

Three Steps One Bow

Bhikshu Heng Ch'au

The Abbot's commentary continued,

"Therefore, you must be sure to be continually diligent in ridding your mind of these impurities. The true principle in all of the sutras is the same. They all come back to the basic teaching, that people must get rid of sexual desire and stop their bad habits. You need only understand the principles as they are explained in one sutra and you'll find the other sutras are pretty much the same.

It's up to you to constantly return the light and illumine within, to get rid of your bad habits, and wash your minds cleaner gradually day by day. Don't look outside. All that is genuine is within you yourself, and not outside."

I was stunned. How perfectly these words fit my state. The text proper began by describing how worlds are adorned and purified by the Bodhisattva's pure conduct and great vows. As I read it, I couldn't help wonder what would have happened to Good Wealth if on his journey in search of All-wisdom he had stopped at the library or newstand. He would have never arrived at the Vairochana Tower, or met Universal Worthy, or entered the Dharma Realm.

The Abbot's commentary followed the text. Again as I read it my mind was blown open!

"When a Bodhisattva cultivates the Bodhisattva practices, there are times when he goes down many sidetracks. What is a sidetrack? A sidetrack is the wrong path."

Instantly I recalled a dream I had a few days earlier after reading one of these worldly articles. In the dream I was stumbling along a treacherous sidetrail far from the main road. I followed an evil advisor over boulders, crevices, violent streams, eroding cliffs that fell into the sea, and deep abysses. There were wild beasts, danger, and uncertainties on all sides.

The commentary continued,

"But although in his cultivation he may take the wrong path, it doesn't matter. He should just know how to turn back... Most Bodhisattvas are not without this fault, but having unwittingly entered the path of confusion, they know how to turn back. If one doesn't know how to turn back, then the more one cultivates, the farther one gets away from the Buddhadharma. One loses one's way and goes about in confusion. Being lost, one is sure to stumble right into the hells. There would be no danger if one knows to turn back and set oneself on the great highway."

Then came the clincher. It was right out of the dream that followed our interview with the Abbot that day. The commentary said,

"Be wholly clean and purely concentrated without the slightest bit of defilement. Sweep your mind spotlessly clean." As the Fifth Patriarch's disciple, Great Master Shen Hsiu said:

Time and again diligently sweep it clean; let no dust alight.

It was just like the pure youth in my dream who handed me a broom and said, "We should sweep away all the red dust."

Namo da fang gwang fo hwa yen ching.

Hwa yen hai wei fo pu sa! No more worldly books for me.

Our lives are a quest for true principle, and there is no higher principle than the Buddhadharma. Why piddle away this precious time on the mountain of jewels schleping in the excrement and sawdust of worldly knowledge and views? The highway method is best: bow a lot, don't talk so much, study the *AVATAMSAKA SUTRA* only. Let its principles sink in slowly, deeply, as they connect with and illumine our daily experiences. Enter one door deeply; don't dance on the steps of a hundred doors. Open the true mind; close the false books. Investigate the hua t'ou, not the library. Practices illumine principle; principles guide practice. And more important than amassing knowledge is to amass inner merit and virtue, and to certify to the true and actual meaning.

I used to read everything and anything as a layman. Now I just want to read the Buddha's works. Being well-informed is a kind of greed that cuts off the magical nature and obstructs the heavenly principle's flow. An ancient author said,

Watch over what is in you, shut up the avenues that entangle you with
externals--much knowledge is pernicious.

Another author said,

True wisdom is different from much learning. Much learning means
little wisdom.

Some people ask us, "How can you give up so much? Don't you feel you're missing out on everything?"

Although it appears like leaving home is taking a big loss, actually it's in NOT leaving home that we take the greatest loss. And it's in trying to keep up with everything that we miss out on the best thing in life--Buddhahood. Last night the Abbot said to the L.A. assembly that Arhats got to be Arhats because they put an end to the ten thousand things.

"They did not seek outside. Because they did not seek outside, they put an end to all outflows. If you like to talk, it's an outflow. If you like to look at sights, it's an outflow. If you like to listen to sounds, it's an outflow.

"'Oh, I'm really done for,' someone wails. 'I can't look or listen. It's not okay? To study Buddhism I can't look or listen? How can I take that?' It is just because of that reason until this moment you haven't become a Buddha," said the Abbot.

The Buddha got to be a Buddha through the power of his own sound. He didn't rely on externals or seek outside. The more he cultivated, the more simple and concentrated his life became, until in the last forty-nine days before his enlightenment he sat alone, unmoving beneath the Bodhi tree. No books, no friends, no discussions--only his vajra-will and a straight mind. After his enlightenment he

taught and transformed countless living beings and benefited the world. Can we say he didn't know what was happening in the world, or that he was uninformed and behind the times?

The *AVATAMSAKA SUTRA* says,

It's like a person who prepares succulent foods, and is himself starving to death but doesn't eat. When one does not cultivate the Dharma, mere study is just like this.

