

Across the Sea of Suffering in a Boat of Vows

-by Bhikshuni Heng Tao

Before the Avatamsaka Assembly of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, before the Venerable Abbot and before this Great Assembly, I, Disciple Kuo-jing would like to make the following repentance and vows.

First I would like to repent of the killing that I have done since beginningless time. Ever since I was a child in this life time, I have eaten meat, and it's not known how many creatures I have harmed or killed; I have also killed many insects, even if often non-deliberately. I know that any such acts of killing injures the seeds of Great compassion.

In my cultivation now, the reason why I still haven't subdued my mind of contention and anger, is because those living beings inside my nature are still demanding repayment, I am sorry I have hurt them and killed them in the past. I repent of this offense and I vow that from this life onwards, of all the merit and virtue that will accrue from my cultivation I do not want even the tiniest bit for myself, but will transfer it completely to my karmic obstacles and the living beings within my self-nature, so that they will be quickly crossed over. Further, I vow that from this life onward, in life after life, I will be a vegetarian, even in my mother's womb that is, I will always be born in a Buddhist family of proper faith, and not a family of deviant knowledge and views; from the moment I emerge from my mother's womb I will begin being a vegetarian. And this is forever.

About two and half years ago I made a vow before the Assembly, that in my dealings with my Dharma peers, whether they be left-home people or lay-people, I would not develop any emotional relationship with any of them. This is a vow that is not easy to keep, because I'm a beginner in the Way. And although through my body and mouth I have kept this vow, I find that my thoughts have at times strayed from this vow. About a year ago, I brought forth a thought of fondness towards a Dharma sister, and broke my own rule, and that had resulted in months of demonic obstacles. From that painful experience I learned that love and hate are reduced to a single movement of the mind. I cannot have such a single thought arise. Therefore, I want to make that vow again, and promise that I will be even more resolute and more pure in keeping it until I can perfect it. My only aim is, as a pure member of the Sangha, to influence all my Dharma peers to bring forth the resolve for unsurpassed Bodhi. I vow to start with myself, that is, to be as pure and to be as unsticky as I can as a left-home person. I too wish to act as a model who inspires credibility and faith in the sangha.

If in my cultivation I have encountered obstacles, I know very well that it is just a case of cause and effect. And in no way will I shirk from receiving retribution that is due me. The obstacles that I encounter in this life are direct results from having vexed many living beings. Therefore, my cultivation is not always very smooth. I am more than happy to pay back my debts because I know that if I do not clean up my accounts, I cannot get off the turning wheel. But before this assembly, I want to say this to all my karmic obstacles and past debtors: I will be glad to repay whatever is coming to me, but I will NOT repay it through sexual embrace in this life, or in any future life. I will do anything to the point of giving up my life to repay my former debts, but I will not repay them through sexual

actions with any other living being. I would rather die than do that. But I have a much better solution to offer my previous debtors: if they will let me cultivate and be pure, and quickly accomplish my Way-karma, then I can transfer all the merit and virtue to them so they can quickly become Buddhas. I will never again involve myself in the causes, conditions, or karma of vexing or injuring any living creature.

Also, two and a half years ago I made a vow of silence. At that time I specified that the only exceptions to this vow would be when acting as an interpreter for the Abbot, and this includes any meetings. Originally, the purpose of making such a vow was not to hide behind noncommunication, but rather, to take some time out to still my mad mind, and to stop creating bad mouth karma. But meanwhile, I want to develop the discriminating wisdom to know when to talk, and when to keep my mouth shut. During the last half-year, the Abbot has used numerous expedients to teach me that there are no fixed dharmas, and that I can't become attached to my silence. He's compassionately teaching me to remain flexible and yet not get out of bounds. In the past months, I've been told specifically to talk whenever we travel on extended Dharma-tours abroad, or when we go to Gold Wheel Temple in Los Angeles. Sometimes when special guests arrive at the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas, I am told to take care of temple business, which involves a certain amount of talking. As the Way-place grows, there is need to take care of business from time to time. Now is the best time to receive on-the-spot training as to when to speak and when not to speak. I completely trust my teacher's ability to know my root-nature and to guide me in the right way, so I will follow his instructions compliantly and sincerely. But I am determined to hold this vow in the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas. All of my Dharma peers have also been extremely helpful in helping me to protect my vow, too.

Further, I vow to learn from all Buddhas to speak true and actual speech, non-dual speech, and supremely skillful speech. I vow that everything I say would be motivated with a straight and honest mind, and to use principled and timely speech that will inspire faith in the Triple Jewel. I vow never to use harsh or angry words, harming or cruel words, but instead to always use gentle, considerate and wholesomely clever speech that suits every occasion.

Specifically, I vow to cultivate according to the Ninth Ground, that of Good Wisdom; and the Tenth Practice, that of True and Actual Conduct of the Avatamsaka Sutra. The Bodhisattva on the Ninth Ground is a Dharma Master who has obtained unimpeded and fearless eloquence. There's nothing more that I want to do in this life than to be able to speak the Avatamsaka Sutra and match its teachings with my practice. From now until the time when I perfect the requisite wisdom and skill to do so, I will always speak the wonderful Dharma extensively for all living beings without fatigue or rest.

In life after life this disciple will always follow close to the Venerable Abbot and be his assistant in any way possible in helping him to propagate the Dharma. I will take as by model the Youth Good Wealth from the AVATAMSAKA SUTRA, and forever be compliant and filial to my teacher's instructions, and never oppose him in any way. For as many transformation bodies he assumes to go throughout the Trichilocosm to teach living beings, this disciple will do the same. In each destiny and every different Way-place, I will stand by his side. And until his vows are completely fulfilled, I will not rest. I know that offering up my entire life, and body, and mind to one good and wise advisor is just the same as making offerings to all Buddhas of the three periods of time, and ten directions.

