

A Snake Comes to Hear the Dharma

-reported by VBS staff

On June 20, 1982, at the City of 10,000 Buddhas, about sixty members of the fourfold assembly were holding evening recitation ceremonies as they circumambulated the Hall of Ten Thousand Buddhas while chanting, "Namo Amita Buddha." As the assembly filed back into the Buddhahall from their walk outside, suddenly, to their surprise, they found a snake lying stretched out straight across the threshold of the front door. The snake was about four feet long, thin, and had the markings of a rattler. Some people were so frightened, they froze on the spot.

The Patrolling Officer suggested that the snake be taken away. At that time the Venerable Abbot entered the hall and said with a smile, "No need! All living beings have the Buddhature. This snake has come to draw near to the Triple Jewel and to listen to the Dharma. We should not drive it away."

The snake didn't act like an ordinary snake. It laid itself out flat by the doorway, and although people passed by it as they walked to and fro, it showed no signs of being intimidated and did not threaten or strike out in fear. It was extremely tame and compliant. After the Abbot ascended the Dharma Seat, he said, "Tell the snake that he can enter the hall to listen to the Dharma." Thereupon the snake "heard" and slowly crept in. Without disturbing anyone, it crawled around the Buddha hall a full circle, as if paying homage by its circumambulation, and then quietly settled into a back corner of the hall for the entirety of the Dharma lecture.

The Venerable Abbot spoke as follows:

The Buddha himself said, "All living beings have the Buddhature and all of them can become Buddhas. It is only because of living beings' false thinking and attachments that they have not been able to certify to the virtuous characteristics of the Thus Come One's wisdom."

When we understand that all living beings have the Buddhature, that all are capable of becoming Buddhas--if we *really* understand the meaning of the Buddha's words--then we will not want to kill, or steal, or engage in sexual misconduct, or take intoxicants. Why not? Because if we kill, it is just as if we were killing the Buddhas of the ten directions and the three periods of time. All living beings are manifestations of the Buddhas. But because of a single unenlightened thought, living beings give rise to the three subtle marks: the mark of karma, the mark of manifestation, and the mark of turning. Because of this, they run farther and farther away, and they sink in the bitter sea and forever lose the True Way. This is a very simple principle; it's a shame that all of us have neglected it. We cultivators of the Way should further make the following contemplation: "All living beings were parents of mine in past lives and all are Buddhas of the future." Since they are parents of ours from past lives, we should think of ways to be filial to them; to cross them over so that they can leave suffering and attain bliss, get rid of birth and death, and no longer turn in the revolving wheel. Since they are also the Buddhas of the future, we should respect them. Although they are not yet Buddhas, in the future they will certainly become Buddhas and since they will accomplish Buddhahood, even while they have not yet become Buddhas, we should still respect them. We should regard all living beings as if they were

the Buddhas of the ten directions and three periods of time. If we think in that way, we won't be impolite or irreverent toward any living being, nor will we want to bother or harm them in any way. We should be devoid of such wrong attitudes.

As for living beings, they include not only those that can be seen with the physical eyes, but also those living beings that can't be seen, such as ghosts, spirits, immortals, demons--they are all living beings. And since they are all living beings, we should be impartially reverent toward them all. We shouldn't look down on any one of them.

This evening we found a snake lying by the front door. The snake is a living being. But because he manifests a snake body, many people are afraid of him. When you look at him he appears to be a snake, but actually he's capable of thousands of transformations. He looks like he's right there, but actually he is capable of disappearing. He appears to be quite small, but actually he's very big. He also knows how to mount the clouds and ride the fog--he can roam freely in empty space. Most of us can only see this snake's body but can't recognize his actual powers. Since he has come to draw near the Triple Jewel, you shouldn't harm him. In the future, when he accomplishes his cultivation, he will be crossed over. He belongs to the category of Mahoragas of the eight-fold division of gods and dragons. When you see one of those of the eight-fold division like him, you shouldn't drive him away.



As for this snake's origins: Way back in the Chou Dynasty some four thousand years ago, this snake was a minister in one of the minor countries of Chung Kuo (China). Once, he spawned the wicked intention to usurp the throne. Thereupon he dipped a short dagger into a wine decocted from the poisonous *chen* bird, and hid the dagger in his sleeves. Drawing near to the emperor when no one else was watching, he stabbed him in the back, killing him instantly with the lethal poison on the

knife. of the Son of Heaven, not only did this minister *not* manage to rise to the throne, but his rebellious act startled the people and angered heaven. At the moment of his death he brought forth a thought of intense resentment and hatred, and immediately was reborn as a poisonous snake.

In this world there can be said to be two kinds of forces: the force of good and the force of evil. Diametrically opposed to each other, they are the proper against the deviant, *yang* as opposed to *yin*, pristine whiteness as opposed to darkness. Those who pursue good exhaust their efforts to cultivate blessings and wisdom, and from the momentum of this force of good, they can become immortals, sages, Bodhisattvas, and ultimately Buddhas. On the other hand, the power of evil is equally strong. Those who pursue evil exclusively deal in affairs that cannot face the light. With ghostly thoughts in their minds, they foster an energy of wrath and evil that grows stronger every day. At present the earth is populated with poisonous snakes and dragons of all kinds. These wild beasts are not visible to the ordinary flesh eye, yet in reality they permeate all lands. Ultimately, what are these poisonous creatures? They are just the greed, anger, and stupidity in peoples' minds which have materialized to assume snake-like appearances. The many natural and man-made disasters, as well as "flying corpse" spirits, goblins, weird essences, nightmare ghosts, plagues, epidemics and so forth are all by-products of these ominous snakes roaming at large. They specialize in robbing people of their wholesome energies and life-force, spreading doubt and dissention everywhere, fanning the fires of war and strife, causing insanity and the myriad forms of psychological illness.

