

# *Bodhi Mirror*

*compiled by Bhikshuni Heng Ch'ih*



*Shramanerika Heng Chia*

As a novice-in-training, Shramanerika Heng Chia is immersing herself in the study and practice of the Dharma with intensity, sincerity, and firm resolve. Experiencing an inexpressibly deep joy at being able to encounter the Dharma and to view the tantalizations and taints of the affluent Western social structure from which she recently emerged in a clearer perspective, she has this to say:

"We in America are blessed. We enjoy a rich country and an abundance of material goods. Having our food, clothing, and shelter so easily attended to, we end up with time on our hands. Unfortunately most of us are not making good use of that time. We are, in fact, extinguishing our blessings by running outside ourselves in search of 'excitement' and 'freedom.' What the Dharma has taught me is that actually by returning the light we can each find that we have all we need right within our self-natures. We don't need to look for rare treasures outside ourselves. When we do this, we end up stealing the wealth of our country and robbing other people of their treasures."

Having affinities that brought her to the Dharma as a young person, Shramanerika Heng Chia believes that many other people are ripe to accept the tenants of the Dharma which stress self-discipline, morality, and non-competitiveness. She comments:

"The young people in this country are finding out that what they have been taught is 'excitement' is nothing more than a rip off of their own vital energies--their own essential self-natures. They have so much 'freedom' they don't know what to do with themselves and so they end up getting into all kinds of trouble. When people who have affinities with the Dharma encounter the Teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha, the truths penetrate deeply. I think that if young people can be afforded opportunities to investigate the Buddhadharma, they are sure to find answers to their long lists of unanswered questions about the meaning of their existence in this world. There is a rising segment of young people today who can't be bluffed. They want to be dealt

with 'on the level.' They long to hear 'straight talk.' Shakyamuni Buddha only spoke true principle. Let us work to provide opportunities to allow the meeting of these minds. How gratifying it is to witness such occasions!"

The Dharma-doors the Buddha taught are wide open. It is up to us to enter them. Having at last found the Dharma, Shramanerika Heng Chia now comes to grips with her own karmic makeup through the Dharma door of repentance and reform. Of this learning experience she says:

"Bowing repentances is an important Dharma door for everyone, and especially for novices. We all have many karmic obstacles which form potential blocks to our cultivation of the Way. Bowing helps 'melt away' these obstacles."

Repentance and reform is a unique method in that it places the entire responsibility on the individual performing the act of contrition. As Sr. Heng Chia expresses it:

"A lot of times when I'm bowing, my past offenses rise up and I feel a sense of shame and remorse which I can't really express in words. I am aware of a deep pain within myself when I view my karmic mistakes."

She is defining here what is known as "repentance." As the Sixth Patriarch puts it:

*Repentance is to repent of past errors, to repent so completely of all bad actions done in the past out of stupidity, confusion, arrogance, deceit, jealousy and other such offenses, that they never arise again.*

Shramanerika Heng Chia continues:

"I'm really thankful that the Buddhadharma provides a method to repent of karma one has created. I've come to grips with the fact that I alone have created it--it's all my doing. As the *Earth Store Sutra* says, 'In life and death, one must undergo retribution for his or her own deeds.' So if I have to undergo suffering now in order to pay back my debts, then I'll do it. I keep in mind the Venerable Abbot's instruction on this point:

*"We wouldn't be here in the Saha world if we didn't have debts stemming from emotion and defilement to pay back. The Dharma door of repentance and reform cleanses us of the dirt. We should give up afflictions and desires; know remorse and shame."*

The other half of this process is "reform," which the Sixth Patriarch defines thus:

*Reform is to refrain from such transgressions in the future. Awakening to and cutting off such offenses completely and never committing them again is called repentance and reform.*

Therefore, the act becomes a continually renewing process--cleansing oneself of old habits and defilements and resolving to turn toward the good--to develop wholesome karmic patterns. There is no room for self-pity or time for judgements of others' actions. One is too busy becoming anew.

Looking at the foundation of her cultivation, Shramanerika Heng Chia has drawn some important conclusions. She says,

"I decided that if I was going to cultivate, I would have to bring forth a mind of faith. I would have to believe in what I'm doing, otherwise my efforts would be fruitless. The next essential step was that I needed to make vows. When I first thought about making vows I got a little nervous. What if I wasn't able to keep them? But then it occurred to me that by not making vows, there might not be the proper motivation as an aid to my practice and I could end up going down the wrong road. I surely didn't want that to happen! So I formulated and made vows before the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, the Venerable Abbot, and the assembly of disciples. Once made, then there's the fact that I have to put them into actual practice. As the Abbot has said, 'You have to digest all that you learn and put it into practice. That is the most important part of Buddhism.' We are told that we all have the Buddha nature, but it's impossible to get off cheap. We each have to do the work. We can't expect someone else to cultivate for us, any more than we can expect someone else to eradicate our offenses. Buddhahood can't be bought. In the final analysis we each have to take ourselves 'back home.' A comment from a fellow-cultivator sums up quite well the situation we are in:

'Having encountered the Dharma, we learn that if we do things right this time, we will get to do things right every time.'

How can we not try our best?"