

SCENES FROM ORDINATION

Transmission of the Vajra Brilliant Jeweled Precepts at the City of 10,000 Buddhas

by Ch'ing Liang

"ANOTHER LIGHT IS RELEASED, CALLED DISPELLING HEAT. THIS LIGHT CAN ENLIGHTEN THOSE WHO VIOLATE THE PROHIBITIONS. IT UNIVERSALLY CAUSES THEM TO RECEIVE AND UPHOLD THE PURE PRECEPTS, TO BRING FORTH THE RESOLVE, AND VOW TO CERTIFY TO THE PATH THAT REQUIRES NO TEACHER."

THE AVATAMSAKA SUTRA

Worthy Leader Chapter 12

Three-thirty. A brisk November morning. As soon as the clap, clap of the wooden boards sounded, she got up from her sleeping cushion and folded her blankets. Today was the day, the occasion they had been bowing towards for more than three years. Today they were going to receive the full ordination. At the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas, it is a standard requirement that those who set forth from the home life undergo a period of intensive training period which lasts three years: During that time both male and female novices are fully instilled with the ascetic discipline that would qualify them for full monkhood or nunhood. They have been bowing consistently every morning and evening, repenting of karmic obstacles, and practicing a variety of other Dharma-doors to bolster their spiritual morale and cultivation.

As the first rays of the Autumn sun crept over the brown shingles on the roof of Great Compassion House, she and some fifteen other novices assembled in the main hall. They all wore black *hai ch'ings*--the long ceremonial robe with the butterfly sleeves--and their five-piece sashes. Each novice held in his or her hand the sitting cloth, a patchwork of black, red, and blue, folded neatly before each one. With palms placed together most reverently, they knelt on the stone paved corridor leading to the Akshobhya Buddha Hall.

In a while the ten Masters came out in file--the Upadhyaya (Precept-Transmitting Master), the Karmadana Master, and the Acharya (Teacher and certifying Master of Rules and Comportment); behind whom were the seven certifying Masters. Some of the Masters had flown from Los Angeles and Taiwan, especially for the occasion. It was a most international gathering of High Monks, comprising of Americans, Chinese, Ceylonese bhikshus of the Theravada tradition and so forth, exemplifying the flavor of the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas--Orthodox Dharma that transcends all confines of race and sects.



ALTERNATE BOWING OF VOWS TO HELP ERADICATE KARMIC OBSTACLES

The entire ordination consists of Three Platforms:

The First Platform marks the transmission of the Ten Novice Precepts. During the Second Platform the full 250 Bhikshu and 348 Bhikshuni Precepts are conferred, and the Third Platform culminates with the transmission of the ten major and forty-eight minor Bodhisattva Precepts.

The First Platform has now officially begun. First the name of each of the Ten Masters was read aloud. The novices came before them, unfolded their sitting cloths with meticulous attention, and made full prostrations before each of the masters, then the incense praise ensued. As they intoned "With incense and flowers we request; with incense and flowers we welcome. We, disciples with a single heart reverently make this offering...", the rich scent of Chandana incense filled the air. In their minds they silently beseeched Shakyamuni Buddha, Amitabha Buddha, and all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas of the three periods of time and the ten directions, as well as all the sages and worthies of the sangha, to grace the Way-place with their compassionate light, and to certify the transmission. They also implored the dragons, gods, and the eight-fold division of Dharma-protecting spirits to guard and maintain the Precept Platform, ensuing it's safety from all demonic disturbance. As the transmission of the Complete Precepts is a most sacred and holy ceremony, in full accordance with tradition, the entire ceremony was barred to the laity.

After the Ten Novice Precepts were conferred, next came the transmission of the three sashes, bowl, and sitting cloth (*nisidana*). As it is said in the Vinaya,

*WITH YOUR ROBES AND BOWL, FOREVER KNOW
CONTENTMENT.
DO NOT HOARD WEALTH OR TREASURES.
CHERISH FEW DESIRES AND PRACTICE PURE CONDUCT:
SUCH A ONE IS CALLED A BHIKSHU.*

SUTRA OF THE MINDFULNESS OF THE PROPER DHARMA

The three robes, the five piece, seven piece, and nine piece sash, bowl, and sitting cloth are the hallmarks of a left home person--officially his or her only possessions. One should praise these objects above all worldly valuables or treasures. They are the emblems representing the road of Bodhi which guarantees escape from the "Burning house of the Three Realms," and which leads to the City of Nirvana. As those sacred symbols of faith were passed on to them, the novices together recited the verse for transmission of the robes.