To return to the story of this particular snake: After it fell to a snake body, it concentrated on deviant practices and eventually became a snake spirit. Its powers were considerable, such as being able to fly up into the heavens and bore into the earth. And it delighted in terrorizing people. Its behavior was no different from that of some "quack" Buddhists nowadays whose sole aim is to wreak havoc within the Buddhadharma and bring about its destruction.

The snake's antics went unchecked all the way up to the Sung Dynasty. By that time it had turned into a colossal sea serpent. Inhabiting the rivers and streams, it brewed horrendous tornados and storms. A single playful sweep of its tail would overturn boats and drown hundreds of unwary travellers and merchants. For years the area around where it lived came under a shroud of dread and misery.

Then help came. An eminent Sanghan possessing lofty Way Virtue and spiritual powers appeared on the shore of the River and remonstrated with the snake. When the serpent heard the rebuke, it flew into a rage and appeared in a gigantic form in an attempt to scare the Dharma Master. Its python body stretched out several thousands of feet, spanning the entire river from one side to the other. But the Dharma Master remained unmoved in the face of that ghastly sight. With his Dharmas of summoning, hooking, and subduing, he waged battle with the snake. The two remained locked in combat for three days and nights, neither side taking a break for food or sleep. Finally, the snake was defeated.

Once bereft of its spiritual powers, the snake could only surrender. The Dharma Master then spoke Dharma for it, explaining to it how all things are suffering, empty, without a self, and impermanent, and that only one's karma follows one incessantly. The snake was exhorted to give up its thoughts of harming, to bring forth thoughts of kindness and compassion, to mend its evil ways, and thenceforth, to do only things that were beneficial to other beings. After listening to the wonderful Dharma, the snake obtained the purity of the Dharma eye. It received the three refuges and five precepts. Thereafter the Dharma Master ordered it to retreat to a certain magical cave to cultivate, and to no longer disturb the populace.

Several hundred years have passed since the Sung Dynasty. The snake, meanwhile, having pursued good Dharmas, has by now become a member of the eight-fold division of Dharma protecting spirits. Its python body is now replete with wondrous changes and functioning. Its only purpose in coming to the City of 10,000 Buddhas is to hear the Dharma.

At this point one of the women spoke up. "A few weeks ago we saw the snake at the door of the Buddhahall at Joyous Giving House (women's quarters). Someone was concerned that it might be a rattler, so she put a cardboard box over it, placed a heavy board on top of the box and then slid a flat board under the box, thereby trapping the snake inside. Then she placed the entire box in a large gunny sack, secured the top of the sack and took the snake off the grounds of the City. When she opened the sack to release the snake, there was nothing inside. No wonder. It has spiritual powers!"

The Abbot smiled and agreed, "I recognize this snake too. Way back when I was in Hong Kong over twenty years ago, this snake used to frequent Tze Hsing (Celebration of Kindness) Monastery on Lantau Island. (This is one of the Bodhimandas that the Venerable Abbot established during his sojourn in Hong Kong). It came to listen to the Dharma. Some of the lay devotees, unable to bear its snake-like appearance, captured it in a tin can and walked quite a distance away from the temple, thinking to release it there. But when they opened the tin can, the snake was nowhere to be found. And now that the City of 10,000 Buddhas has been established in America, it has taken it upon itself to fly across the ocean to come and protect and support this Way Place."

Thereupon the Abbot concluded with these words:

Living beings who study the Buddhadharma must deeply believe in cause and effect. If you don't plant an evil cause, then naturally you will not reap an evil fruit. If you plant a good cause, then in the future you will certainly reap a good result. Cause and effect are not off by a hair. So it's said:

*If you kill someone's father, someone will kill yours.
If you kill someone's brother, someone will kill yours.*

You should not feel that harming other people is a good deal, because harming people incurs the worst type of loss. Why is this? It's because, as it's said:

Heaven's virtue is to cherish all that lives.

Heaven doesn't like any living being to harm any other living being. When we understand this virtue of cherishing life that is shared by heaven and earth, then we shouldn't err in cause and effect. So it's said:

Bodhisattvas are afraid of causes, but they are not afraid of results.

The Bodhisattva is very careful to plant good causes on the causal ground. But if he were to make a mistake in the process, he would admit to it, look it squarely in the face, and accept the retribution. He would never gripe to heaven or blame other people. And you say "Why does this have to happen to me? Why must I take this suffering?"

You probably haven't figured out yet that if you hadn't created the causes in the past, you wouldn't be undergoing the results now.

Today we have discovered this member of the eight-fold division who has come to listen to the Dharma and so we have discussed its causes and conditions. As it's said:

*It's only because of a single mistake
That it becomes impossible to turn back the tide.*

I know that there are those among you who find this story incredible. If you don't believe in it, you can go ahead and try things out for yourselves. But if you have genuine faith, then you shouldn't harbor any doubts about cause and effect!