

Three Steps One Bow

Bhikshus Heng Sure and Heng Ch'au

on their bowing pilgrimage to the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas.

HENG CH'AU: October 29, 1977:

No Place Solid

There is no self. Nothing confirms "me." Everywhere I look for validation, there is a sign "no vacancy." Behind everything I take for real and lasting is thin air and empty space. Family, car, wife, and clothes say, "sorry, no vacancy." Success, failure, parties and funerals, say, "sorry, you are only dreaming, this is a recording."

Eventually we all start seeing those "no vacancy" and "out of order" signs. They show up unexpectedly and uninvited like, say, when you're at a wedding, driving home from work, waiting in a line, or on the toilet. Hard to say. Sometimes they show up in the mirror. I saw one in the mirror I shaved in front of this morning. It was in my own face!

Where once seeing the emptiness of self and all things (dharma) would send a shudder up my spine and freak me out, now there is a little patience and evenness of mind. It is said when one truly sees things as they really are, one obtains, "irreversibility from patience with the non-production of dharma." Far from a freak-out, this vision brings peace and delight. "This is the realm of the one who delights in still extinction, the one of much learning." {*AVATAMSAKA SUTRA*-Chapter 10) I've got a long way to go before "fear and trembling" is replaced with delight, but each day of bowing leaves things a little clearer and my heart lighter.

The *AVATAMSAKA SUTRA* is such a fine friend and advisor during these little psychic crises. These passages turned a potential cosmic collapse in front of the mirror this morning into a smile. How did I ever come to think I was so important:

"Discriminate and contemplate within yourself this way: 'who am I inside?' If you can understand in this way, then you will realize that the self does not exist. The body is falsely set up. Its dwelling place has no fixed position. When one truly understands this body, then within, there is nothing at all to attach to.

Contemplate the body well and see it all clearly. Be aware that its dharmas are all empty and false. Do not use mental effort to discriminate them. Who is it that gives rise to your life? Who is it who takes it away? It's just like a turning ring of fire--no one knows its beginning or its end."

AVATAMSAKA SUTRA Chapter 10

I've got a long way to go before I "see it all clearly." As we were bowing around dusk, a huge flying, silent thing flew over my shoulder, hovered above and then enveloped me. I jerked and spasmed in fear. I felt my guts pole-vault.

What was this creature? It was my nylon sash a brisk tail wind had blown over my head. Now who is it that is afraid and of what? A long ways to go before I'm really "aware that all dharmas are empty and false." The guts tell the true story.

Bowing is a trick. It's like 'hide-n-seek', only after a while you forget to seek. You try to bow so singlemindedly that you trick yourself and disappear. Bowing is a trick to get free and benefit others.

AVATAMSAKA SUTRA

The *AVATAMSAKA SUTRA* is very special. As the bowing progresses, we come to places inside that are too new and raw to understand. These states and changes seem too 'far out' to even try to clarify or share. It is like a lot of thoughts and inner experiences we all learned it was best to keep to ourselves.

But then, Heng Sure will read a passage from the *AVATAMSAKA* (the *King of Kings of Sutras*) and zap! There it is! That's exactly what was in my heart. The feeling of isolation and weirdness breaks open. The *AVATAMSAKA* is like having another sun in the world.

There's a bone-chilling stiffness before sunrise in these mountains. When the sun rises, it sets everything vibrating with warmth and light and melts the ice coverings. The Sutra does the same for the mind/heart and all its states. The *AVATAMSAKA* is very special. Without it would be like losing the sun. Here's the verse Heng Sure read:

"Another light comes forth called wisdom lamp.
This light is able to awaken the masses, and cause them to know the
nature of living beings is empty and still.
And that all dharmas do not exist.
This light proclaims that all dharmas are empty without a host,
They are like an illusion, like a flame, like a moon's reflection in water.
They are also like a dream, like a shadow, like an image in a mirror.
For this reason this light comes about.

AVATAMSAKA SUTRA

WORTHY LEADER

Chapter 12

HENG SURE: October, 1977:

Breathe

Why did it take us this long to incorporate mindful breathing into the bowing? It's been there one the fringes of consciousness all along. The Abbot instructs the Forty-two Hands that way and in his Dharma talks he says that breath should be even and natural. It makes a real difference in concentration when the breath is rhythmic. I don't nod while sitting if my breath is even and mindful.

Yesterday the proper breathing became a bridge between bowing and seated meditation. They merged into one practice because the breathing was the same.

HENG CH'AU: October 30, 1977:

Who is Different?

Some friendly people from Lompoc stopped with offerings and warm words of welcome. Plain and simple and very real. They weren't "marked" or pretentious like me. It is said, when all marks of self are gone, this is to "open the knowledge and vision of the Buddha." What is the Buddha's knowledge and vision?

"You should now believe that the Buddha's knowledge and vision is simply your own mind, (for there is) no other Buddha.

SIXTH PATRIARCH SUTRA

Great Master Hui-neng

Some surfers stopped with money and food offerings. A few kids ask the usual questions, wish us luck, and ride off to jump driveways and gopher holes with their bikes.

