

Three Steps One Bow

HENG CH'AU: December 15, 1977: Rain. The fine dust has turned to silty mud. Bow in rain gear at foot of Nipoma Mesa. A sure multiple collision and death was miraculously prevented somehow when a car spun out of control at high speed and headed for us. One could feel a force like a huge hand divert and steer the car away from us and Barry, a man standing with us who had come to make an offering.

Everyone was speechless, especially the two men in the car. Six cars were involved on a narrow slick road and not one injury or collision occurred. Really incredible!

A man named George made an offering and cryptically said, "I've seen your signs all over the place and although I don't understand completely I hope to someday be able to follow and walk the path you walk." He was an American Indian and he left as he came.

Reporters from Santa Maria and San Luis Obispo stopped for an interview.

Lots of fire. Hard to cool down even after meditation. "Who is this so nervous?" I ask myself. While sitting, vivid and detailed memories from childhood in Wisconsin came to me. I remembered scratch marks on the old Studebaker and nooks and crannies in the neighborhood I grew up in that I never would have thought possible to remember. Then smells from the past came as if they were right in the car with Heng Sure and me: smells of cooking food, the fruit cellar in the basement, smells of summer cut grass, etc. Then came sounds--I heard the sounds of doors closing (doors in the family home), the sounds of voices from upstairs, the furnace igniting. How can this be? (They were all so real I wanted to uncross my legs and go outside and find them. But these are just states -- distractions and games of the mind. Keep sitting, don't be moved!)

Even the feelings and attitudes I had when I was 4 and 5 years old returned. It would be real easy to attach and get lost in these states if I hadn't been warned in advance by a good and wise teacher. They are dead ends--pleasant or unpleasant--they are all illusions. "Don't attach to anything."

Inside and outside, all worlds.
The Bodhisattva is attached to none of them
...In all countries and in every direction,
He relies on nothing and dwells nowhere.

Avatamsaka Sutra

HENG SURE: DECEMBER, 1977:

For the sake of all Bodhisattvas I have spoken of the pure practices maintained by the Buddha in the past. Now here in this assembly will the Kind One explain the cultivation of victorious merit and virtue?

Avatamsaka Sutra

Pure practices are done with a pure mind. Cultivation of them leads to the elimination of greed, hatred, and stupidity--the three poisons. They encourage the natural growth of morality, concentration, and wisdom, known as the three non-outflow studies. You can cultivate pure practices anywhere--while driving a car along a dusty country road, or roaming the miles of aisles in your supermarket, or sitting quietly with a group of good spiritual friends and in each place you can be using your very best efforts in cultivation. The work is in the mind. It's called the mind-ground because the mind is like a field. When it is weeded, planted, watered, and tended, up grow sprouts of Bodhi-enlightenment heading for a big bountiful Buddha harvest. When we let the mind go its own way, before long it is choked with weeds and dust. Poison oak and trashy, berry vines will keep you off the path. Hawks will rule it from the sky and coyotes will hunt it from below. Your tranquil, fertile field becomes a battle zone of suffering and fear. Before long someone will drive by and dump a truckload of garbage in your bushes. If the weather is hot, you're ripe for a grass fire which can leave your mind-ground full of ashes. In general, which do most of us prefer, the productive, cultivated garden or the snarled trashy field? We can have either one. The only difference lies in the bringing forth of the resolve to cultivate pure practices.

The fruits of this resolve are victorious merit and virtue. In our cultivation, we have vowed to achieve superior victory, ultimate victory in the biggest battle of all: the struggle to subdue the self, the ego. Why is it such a tough fight? Because it cannot be won by force. Superior victory is won only through patience and hard work. Strong faith, a sincere desire to do what's right and avoid what's wrong, helps us to superior victory.

We must constantly maintain precepts and vows. When practice is pure, tests arrive. Sometimes the tests are obvious; sometimes subtle.

An example of the obvious: We hold the Bodhisattva precepts. These are the ten heavy and 48 light rules for right living. All Buddhas and Bodhisattvas have held these rules—they are the substance, the material of spiritual progress. In a dark world of a hundred twisted roads, the precepts of Buddhism are a broad, level, and lighted highway to peace and happiness. What person in this day and age would believe that real freedom comes from following the rules, and not from running wild like the wind! It's true; most of us have to try it out for ourselves to believe it. After stumbling and falling down enough times on dark roads, after getting dirty and scared and tired, everyone sooner or later comes out of the long night into the bright dawn of the Dharma. Finally we all become Buddhas. Who says so? The Buddha himself, the world's smartest, most kind, and most fearless man. Who doesn't want to be smart, strong, fearless, kind and free? Precepts are the beginning.