In life after life I will cultivate the Bodhisattva conduct of the Avatamsaka Sutra.

I will certify to all the seas of the Bodhisattvas' conduct and vows, all Bodhisattvas' paramitas, all Dharani -gates and liberation door, all seas of samadhis and Wisdom light; I will also know the seeds and root natures of all living beings and be able to speak Dharma to each according to his or her needs, up to and including cultivating and perfecting the Ten Powers, the Four Fearlessnesses and the Eighteen Uncommon Dharmas of a Buddha. And in life after life I will work without rest and without stop until I bring all these doors of practice to perfection.

Because this disciple has a problem with obtaining proper concentration, I vow that I will in life after life particularly cultivate this Dharma of having proper concentration and proper reception, particularly according to the Fifth Practice of the Ten Conducts, the practice of Freedom from Deluded Confusion, to the point that in entering and coming out of the womb, my mindfulness will not be scattered; I will know clearly where I have come from and to where I will go. I will also cultivate to perfection the Treasury of Learning and Upholding of the Avatamsaka Bodhisattvas.

For any Buddhadharma that is heard in all Buddha-dharma Assemblies, down to a single phrase, a sentence or a chapter, I vow to remember them all and have that memory intact. In recent years I have tried to commit to memory certain passages of the Avatamsaka Sutra, but I find that as soon as I get some remembered I forget them or I can't remember them well. I know that the reason for this is that my Dharma Eye is still occluded with desire, hence not bright and clear. So I pray that the sea-like assembly of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas will lift that veil of obstructions and help me attain the purity of the Dharma-eye. I also vow in life after life to remember past lives, not only one or two, or three, but all my past lives from beginningless times, and also all living beings' past lives from beginningless time, and then be able to speak to them about cause and effect in the most true and proper way to inspire them to bring forth the Bodhi resolve.

I also vow that in this very life I will certify to the fruit of non-outflows, that I will attain the five eyes and six penetrations. I will not entertain any selfish or ulterior motives behind this resolve. And upon obtaining these powers I will use them as clever expedients in transforming living being; I will never abuse these powers.

Being aware of my very heavy karma, I vow to in every life practice the dharma of repentance and reform, not only as means to cross over my own karmic obstacles, but also to dedicate the merit on a large scale, so as to atone for the collective wrongs of all living beings throughout the Dharma Realm.

I also vow that in every life I will perfect the cultivation of the precepts, translate them, and propagate them so that all beings will be brought to purity through cultivation of the brilliant vajra jeweled precepts. I vow that I will never seek for fame or benefit for myself, and this includes not going out for any position at all within Buddhism. I do not want to be number one. And if circumstances require that sometimes I come under the spot light, then it would only be as an expedient to inspire the Bodhi resolve in other living beings' minds. I will never seek for self-glorification or go on an ego trip, nor will I pull power-trips on anybody.

Only in the past six months or so have I come to realize that this next vow is not just a vow I wish to make in this lifetime, but rather one that I have made in many lives past. After coming to Buddhism I have realized that living beings suffer terribly from illnesses, and that all illness stem from the mind--from greed, anger, and stupidity, and from bad mouth karma. And in order to relieve living beings of their illnesses, I pray to Kuan Shih Yin Bodhisattva, to Jun Ja Li Bodhisattva, and Medicine Master

Buddha that they would teach me the method to cure illnesses and bring relief to all living beings, and ultimately to cure their minds. I know that this Dharma can be brought to perfection provided I cut off all sexual desire, and I vow to do just that, because otherwise this Dharma cannot be brought to accomplishment.

I also vow to cultivate the dharmas of the Shurangama Mantra until I bring them to perfection. The Shurangama Mantra is the very representative of the Proper Dharma, because it staves off all heavenly demons and those of outside ways. I will not engage in thoughts of contention or use force to subdue these demons and those of outside ways, but instead, I will cultivate the Samadhi of Compassion, and get rid of my own hatred and my own thoughts of striving. I will gather them in with Way-virtue, influencing them to submit to the Triple Jewel, to protect the Dharma, and particularly to bring to accomplishment the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas.

Finally, I want to take this vow that is found throughout the Ten Grounds Chapter of the Avatamsaka Sutra as my own vow, as a guide in all my actions: In everything that I do I will never be apart from mindfulness of the Buddha, mindfulness of the Dharma, and mindfulness of the Sangha, up to and including not being separate from mindfulness of the endowment of the wisdom of Wisdom of all modes. And among all living beings I will be a leader-- supreme, be especially supreme, be wonderful, be subtle, be superior, and unsurpassed, up to that I will be someone with the wisdom of all wisdoms upon whom one may rely. And "to be a leader" in this case does not mean to vie to be number one, but rather, to offer up my life in service to the Triple Jewel, to be as pure a sanghan as I can, to see that the Buddha's lineage is never cut off and that the proper Dharma will long abide in the world.

I transfer the merit and virtue from cultivating these vows to living beings throughout the Dharma realm; also to the health and long life of the Venerable Abbot so that he will long live in the world. This is because the Venerable Abbot is the bright light of the world, and if he long lives in the world, then the proper Dharma will also long abide. I also transfer the merit to the very swift success of the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas and my peers, so that they obtain irreversibility from anuttarasamyaksambodhi, and that they quickly accomplish their Way-karma.

I vow to perceive the True Mark of all dharmas, to awaken to All-wisdom which is inherent within my self-nature, and to see all dharmas as level and equal. In order to do so I will bring forth a sincere and true heart at all times. I will perfect the skill of utilizing limitless expedient means to enable living beings to enlighten to the true Mark, and All-wisdom.