*GOOD INDEED, THIS GARMENT OF LIBERATION,
SASH OF THE SUPREME FIELD OF BLESSINGS.
RECEIVE IT NOW RESPECTFULLY ATOP MY HEAD,
AND IN EVERY LIFE WILL ALWAYS PUT IT ON.*

Since it was a case of vowing to in every life put it on and never parting from it, it only follows that the affinities of leaving the home-life are by no means coincidental.

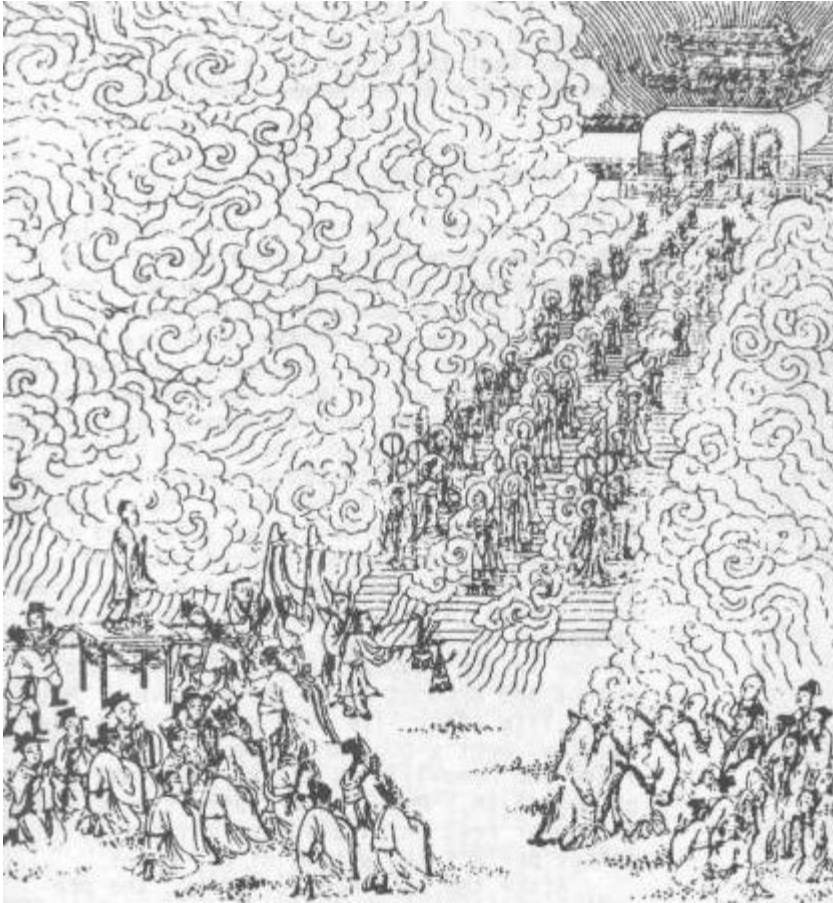
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After the completion of the Precept Platform, the Assembly took a break for lunch. During the meal offering in the Buddha hall, the place where she was standing afforded a view out onto the courtyard of Great Compassion House. The late morning sun had poured a sheen of golden mist on the lawns. A strong breeze stirred up the old oak trees, sending dry Autumn leaves flying. She watched how they whirled about madly in space, spiralling around and around, and finally one by one, made their descent to the ground. The image was sharply etched in her mind. Here they were, weary travelers who had finally decided to shave their heads, don the dyed robe and receive the full precepts. Just as the tired Fall leaves return to the soil, so they had renounced the mad dance of the world to take refuge in the Buddha's household. At that moment she brought forth the resolve, "May I, in life after life be born in the Middle Country, meet a good and wise teacher, and leave the home-life as a pure youth with proper faith. May I never retreat from Bodhi, and never rest until all sentient beings together perfect the Wisdom of All Modes."

After the high meal offering, the preceptors came out of the Buddha hall first. They spaced themselves out on the broad promenade--Bodhi Avenue--that led to the dining hall, kneeling on both sides of the road, waiting for the Ten Masters to pass.

