

# *Three Steps One Bow*

## *Bhikshu Heng Ch'au*

Gold Wheel Temple  
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Dear Shih Fu, and the Great Assembly,

An ancient author once wrote,

He who has the least scrap of sense, once he has got started on the great highway has nothing to fear as long as he avoids turnings (lit. deviant). For the great highway is level and safe, but people love by-paths.

For six years we have stayed away from the distractions of T.V., radio, newspapers, worldly books and magazines. But recently we relaxed this vow, thinking that we were uninformed, and that by studying a bit of the news we could use the Dharma to shed light on current events and modern trends. This was a mistake, a "by-path."

I should have known better. For example, once while bowing the highway someone gave us an illustrated pamphlet on YIN/YANG and the Five Element theory. It was the first non-sutra thing I had looked at since we began. It hit my mind like an ax cleaving wood. I went out to bow and found all these Taoist symbols and YIN/YANG charts polluting my mind. I started to think about them, but soon my brain got so afflicted that I thought it would burst apart. My head was on fire and clogged with over-stimulation and over-loaded. I felt as if I stepped from a speeding car onto the freeway, forgetting the car was racing along at 70mph. As soon as I forgot what I read and concentrated, my mind returned to purity and peace. I concluded that thinking and worldly knowledge obstruct wisdom's practices.

There was a time in Los Angeles when I exercised in a parking lot. I glanced down at a newspaper page the wind blew by. I read one sentence and saw one photo and all my virtuous practice's steam evaporated on the spot. I felt as dirty as the oil-stained littered asphalt lot I was standing in. I vowed to keep my six senses in the Way-place after that and never again defile my mind by running outside after the "news."

The most disturbing and defiling experience took place when a well-intended Bhikshuni at the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas played a radio news special on the Jonestown tragedy, so that we could all learn about what was happening in the world. That one hour of radio did more damage to my spirit and my psyche than anything we met while bowing on the highway--from street gangs to typhoons.

We may sometimes feel that we are missing out on things by not keeping up with world news, or that we don't know what's happening. But actually just studying the Sutras, Shastras and the Vinaya and listening to the Dharma-news makes us the most well-informed people in the world. As for benefiting others, there is no finer gift to mankind than the gift of 100 per cent pure Dharma.

Recently I looked at some articles and news clippings on current deviant trends in religions, science, phony cult leaders etc. My first reactions were rage, anger, fighting, and indignation. My mind's waters seethed with emotions and false thoughts for days, even weeks after. I felt cold and scattered, defiled and common. This worldly news somehow cuts off the circulation of spiritual energy. My "smart bugs" liked the new input, but my spirit mourned the loss.

I should have trusted these natural reactions and first thoughts. Instead, I listened to my second thoughts and "smart bugs" that said, "You should investigate all kinds of worldly teachings and keep up with the news so you can write and lecture on it. People should know about this! It's your responsibility to expose the deviant." So, I ignored the wisdom spot I had learned to trust and follow inside, and went along with what my discriminating intellect came up with. A mistake. As soon as one relies on consciousness instead of wisdom to cultivate, it's all over. Thinking turns us into fools. The Abbot once told us on the highway,

Don't listen to him. Don't listen to me. Listen to yourself. If it's the Tao, advance; if it's not the Tao, retreat.

As soon as I took one step off the Buddhadharma's safe, broad and adorned Great Highway, I entered a tangled and dangerous by-path. Keeping up with the news felt like turning my back on my own parents, the Buddhas and Bodhiattvas, to run with a group of passing strangers or brigands. Perhaps this reaction of being unfilial was the power of vows calling me back to my original intent and true mind. I've made a vow to merge in substance and nature with the AVATAMSAKA SUTRA, and to protect and propagate it for all living beings. By studying worldly things instead, I was abandoning my vow and the main highway. It's as if a Good Knowing Advisor inside saying,

Say! You fellow, why are you taking this road? What rare skills do you have to deal with all that poison?