As we were cleaning up after lunch, two cars sped into the parking lot and squealed to a stop one either side of us, boxing us in. They were full of high spirited, half drunk high school kids full of mischief and out doing their own version of "trick-or-treat." There were two of us and ten of them and nobody else in sight. Sort of a tense scene.

We didn't run or get angry and threatening, and they didn't know quite what to do then. One by one they slowly lifted their Halloween masks and started asking questions.

"We saw you since yesterday. Come all the way from South Lompoc--that's not very far for only two days."

"We started in South Pasadena last May. We are on our way to the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas--about 110 miles past San Francisco."

"Hey, they're for real you guys!"

"What's in it for you?" (sarcastic)

"We're doing it for others, not for ourselves."

"Yeah, like who 'others'?" (hostile)

"Like our parents. We haven't been very good to them and we're trying to set that straight."

"Oh."

We parted with hand shakes and good lucks.

HENG SURE: October, 1977:

In this work, it's like we're on a train. As long as we keep chugging it feels like we're on a level track. As soon as we stop, we suddenly realize we were climbing a hill as we dive backwards. (Heng Ch'au's analogy)

HENG CH'AU: October, 1977:

Why Discriminate!

"It takes all kinds, I guess," says a gas station attendant to a woman filling up her car as they watch us slowly bow past.
"The realm of living beings within the Dharmarealm
Ultimately has no distinctions."

AVATAMSAKA SUTRA

"But originally we are all one," I thought. "All kinds" come about because of karma and the phoney distinctions we put between us. All things, "all kinds," have the Buddhanature. Just like the waves in the sea, though each is different, they are all the same water. The things that separate us are paper thin. What we share is beyond reckoning and "levelly and equally it courses throughout the world. Between us and the gas station attendant is a few feet of empty space and a false thought. At root we are brothers.

Robes and Silence

Our monk robes and sashes must seem strange to many people. But where I grew up, brothers, priests, and nuns in long robes were a common sight. You saw them in stores, the hospital, at school, running the bases, and in your home.

Our family lived only a few blocks from the rectory, church, and convent. So I always had the "opportunity" to get up two or three mornings a week at 4:30 a.m. to serve the early mass for the sisters in their convent. It was a 'real drag' to get up that early and trudge out into a dark--20° Wisconsin winter morning by myself.

But it was special too. Everything was so quiet and without shape or rules. The only sounds were the crunch of the frozen crusted snow under my feet and the snow-wind whirlpools caught in doorways.

I also got a glimpse of a nun that never talked and was seldom seen. I never knew her name. She was petite and quite young. I would ring the strange sounding door bell and wait, listening for her footsteps coming down the long dark corridor to open the door. Without a wasted gesture or uncertain step she would lead me through the convent to the sacristy where a clean white starched surplus and cassock were neatly laid out. The priest always came at the last minute and wore sandals even in the winter.

Bowing behind Heng Sure through the streets of Lompoc this a.m. I remembered these things. Even though many people felt this nun to be living a dull and restrictive life, I know differently. Light, strong, and at peace with herself, she was always happy. Her silence came from a place of understanding and not from fear or a martyr's role. Talking less and bowing more, I am beginning to

appreciate her world and the freedom and purity she tasted. Leaving one world, free to wander in many. Pure karma begins with a pure mouth.

"You should contemplate the mundane sphere
Within it are humans and those in the heavens,
Who accomplish the fruition of pure karma.
They are happy and delighted all the time."

AVATAMSAKA SUTRA
Chapter 5, part 3

The Lompoc police knew we were in town and why. All clear.

A middle-aged businessman swerved his car to the curb and after watching us for a while, approached. "I'm really fascinated how two young men came to do something like this." We had a real straight talk. His wife was nervous and kept motioning for him to come back to the car. "No, no Mildred, this is really interesting!" he shouted to her. He made an offering, shook hands, and wished us luck.

"The Bodhisattva fast brings forth the resolve for enlightenment
because he wants to know within a single thought all vast, great
worlds without obstruction."

AVATAMSAKA SUTRA
TEN DWELLINGS
Chapter

A young man in a van who had been observing our progress for month, finally stopped and asked, "I don't understand the drive behind it."

"It's the same 'drive' all living beings have and share--the drive to get to the source and heart of things. Nothing zany or mysterious, just the basics."

"How do you accept Jesus Christ?"

"We try not to accept or reject anything."

"Humm. Interesting stuff. Good luck, brothers."

"Oh, you're Buddhists! I've heard of them. That's what Muhammed Ali is."

A mother with three kids and a big smile, "My, oh my! Such dedication. God bless you both!"

A man who spends a good part of his life working for world peace and nuclear disarmament offered to take care of our food and lodging while in Lompoc.

"Peace and getting rid of destructive weapons is just common sense and the only sane thing to do." he said.

HENG SURE: November, 1977:

Over-indulgence

It's like a kid with limitless ice cream. He's going to get sick after gorging himself a few times until he learns how to appreciate it.

The basic lessons are always before me after a fall: Don't be greedy. A little greed causes a loss every time. This time it was greed for trying to progress too quickly in cultivation. What are you forcing? You don't know. Don't attach to any state, good or bad. Be patient. This work takes time.