It was a lovely day. Ukiah Valley was ablaze with fall colors: gold and fiery-red maples and spruce, blending perfectly with pale blue sky and white puffy clouds that hovered over the undulating rages that encircled the Bodhimanda. A refreshing breeze blew from Wonderful Enlightenment Mountain situated to the North east, and sweet perfume of cedar and pine trees wafted in the air. As she knelt there on the roadside, with palms together and eyes closed, her thoughts came to a standstill and her mind became lucid, like still waters. Suddenly, a vision started to unfold right before her mind's eye: the Buddhas of the ten directions were silently descending to the Way-place. They came riding on a

vast ocean of clouds, and all of them were adorned with the thirty-two marks and eighty minor characteristics. Some of the Buddhas were seated in their mobile palaces which were replete with floral wreaths, floral parasols, jeweled canopies, streamers, brightly colored flags and tents--a sea of countless adorning objects of unexcelled ornateness and fascinating splendor. Magnificent Dharma Protecting spirits stood in awesome attendance surrounding the Way-place. Each one brandished vajra pestles or jeweled swords and spears. A gigantic white canopy shaded them from above. The boom! boom! of the Heavenly Drum sounded in the distance, reverberating throughout the Dharma-realm.



Legions of Bodhisattvas and worthy sages of the Eternally Abiding Triple Jewel of the ten directions arrived in streams, from different countries, as many as the atoms in empty space. Dragons, gods, mighty generals, gold-winged garuda birds, a host of foot-traveling spirits and space-traveling troops--all in glorious regalia--arrived in droves at the Bodhimanda. And so she realized in fact, that in every Way-place where the precepts of the Orthodox Buddhadharma was transmitted, the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas of the ten directions invariably come to testify to the transmission. They emit great light to show their approval.

"THE WORTHIES AND SAGES OF THE PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE, HAVE LEFT BEHIND THE BONDS OF THE CONDITIONED. ALL OF THEM TAKE THE PRECEPTS AS THEIR SOURCE, THEREBY ARRIVING AT A PLACE OF PEACE AND SECURITY."

THE MULASARVASTIVADIN VINAYA

The atmosphere was hushed, stern, awesome, and strangely peaceful. Her mind cleared up like a bright mirror. Memories from an ancient past surged up in her consciousness. Stark and vivid images of other Way-places in other lands flashed across her mind like movie frames--instantaneously--for the entire "film" must have been aired in a matter of a few seconds only. She saw herself together with her Dharma peers, assuming the roles of Bhikshus, Bhikshunis or lay Dharma Protectors, in different Bodhimandas, different cultures and lands, throughout many lifetimes. They each had various different names and guises, different affinities and conditions, different foods and drink, different root-natures, different nationalities and so on--all different; yet underlying all the differences was an uninterrupted homogeneity that transcended all confines of time and space. They were heirs to the Buddha's most noble lineage--they were representatives of the imperishable holy order of the Sangha. It was the power of vows, brought forth and renewed every lifetime, as well as the grace and protection of all Buddhas, that brought them together again and again. Throughout all rebirths, their mission was to spread the Dharma to every country, to lands as many as fine dust motes in empty space. Although space and living beings could be exhausted, but their vows never end. They came here especially to propagate the proper sagely teachings, to glorify the Triple Jewel, to purify and adorn all Buddhahands. At that time, these verses from the *AVATAMSAKA SUTRA* reverberated in her mind,

*"WHEN I CULTIVATE TOWARDS BODHI,
I WILL GAIN THE KNOWLEDGE OF PAST LIVES IN ALL
DESTINES.
I WILL ALWAYS LEAVE THE HOME-LIFE AND CULTIVATE PURE
PRECEPTS, WITHOUT OUTFLOWS, NEVER BROKEN, AND
WITHOUT STAIN..."*

*"MAY ALL WHO CULTIVATE WITH ME
ASSEMBLE TOGETHER WITH ME IN ONE PLACE,
OUR KARMAS OF BODY, MOUTH AND MIND THE SAME,
AS WE CULTIVATE AND STUDY ALL PRACTICES AND VOWS.
WITH ALL ADVISORS, GOOD AND WISE WHO AID ME,
BY EXPLAINING SAMANTABHADRA'S DEEDS,
I VOW TO ALWAYS CONGREGATE TOGETHER:
MAY THEY NEVER BE DISPLEASED WITH ME."*

AVATAMSAKA SUTRA

Universal Worthy's Conduct and Vows

Chapter 40

The ordination is a sanctified ritual, as old as time itself, reaching back to the deepest resources of our collective consciousness--our Buddha nature. And because the Dharma is just this way, eternally abiding and incorruptible, the Precept transmission will last forever and ever, to the end of time. By the sheer power of vows and merit and virtue, the Buddha's seed will never be cut off.