And poison it was! Heng Sure and I suddenly found ourselves talking about rights and wrongs of other people. We never did that before! Now we were criticizing and gossiping about scholars, scientists, politicians, intellectuals, cult leaders, and so forth. One morning after one of these talks I felt great shame, seeing how far I had strayed from the Buddha's spirit. I felt as if I had broken precepts and lost the privilege of wearing a sash, as if waking up and finding the Way-place vandalized. I nearly cried, and got up immediately and went out to bow to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, vowing never to do that again.

Each bit of worldly news that comes to us would send the mind reeling down another by-path on a great crusade to expose the villain and to save the world—like Don Quixote going to battle against the windmill. Only after the sails went slack and the energy was spent did I realize I had been way-laid again. I thought to ask the Abbot's advice, but each time the question never surfaced. Yet the Abbot, as if reading my mind, on three or four separate occasions, out-of-the-blue, mentioned and praised sticking to the AVATAMSAKA SUTRA, a Dharma-door we began with. He once said point blank,

"Too much Dharma, worldly or even transcending is also a kind of greed. I used to read a lot when I was young, but now I don't study so much. Most important is to get rid of all desire. Basically, that's what all the teachings and sutras say. So it's said,

When confused, ten thousand books are not enough;

When enlightened, one word is too much."

But despite the Master's timely teaching, the log-jam persisted: should I expand and investigate worldly writings or stick to the Buddhadharma?

Few days ago I had a disturbing dream where Heng Sure and I wandered around the grounds of the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas looking for the pure Dharma. But the energy at the City was all stirred up and turbid. We walked until we found the source of the pollution. We came upon a huge majestic statue of a man set atop a large marble block (like the Lenin statue in Leningrad Square, or like Abraham Lincoln in the Lincoln Monument). I read the inscription and was dismayed and shocked! I said to Heng Sure, "But this statue is just a layman, a common worldly person! And the words are worldly words, not those of the Buddha. What is a worldly person doing on this throne at the sagely City!?! There should be statues of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas--of world-transcending sages and worthies, not statesmen, emperors, scholars, and great benefactors. This is a sagely City! How can this be?"

Behind the monument was a lecture hall and classroom where a worldly professor prepared to deliver a lecture to the students. He wore the robes of a Sanghan, but without a sash, and had not shaved his head. The atmosphere in



the classroom was ordinary and common, unlike the rarified and light-filled atmosphere of a Dharma lecture. I felt and thought that the classroom professor and his worldly teachings were out of order at the City. They should have been below the Dharma, the Sangha, and the Buddhas, not above and supplanting them.

I awoke from the dream full of doubts regarding my urge to get into touch with worldly news and studies. Clearly, just a half-dozen articles I had read had taken me further away from the

Buddhadharma into the depressing snarl of worldly thinking. "Forsaking the root for the branches." Moreover, I was becoming embroiled in the personalities and faults of the authors--scholars, journalists, intellectuals who, although brilliant, did not cultivate non-outflow wisdom. So even though my relationship with them was intellectual and only through printed words, the defilement and unwholesome influence was just as real and strong as if I had gone back to lay-life. As it's said,

Draw near rouge and we become red;  
Rub against the ink and we become black.  
When we touch brown we turn brown;  
Coming into contact with yellow we become yellow.

Drawing near to and following good friends and wholesome advisors is the very first and important causal condition for gaining All-Wisdom. Conversely, by drawing near to evil advisors we turn our backs on the Buddha's will and drift far from the Tatagatha's house-hold. So it says in the AVATAMSAKA SUTRA,

*With bad advisors forever left behind,  
From paths of evil one departs for eternity.  
Soon to see the Thus Come One's limitless light,  
And perfect Samantabhadra's supreme vows.*  
AVATAMSAKA SUTRA  
Universal Worthy's Conduct and Vows  
Chapter #40

We end up like the people we associate with. So although I am in a pure Way-place and do not talk with people, I have been hanging out with bad advisors in my mind by studying and thinking about all this worldly trash-- for sure a dense thicket and dangerous road.

