Combined with the Buddha and the community of

believers, known as the *sanga*, *dharma* is one third of the *triratna*, or “three jewels,” that Buddhists find refuge in.

Once we had been signaled to eat, I first made the five necessary reflections. They are to first consider where the food came from and how much work someone went into to prepare it for me. Then you consider whether or not I myself am worthy of the food, and if my virtue and practice have been enough. Third, I make sure to restrain my mind and forsake my faults. Then, I acknowledge that I am to eat to prevent my body from withering away, and lastly, I acknowledged that I was receiving this food so that I could continue to work towards attaining enlightenment (CP 70, 263). Before eating we are not allowed to allow our thoughts to be consumed by greedy thoughts of food and hunger. It is seen as improper “to think of food and salivate; ... to spill gruel in one’s haste [to eat]; to slurp soup; to stuff one’s mouth full...” (CP 70-71). Why does it seem that only the monks here understand etiquette?

There are many rules that we must abide by when it comes to eating. We are to bring the food to our mouths not our mouths to our food. At no part during the meal are we to make any noise. They seem to have a lot of rules regarding cleanliness, so we are to cover our mouths with the sleeve of our robe if we need to sneeze, we are not to scratch our head or pick at our teeth with our fingers. Each type of food is to remain in its specific bowl and they are not to be mixed and combined. If there is any vegetable that I deem to be inedible, I am supposed to leave them out of sight behind the bowl. It is written, “Judge the amount when you take your food, and do not ask to throw any away” (CP 70, 263). This seems

to me to be good advice and wish more people in our home country behaved in that manner. We are also supposed to make sure that we eat at the same speed as those around us. Once we were finished eating, we had to wash our bowls.

As with everything else at the monastery, the washing of the bowls had a specific process as well, however, that should all be left to another letter. I will have many years to relate the comings and goings of our daily routines, and I would hate to share it all with you in one day.

I must say however, that my studies at school have helped prepare me for the transition into life in the monastery. When I had to do the daily practice for one of my religious studies classes, I got into the habit of doing the same activity everyday and reflecting on how the verses made me feel. However the verses recited are dramatically different. As you know, before I used to recite a poem ending in, "Life's battles don't always go | to the stronger or faster man; | but sooner or later the man who wins | is the man who thinks he can." Now though, I recite things like, "Upon hearing the bell, | Vexations are lightened; | Wisdom is strengthened, | Bodhi is produced; | We escape from hell, | Leaving the fiery pit. | May I attain buddhahood, | And save living beings" (CP 72). It is definitely going to take me a little while to get used to the fact that I am no longer trying to inspire myself to greatness but am now putting all of my faith into something bigger than myself and hoping only to preserve life.

As I wrote before, I hope this letter finds you well and that you are well provided for and find happiness in your life experiences. In thoughtful meditation, Your loving child