* * *

After lunch, the ceremony resumed. Next in line was the transmission of the Bhikshu and Bhikshuni Precepts. It commenced with the questions about purity, during which the novices were queried as to whether they had committed heavy offenses in this life, such as the Five Rebellious Acts, or any other violations that could call forth eight difficulties as retributions. The Four Dharmas of Reliance were transmitted, followed by the Four Parajikas for Bhikshus and Eight Parajikas for Bhikshunis. During the platform, Karmavaca was enacted in three pronouncements. The Precept Transmitting Master asked three times, and the Karmadana, the Teaching Master, and all the Seven Certifiers replied three times, testifying that the ordination was legal, that is, in full accord with the proper Dharma.

They had now received the full Bhikshu and Bhikshuni Precepts. "Bhikshu" is a Sanskrit word, and it has many meanings, three of which are mendicant, frightener of Mara, and destroyer of evil. The Precepts, or *Vinaya*, also carries many connotations. The word means destroying evil, taming and subduing, good at regulation, getting rid of starvation, and many other meanings as well. The Vinaya is called the *Pratimoksha* code, meaning "liberation" or "special liberation," because through the Pratimoksha code, the cultivator obtains a path of liberation which is special, elevated and unique. Therefore, the Buddha, not fearing trouble, repeatedly counseled his disciples to sternly and purely uphold the Vinaya, the moral code.

"IN THE AGES FOLLOWING MY NIRVANA, DURING THE DHARMA ENDING AGE, YOU SHOULD REVERENTLY HONOR THE PRATIMOKSHA CODE LIKE SOMEBODY IN THE DARKNESS COMING INTO LIGHT, ALSO LIKE A DESTITUTE PERSON COMING UPON A TREASURE TROVE. THE PRECEPTS ARE YOUR GREAT MASTER. THE EXISTENCE OF THE PRECEPTS IN THIS WORLD IS NO LESS AUSPICIOUS THAN MY PERSONAL PRESENCE IN THE WORLD."

*BRAHMA NET SUTRA PREFACE ***

**Now available from BTTS.

"THE BUDDHA ALSO TOLD ANANDA, "AFTER MY EXTINCTION, THE VINAYA IS YOUR GREAT TEACHER. IT REPRESENTS THE PROPER DHARMA LONG ABIDING IN THE WORLD. IF THERE ARE DOWN TO FIVE BHIKSHUS WHO CAN UNDERSTAND THE VINAYA, THEN THE PROPER DHARMA WILL CONTINUE TO DWELL IN THE WORLD."

Being aware of instructions as pointed and evident as the above, the novices all realized in their hearts that this bequest was invaluable, unequalled in the world. The moral code is the direct pathway to enlightenment, the eternal paradigm of conduct for both gods and humans. The Vajra Brilliant Jeweled Precepts are inherent in the self-nature of all living beings. The fundamental pure Precept substance is within each of us, not gleaned from outside. It does not increase on the part of the Buddhas, nor does it diminish on the part of living beings. Therefore, in the *BRAHMA NET SUTRA* in which the Bodhisattva Precepts are laid out, the Buddha said,

"THE VAJRA BRILLIANT JEWELLED PRECEPTS ARE THE ORIGINAL SOURCE OF ALL BUDDHAS, THE ORIGINAL SOURCE OF ALL

BODHISATTVAS, AND THE SEEDS OF THE BUDDHA NATURE. ALL LIVING BEINGS POSSESS THE BUDDHA NATURE... THESE PRECEPTS OF DHARMAS ARE RECEIVED AND UPHELD IN UTMOST REVERENCE BY ALL BEINGS OF THE THREE PERIODS OF TIME. THEY ARE THE PRECEPTS OF ALL BUDDHAS; THEIR SOURCE IS THE PURITY OF THE SELF-NATURE."

And yet, although the precepts are inherent in our natures, living beings have since beginningless time become defiled and lost, and so, in order to realize Proper Enlightenment and cross over the teeming multitudes, the very first thing a cultivator has to do is to lay down a solid foundation for his Way-karma?. And that foundation begins with upholding the precepts. From holding precepts, one gives rise to samadhi, and from samadhi one produces wisdom. The three-tiered non-outflow study is an ultimate dharma of all Buddhas. And so in the *BRAHMA NET SUTRA* it also says,

"PRECEPTS ARE LIKE THE BRILLIANT SUN AND MOON, ALSO LIKE LUMINESCENT NECKLACE GEMS. BODHISATTVAS MULTITUDES NUMEROUS AS DUST MOTES, ATTAIN PROPER ENLIGHTENMENT FROM THEM."