AVATAMSAKA SUTRA

Bodhisattvas ask for Clarification

Chapter 10

If mere study of the Dharma is this way, how much the more useless is studying worldly dharmas!

I studied and researched this "trash" all the way up to my PhD, and then left it all to find a Good Knowing Advisor and return to my original purity. My body, mind, and spirit were starved and sucked dry by what I studied. Sure, there's some truth to worldly knowledge, but it's all one-sided, and never reaches perfect, unobstructed penetration. The stream of ideas, theories, and "news" is endless and always changing, but it never penetrates to the root, or goes back to the source. I fought and protested against war and injustice, spurred in by the horrible statistics and information I uncovered in my research. But that will never change the world and only adds to the fire. The only way the defiled can become pure is by not mixing with the dust. We bring the great benefit to mankind simply by keeping our own mind-ground clean. The City of Ten Thousand Buddhas is a place of refuge and reliance for all living beings. Its value for the world is that the City is NOT the world--it's pure, apart from worldly dust and depression. So many people we meet on the highway told us how much it meant to them just to think and to know that such a pure place existed.

"Even if I never go there, my heart soars whenever I think about that pure and peaceful City of Ten Thousand Buddhas. Just knowing it's there and doing all the good it is doing gives me incredible strength and peace of mind," said one person to us.

"Pure" means only Dharma spoken and cultivated--no worldly dust, there's way too much of that already. Evil is destroyed by increasing goodness; darkness is chased away by increasing the light. Of all the things I remember upon first coming to the Sino-American Buddhist Association as a layman were the Sutra quotes I heard in the lectures. We are all spiritual beings by nature and long to return to the wind and light of our original ground, as flowers reach for the sun and streams return to the sea. The Buddhadharmas are enough. It's everything we need. We may think that by studying worldly knowledge and views, even the news, we are well informed and manifesting expedient wisdom. But in truth we are being milked dry by demons and will end up with empty pockets and a bad case of dust-fatigue. Only when birth and death is completely severed, and the ten thousand things put to an end, only when the work of the great hero is done, can we enter the fire and not be burned. This is the state of a Bodhisattva, Mahasattva who has reached the Seventh Ground and beyond. Only then can he enter dharmas and not be confused by them, and use the power of expedients to return to the flames. Although the fires blaze, he is not burned. Before that level of certification, to mess around with worldly knowledge and views is akin to going to sea without a boat--one is certain to drown.

disciple Kuo T'ing

bows in respect

*His wisdom clearly penetrates the ocean of all dharmas,
And he always happily cultivates the Dharma that leaves ignorance
behind;
Having perfected the accomplishment of merit and virtue which
transcends the world,
He never again cultivates the study of worldly dharmas.*

AVATAMSAKA SUTRA

Ten Transferences

Chapter 25

But what about benefitting others then?

A young disciple of the Master once came to bow with us on the Coast highway. He had just come from the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas where he took the precepts and refuge with the Triple Jewel. He was full of light and great joy. A couple of weeks later he returned, totally depressed and dark. He told us about how all these people had committed suicide in a place called Jonestown, and how the Mayor and supervisor of San Francisco had been assassinated. He felt people were bad at heart and couldn't cultivate to Buddhahood. His Bodhi resolve was hurt.

So how do we know that all of those phony teachers and deviant trends are not the deeds of demons meant to destroy the Proper Dharma in a backhanded way, by confusing people and undermining our faith in our own Buddha-nature? They make us think that there is no such thing as a true Good Knowing Advisor! Certainly there's a danger that unknowing people will follow evil advisors or join these deviant movements. But there's a more subtle and even greater danger that by constantly hearing about so much evil we begin to doubt and despair of our own inherent goodness and capacity for proper knowledge and views. We can begin to doubt all religions and completely lose faith in the heavenly principle that all living beings possess. The more we rub up against the coal, the blacker we become. And soon our spirits are so eroded by this war of attrition that we end up as hedonists, nihilists, or icchantikas.

The young disciple came out to see us because he knew we didn't listen to or read the news. He came out because he heard bad news and wanted to forget about it, not to hear more bad news. He wanted to bow in silence to the Buddhas, listen to the Sutra, and raise his downtrodden spirits. He wanted to believe that people are still good and could cultivate to Bodhi.

Whenever I myself read about these things or hear a lecture on them, I go away feeling hungry for Dharma, as if I lost more than I gained. There is an actual feeling of hunger and thirst we feel for world-transcending sweet dew, and it's more important to our well-being than food. If I don't get the food and joy of Dharma, I feel like a baby that's missed a feeding.

*As one thirsty thinks of icy water,
As one hungry dreams about good food,
As one sick reflects on wholesome medicine,*

As a bee is greedy for good honey;

*So, too, do we in just the same way long to hear these Dharmas of sweet
dew.*

AVATAMSAKA SUTRA

Ten Grounds

Chapter 26