Yesterday the Abbot said to a visitor about us, "They continue to practice three-steps one bow, and then write in their journals if they feel inspired. Most important, they study the AVATAMSAKA SUTRA, and apply its principles to their cultivation."

As I heard these words I felt ashamed, knowing my bowing and study-gate had narrowed to where I was bowing less and less each day. My memorization and transcription of the AVATAMSAKA SUTRA had collected dust. Whenever I went out to bow it was like a breath of Spring coming into a stale attic or dingy cellar of the mind, and studying the Sutra was like being catapulted from a rank sewer to the summit of a snowy, virgin mountain. After poring over some article on the latest scientific horror or deviant guru, the fire would rise to my head, forcing me to stop reading and thinking, and go bow or sit in Ch'an. I'd say to Heng Sure, "Too many words; this stuff is draining. I'm burning rubber inside." Bowing instantly cleared my over-heated brain, and doused the fires. My mind regained clarity and calmed down within only a few minutes of bowing, or from a single passage of the Sutra.

Then, last night, after visiting the Abbot, I had a dream. In the dream I came upon a beggar. He was a drifter, dressed in tattered clothes, dirty, unshaven. Everything in his life was neglected and unattended except for one thing: A small notebook. He sat on the ground, bent over this small notebook, totally absorbed. Nothing else was important to him except the words on the pages. He

recited them, mulled over them, memorized them, pondered them. The world passed by, the weather and seasons came and went, but he just sat there talking to himself about those words on the paper.

Out of curiosity I drew near him to see what he was so engrossed in. It was the AVATAMSAKA SUTRA! He was contemplating a passage from the Flower Treasury World chapter (Chapter 5). He asked me about its meaning and I responded instantly to the excitement and enthusiasm the Sutra awakened in me. Together enjoying deep and natural affinities, and delighting in the good energy surrounding our meeting and the Sutra, I was no longer aware of the beggar's unkempt appearance and dirtiness. His heart was so pure, his intent so lofty that by contrast everything around him seemed dirty and dull. As we discussed the passage a pure youth walked up and joined the discussion. The youth was radiant, bright yellow-gold. He listened intently and then got up to fetch a broom. He pointed to the ground that was covered with a brownish-red sawdust and said, "We should sweep away all that red dust."

I awoke and remembered the words of the Abbot, "Most important for cultivators is to not seek outside. A lot of cultivators make this mistake and search far and wide looking for the Tao in heaven, but the Tao is not in heaven. It's right here under your own feet. So you want to sweep clean. And although you sweep clean, also know that basically there's not a thing, so where can the dust alight? Just don't have so many false thoughts and all the demons will disappear."

The dream lingered in my thoughts. After morning recitation I went to my room to meditate. Before sitting I decided to study for a half-hour. The first volume I happened to lift out was the Flower Treasury World chapter, just like the dream! I opened a page at random and read the text:

Chapter Five  
The Flower Store Sea of Worlds  
Part I

Then I read the Abbot's commentary,

"In investigating the Buddhadharmas you must be patient. It is most important not to have attachment to self, or to a view of self. You should use your wisdom to illumine the real mark of all dharmas. Once you do this you will certainly understand the Buddhadharmas. If you use the ordinary human mind, you will never understand it. Those who study the Buddhadharmas shouldn't just intellectualize it. "...All you need to do is get rid of human desires completely, then the heavenly principle will flow forth and manifest wisdom." I realized that I had been impatient. The whole point and "trick" to cultivation is to hold the mind even to a single condition and to deeply enter one gate until there's penetration. When one connects, they all connect. But the closer one gets to penetrating the black lacquer barrel, the hotter the drill burns. At this point it's very easy to go down a side-path to cool off and replace the pressure. The slightest distraction or enticement to quickly get over the hump can ruin the whole smelt. One thought is all it takes to scatter one's Way-karma and cut off the heavenly principle. It's just like a train derailing. *-continued next issue*

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