Part of the precepts says you shouldn't eat the Five Pungent Plants: onions, garlic, leeks, shallots, or chives, because they increase desire. The spiritual protectors who protect us when we hold the precepts will quickly leave any place that stinks of garlic or onions. (How much the more so for tobacco smoke!) However, most cuisines include these five; we have to be careful about accepting offerings of cooked food along the road to avoid inadvertently breaking the rules. The precept-protecting spirits can keep us out of lots of

situations that would be hard to struggle through on our own. Sitting in a field at lunchtime outside Vandenberg Village, we saw a car pull up and a chubby, cheerful lady pop out. "What can I get you monks to eat? How about a pizza?" We both have been fond of pizza in the past but have cut it out of our diets after taking the precepts. No big loss; there's lots of clean food on this planet, and we would both rather go hungry than say goodbye to our protectors.

Heng-ch'au's response: "That's really a generous offer, but we don't eat garlic or onions, and most pizzas are loaded with them."

The lady: "That's no problem, I'll tell them to take out that stuff. Be right back."

Ch'au: "But the tomato sauce usually has garlic in it, and if it does, we can't eat it."

"Okay, I understand. Be right back!" Zoom! and off she went. We sat down to a cold lunch, no use cooking with a hot pizza coming. Both of us wordlessly agreed that her chances of finding a garlicless pizza were pretty slim. Still, you never know. Ten minutes later, she returned, "Here you are, good luck. Oh, and by the way, the man says there is a little bit of garlic in the sauce, but not very much. Enjoy it!"

Test time. Open the big white box and smell the garlic fuming out of a red and yellow precept-pizza. Nice cheese, nice tomatoes and mushrooms...close the box and set it out on top of the car and go back to peanut butter and raisins. We were washing up after lunch pondering the reason why so few people believe that saying, "No", to old habits helps go towards the good and avoid the bad. Suddenly, a dark cloud of negative energy walked up—a crazy man in a yellow windbreaker, eyes gone pale and unfocused, talking nonsense to himself in a low and slow voice: "...in Marine Corps, '49..oh yes, we know China and India.... uh, huh...you'll see how it hurts..." I could sense Heng-ch'au's defenses move into high gear; the Great Compassion Mantra clicked on automatically in my mind and recited clearly and evenly, as if by itself. The man stood ten feet away and tried to walk closer but couldn't. Something held him back. His hands searched through his pockets and he rocked back and forth, muttering and staring at us without eyes. This was a sick man! The tension broke after a few minutes and he turned and walked away as if blown by a clean wind. The air cleared. We felt as if the sun had come out again. What stopped him from approaching us? Only those same precept protectors that don't eat garlic or pungent plants. Five minutes later a pair of friendly women strolled by with an offering of fruit and nuts. After hearing about our diet they were pleased to relieve us of our garlic-precept pizza. Keep the rules and it all works out the way you want it to. Break the rules, and you're on your own.

The principles of patience and detachment, are found everywhere in Buddhism. Patience is a paramita, a "crossing over," a "perfection," one of the six major jobs before a Bodhisattva. Detachment from all states of being is fundamental to a Bodhisattva's career.

"...In the midst of mundane dharmas, he attaches himself to none of them;
He practices all victorious Dharmas yet remains unattached to them."

AVATAMSAKA SUTRA

Patience and detachment from dharmas are prime testing areas in cultivation. The ego/self expresses its need for : existence at these points. For example: Suppose you are a musical person and you take some small pride in your ability to carry a tune. As a cultivator of the Way, your musical output each day is considerable among the hours of daily ceremonies and recitations. It's a good situation for one with your talents. However, the cultivator who stands next to you in the assembly is not musically talented: in fact has a tin ear and always sings off key and out of time. This person is not aware of any distinction or failing in his style of music, but to your finely tuned sensitivities, each wrong note is like a fingernail on a blackboard. What to do? If you are really cultivating to reduce your ego and to replace your discriminating mind with the level equality of the Buddha, you will restrain the impulse to create a problem where basically no problem exists. You will be grateful for the feedback on your attachment, and you will "return the light" and investigate what it is inside. Who is attached to hearing sounds a certain way? That's how it appears when your mind is clear and concentration is good. Then the test appears. A Buddha-recitation session is going on and the sour-note singer is walking just behind you. Every off-key sound pierces your heart like needles. You recognize the state and you resolve not to be moved by it. Why? Because you are cultivating the Buddha's wisdom, and the Buddha teaches that all dharmas are the same; they are equally illusory. As the Venerable Abbot explains it:

"If you practice seeing all dharmas as being the same, then gradually; bit by bit, they will be and you will be free of your attachment to the world. If you see certain dharmas as special, then you will forever be attached to the turning wheel."

