

Three Steps, One Bow

*Excerpts from the Journal of Bhikshus Heng Sure and Heng Chau
Written During Their Bowing Pilgrimage to the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas*

continued from issue #181

Bhikshu Heng Chau

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People believe or do not believe in us at a single glance, well before we utter a single word. Words in themselves don't mean much. What teaches and transforms is invisible and inexpressible and resides in one's attitude. Right words spoken with a wrong mind sound wrong; wrong words spoken with a right mind ring true. We study right words by investigating the Sutras, but it's equally important to cultivate a right mind.

What is cultivation of the mind? It isn't nurturing a high IQ and using cleverness. It isn't the discriminating intellect's realm. Cultivating the mind begins with purity, grows strong with meditation and blossoms into wisdom. First and foremost in developing one's mind is keeping the precepts. With precepts the mind can find true stillness and from stillness, wisdom naturally appears like the moon reflected in calm water. This is the ancient method of all Buddhas. We trust it completely.

The Buddha told Ananda:

You constantly hear me explain in the Vinaya that there are three unalterable aspects to cultivation. That is, collecting one's thoughts constitutes the precepts; from the precepts comes concentration; and out of concentration arises wisdom. These are called the 'three non-outflow studies.'

Shurangama Sutra

We pulled off this narrow coast highway onto an overgrown, farm-wagon path hidden behind a grassy hill. As we sat overlooking the rolling valley below to write in our daily journals, a sleek, black sedan suddenly swerved from the highway and pulled to an abrupt halt next to us. Don't know how anyone could have spotted us nestled back in this remote coastal cranny, but this man did.

He stepped from his car and came right over, squatting down in front of us like a football coach in the huddle. He was in his late thirties, well-dressed, urban and refined, yet obviously troubled and upset.

"I'm sorry to intrude on your privacy, but I saw you praying and immediately pulled over. It was pure inspiration, came right from my bones. I don't usually act so impulsively," he said apologetically, but with self-confidence and strength.

"I don't know how to say this... I'm not the type of person who likes to lean on others, but frankly I'm at my rope's end and desperately need to talk with someone. I saw you two monks and knew at a glance you had the answer," he said.

"Well, we don't talk. We are vowed to silence except to explain our pilgrimage in a few words when necessary. Besides, we are not counselors and have no way to help you," I answered.

"I don't believe that. I don't believe you don't have the wisdom to help me. I just know from one look that you understand my plight. But I don't want to pressure you or break up your practices. Perhaps you could just listen and just let me get it off my chest. Maybe that's all it would take," he asked.

He was so troubled and sincere we couldn't say no. We nodded 'okay.' He heaved a sigh of relief and then told us the story of how his wife had run off with his best friend. How he was on his way to L.A. to find them and to get revenge. Perhaps he had a gun in the car. He was emotionally out of control and likely to do anything. Yet he had enough sense and self-presence to recognize his state.

"I'm not myself right now, but I'm hurting deep inside and feel like I've got to get even, got to settle the score. What do you think, please," he implored.

"Well," I said, "Everything that happens to us no matter how bad it seems or how hard it is to take, is what we have coming to us. This is what the Buddha taught. So it's probably best not to act when you're so upset and confused. That would only make things worse. Let it cool down until you see the situation more clearly."

"That makes a lot of sense," he said, visibly relieved, "but I'm just aching inside with pain and rage and frustration. Feel like I'll explode if I don't do something. What can I do to cool down and take this pain from my heart?"

We gave him the name of Kuan Yin Bodhisattva to recite. He began reciting immediately like a thirsty man takes to cool water. After a few moments of silently reciting he said,

"This may be unrelated, but I just remembered that early on in our marriage we both cheated on each other. Even though we worked it out by talking about it, there was never any peace after. Maybe it's all connected somehow, huh?"

We nodded. The man now saw the seed of karma he planted in the past that brought this present painful situation. The workings of cause and effect are not off by a hair. And so the *Avatamsaka* says,

The offense of sexual misconduct also causes living beings to fall in the three evil paths. If they are born among people, they have two kinds of retribution: one, their wives will not be good or faithful; two, they will not have a retinue that accords with their intent.

Retinue refers to family or one's circle of friends. How exact! His wife ran off with his best friend just as the

Sutra described.

The man was now calm, resigned and clear. He stood up, brushed off his slacks and reached into his wallet.

"I know you don't want anything, but please, for my sake, accept this money. It's my traveling expenses I would have used in going to L.A. for revenge. I won't be needing it now. I'm going back home!"

He wished us well and left reciting Kuan Yin's name.

Bhikshu Heng Sure

December 28, 1978

After the last sitting period at night, I copy out and memorize the Ten Practices chapter of the *Avatamsaka*. The principles I absorb at night save my concentration during the day. While bowing recently, I've had to face huge false thoughts. A tiny moment of careless inattention lets a seed of desire in the gate. It blooms instantly and produces hours of work trying to return to stillness inside.

Thursday, My mind strayed into false thoughts of astrology. On Friday, temptation arose to refresh a memory of old friends. Saturday, it was radios, sound waves and a "great idea" to established a radio station to beam the Buddhadharma onto the air waves. Concentration wavered every-time until I contemplated lines of the Sutra. Without fail the ancient words of wisdom stilled the turbid waters and restored clear seeing. With each review, the Sutra opens wider. It delivers peace of mind again and again.

"I should cause all beings to dwell peacefully in pure, supreme proper mindfulness."

-Avatamsaka Sutra "Ten Practices"

Bhikshu Heng Sure

December 29, 1978

One night, two weeks ago, we parked on government land beneath a big sign. It was posted on the fence surrounding the Pigeon Point lighthouse. The sign pleased deeply:

NOTICE: NO HUNTING, FISHING, KILLING, TRAPPING, OR DISTURBING
ANY CREATURES ALLOWED.

-by order of the Commandant, U.S.COAST GUARD

India flourished under the reign of Buddhist disciple King Asoka. At first Asoka was an evil tyrant who devised a "torture city" to punish his enemies. One day a Bhikshu entered the city. He was a cultivator with accomplishment and the executioners could not kill him. The king was so impressed, he looked into Buddhism, deeply recognized the truth of cause and effect and repented completely of his karma of killing.

Asoka destroyed his death city and made hunting illegal throughout the land. He established huge game preserves and became a vegetarian. As a Dharma -protector, the king greatly glorified the Triple Jewel. Perhaps he encountered the Bodhisattva Precepts and changed his heart:

"A disciple of the Buddha must not collect knives, clubs, bows, arrows, spears, axes, or any other weapons used in fighting or waging war, nor may he keep nets, traps, or any other instruments of evil which may be used in killing beings..."