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Although the steps leading to the final ordination were by no means easy, honed with trails and hard work which demanded genuine yielding, patience, and unwavering resolve; she knew that now having received the Precepts, to uphold them purely would be harder still. But, just because it would be that difficult, it would also be the most important work of a sangha member. With pure Precepts there can be a strong Sangha, a pure field of blessings, acting as a final refuge for bewildered living beings who are blown about by the cruel winds of karma, as the present kalpa rushes on to its imminent annihilation.

How fortunate they were to be able to cultivate at the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas! Here at the City, the very air is infused with the proper, auspicious and righteous energy that alone can rectify the fast-crumbling "burning house." Instead of curtailing their movements, the precepts gave them moral discipline, protection, and a sense of calmness and tranquility nowhere else to be found. The Venerable Abbot, their teacher, often said,

"In the past, in the big Way-places in China, the Precept Platform would last fifty-three days. During this period, all the novices from the temples of the ten directions would flock together to the big monasteries to receive the rigorous training in comportment, rules and precepts. But here at the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas, the very day you shave your head and don the *kashaya* robe is the beginning of the Precept Platform." Therefore, over three years ago, the novices began their training. They had bowed at least one hour every morning, and evening-- though many of them bowed more often than this. They gradually stretched the hours and increased their concentration. Bowing is a magical dharma--the act of prostrating the entire body in homage signifies genuine humbling of oneself. It is an age-old practice of worshipping and lauding the sages. Although to their western-trained "scientific" minds, the bowing at first seemed strange and unnatural, but very soon they caught on to the fact that in this very simple act of worship is hidden one of the most powerful tools of the Buddhadharma. For every time one bows sincerely in repentance and reform, inevitably he or she would obtain a response. Bowing is the best way to tear down the ego. In order to become worthy vessels of the pure Dharma,

they had to be emptied of a sense of "self." The continuous bowing that they had worked on over the years exercised an inconceivable effect on the psychs; it chipped and chattered away at the monstrous mountain of karmic obstacles, the blockages of "self," so that in ways unbeknownst to their conscious minds, they found themselves more empty, lighter, cleaner, braver, ever more receptive and ready to answer the calling that lay ahead.

Then, as the time drew near, the 108 day Precept Platform officially began. There were lectures on the Shramanera Precepts, Bhikshu and Bhikshuni Precepts, and the Bodhisattva Precepts, as well as constant drills in reciting from memory the Daily Vinaya and 53 mantras, which are standard requirements for all novices before they are ordained. The last couple of months were extremely busy, the schedule purposely arranged so tightly that there was no space for false thinkings but instead of feeling flagged or tired, they always found themselves more energetic everytime they made it past a new hurdle. They were filled with an awakening to supreme expectations, and in their young minds there dawned a new rejoicing.

*"HE DOES NOT DEFILE THE BUDDHA'S HOUSEHOLD, NOR
ABANDON THE BODHISATTVA PRECEPTS: TAKING NO DELIGHT
IN WORLDLY MATTERS, CONSTANTLY HE BENEFITS THE
WORLD."*

AVATAMSAKA SUTRA

Ten Grounds, Part I

Ground of Happiness;

First Ground**

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When the Three Platforms were completed, the assembly recited the Verse of Transference dedicating the merit to living beings of the Dharma realm. As she came out of the hall she felt a new peace and stability, a growing sense of mission and responsibility that now lay ahead. In her ears the bequest of all Buddhas echoed over and over again.

*"OH, GREAT ASSEMBLY! WITH SINCERE FAITH BELIEVE
THAT IN THE FUTURE BUDDHAS YOU WILL BE,
AND THAT I HAVE ALREADY ACCOMPLISHED BUDDHAHOOD.
YOU SHOULD EVINCE SUCH FAITH,
THEN PRECEPTS YOU WILL FULFILL...
WHEN LIVING BEINGS RECEIVE THE BUDDHA'S PRECEPTS,
THEY ENTER THE BUDDHA'S POSITION.
WHEN THEIR STATE IS IDENTICAL TO GREAT
ENLIGHTENMENT,
THEY ARE TRULY THE BUDDHA'S DISCIPLES."*

BRAHMA NET SUTRA

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