You are bearing the grating noise of your own discriminating mind night and day. The pressure is building inside. After five days of mindful patience, you find yourself at the teastand for a brief cup of tea. Up walk two young people who do not have your resolve. They are gossiping about the session, and they mention how awful so-and-so's voice is and how hard it is to concentrate when they hear that off-key voice in the hall.



*THE FOURFOLD ASSEMBLY GATHERS TO WORSHIP IN THE
KUAN YIN HALL OF TEN THOUSAND BUDDHAS*

TEST TIME:

Do you let your patience go and join in the gossip? Do you bear it past the extreme and keep the rules? If you do, when you return to the hall you may notice things have changed. No longer do you make discriminations between good and bad sounds. That bit of sense input no longer robs your energy. You are now free to be happy and unmoved in the midst of any kind of noise. Because you were sincere in your desire to reduce your own ego's control of your mind, you got a response. Through hard work and patience, you earned that much liberation from the suffering of the mundane world.

If on the other hand, you were turned by the gossip and you fell back into your old habits, when you returned to the hall you would find the off-key voice that much harder to ignore. During the next hour you would pull the person aside and ask him to recite more softly. This would cause him to strike up false thinking and would obstruct his cultivation for the rest of the session. By doing this bad deed you would create offense-karma that could carry you down to the gates of hell. It's said,

"Better to move the water of a
thousand rivers
Than to disturb the mind of a
cultivator of the Way"

All of this trouble was caused by your sad little ego trying to assert itself over your own better judgement, and it succeeded!

"When the mind moves,
 one hundred matters come into being.
When the mind is still,
 one hundred affairs do not exist"

The difference lies in the power of your resolve to get enlightened. This is what Manjushri Bodhisattva is asking Worthy Leader Bodhisattva to explain. When you really bring out your heart and say, "This is what I want to do. I want to be just like the Buddha, no matter what it takes of me to get to his understanding and vision," then the merit and virtue begins to naturally gather around your every thought, word, and deed. If your resolve is not firm, then you will always slip and slide, running back and forth, correcting mistakes; now looking out, now looking in, a foot in each of two boats going opposite ways on the river.

HENG CH'AU: December 16, 1977:

My Heart feels Clean and Unbounded.

Thom Halls, photographer from the SAN LUIS OBISPO NEWSPAPER, came out to shoot some pictures. As he pulled up an angry motorcyclist was tailgating him and nearly got wiped out when Thom pulled off the highway.

The biker came over then and yelled at us; "Why don't you find some place better to do...to do.. to do whatever you're doing!" He really wanted to fight, but he got no response, so he peeled out in a cloud of dust and went back over to Thom and said, "As for you-----!!" and tried to get him to fight. Thom didn't do anything. Afterwards, Thom was a little shaken. He had just driven out to film two peaceful monks. "At first I ignored that biker, but the longer I thought about him, the more I realized I let that guy walk all over me. That burns me up!" He said, "How do you handle people like that?"

"Don't take on their vibrations; don't get angry. Some people speed and get angry because others go too slow. Some people go slow and get angry at those who speed. We try to keep to the middle; not too slow, not too fast; not angry, not overjoyed, just right."

"For sure. That's the way to do it. I could see keeping to the middle and not getting bothered, but it's hard."

"Yes, it is, but if someone doesn't do it, the bad vibrations spread until,

"...families are fighting with families, and countries are fighting with countries..."

WATER AND MIRROR REFLECTIONS
Ven. Master Hua

"Boy, that's how it works, isn't it? My wife has studied Buddhism, and the little I know I really like. Buddhism seems more personal; I mean it takes things here." (He puts his hand to his heart.)

Thom asked for some method to control his anger. "I try hard, but then something comes up and I can't hold the lid; I lose my patience." I suggested the Master's, "Patience Mantra," which goes,

Patience, Patience,
Gotta' have Patience
Don't get angry
Swo pe he

"Hey, I like that!" Exclaimed Thom with a smile. "Say it again and I'll write it down. It's got a good beat too---"

He is able to bear all manner of evil, and in his mind he is totally level and equal toward all beings without any agitation;
Just as the earth is able to support all things,
He is able to purify the perfection of patience.

AVATAMSAKA SUTRA
Bright Dharma
Chapter 18