

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*

Bhikshu Heng Chau

Saturday, December 30, 1978

"TURRITAS CREEK CROSSING"

Mr. and Mrs. Lee from Pacifica drive out with a hot lunch and offer to fix our ailing car. They work on the engine together by the side of the road as we bow ahead to cross Turritas Creek bridge.

A family from Santa Cruz stops to offer support and supplies. "We miss you in Santa Cruz; come back soon, please," they say sincerely. Kuo Li and three of his family stop on their way from Gold Mountain to Los Angeles. They bow the bridge with us.

Midway across the bridge, four burly, hostile men appear and block our way. Violence threatens and we face the prospect of being tossed from the bridge into the nearly dry river far below. Kind words subdue them. They yield, let us pass and wish us 'good luck.' Bridge is narrow, traffic fast and heavy, and so is the energy in the air.

On the other side of the bridge a strange, demented-looking man emerges from the woods and storms over towards us with his nasty dogs. He's wielding an ax, but mellows and lets it fall to his side. In the tall grass off the highway, two men from some religious cult are beating conga drums, chanting and bowing to us.

Sheriff Deputy Bud Hill shows up in the nick of time and parks his squad car nearby, in plain sight, to protect us. The air clears and everyone leaves. As the sun slowly sets and the evening fog rolls in, we transfer and bow to the Triple Jewel and to the Master. Bud Hill tips his hat and gives a hand salute and drives away. End of day. Temperature 35⁰ and falling. Time to meditate, study the *Avatamsaka* and raise our spirits to fight off the hibernation blues that always come with the first winter chill. "Vigor, be more Vigorous!" urged the Master to us in a song.

"Disciple of the Buddha, what is the Bodhisattva Mahasattva's fourth practice of perseverance? This Bodhisattva cultivates vigor. That is to say, number one vigor, great vigor, victorious vigor, especially supreme vigor, most victorious vigor, most wonderful vigor, superior vigor, unsurpassed vigor, incomparable vigor, and universally-pervading vigor."

*-Avatamsaka Sutra
"Ten Conducts"*

Bhikshu Heng Sure

December 31, 1978

Nature doesn't struggle, only when people have desires do struggles begin. Nature blends wind, ocean, shore, mountain, live oak, shrubs, coyotes, blue heron, crickets, sunlight and fog into a perfect harmony. One thought of greedy desire sends echoes of strife and grief rippling through the world like a big rock shattering the perfect mirror of a pond. Nature doesn't struggle because nature doesn't have desire.

Lesson of the Dharma: desire is suffering. End desire and suffering stops.

"Bodhisattvas contemplate the mundane world in this way and reduce their greed for the flavors of desire.

-Avatamsaka Sutra

Bhikshu Heng Chau

Sunday, December 31, 1978

Ice on the ground, frost on the windows. Steep rolling hills with billy goats, sheep and peacocks. Meditate on a quiet mountain-side above the ocean. Too cold to transcribe Sutra at night--ink freezes, hands too stiff. Wait until next day when sun's out to write out passage we translated three nights before. Dharma friends from next town repair car, add oil and new spark plugs.

"The two offerings of wealth and Dharma are equal, without distinction.

-Daily Vinaya

Bhikshu Heng Sure

January 1, 1979

It takes courage not to follow the crowd when they're out to break the precepts. Cultivators show courage when they put principle over personality and take a loss in popularity in order to protect the precepts.

"This Bodhisattva does not seek powers, he doesn't seek status or class, he doesn't seek wealth or affluence, he doesn't seek a handsome appearance, he doesn't seek a king's throne --to all such as these he is completely unattached. He only solidly upholds the precepts.

-Avatamsaka Sutra

"Ten Practices" chapter

Heng Ch'au told a story about his experience in hunting. In Wisconsin where he grew up, everybody hunts and fishes. It's part of "being a man; a yearly ritual to maintain status among male peers. One time the crowd went pheasant hunting and took Heng Ch'au along. They found no "game" in the fields. On the way home, so as not to arrive empty-handed, the group stopped at a barn. The men went inside to flush out a flock of pigeons. As the frightened birds streamed by Heng Ch'au, his heart felt pity and compassion. He could not pull the trigger of his high-powered automatic shotgun. Instead he pointed the other way, deliberately missing the fleeing birds. The men jeered, disgusted, and never took Heng Ch'au hunting again.

By following his heart instead of the crowd, he avoided creating evil karma of killing and directly benefitted both the pigeons and his hunting pals. By taking a stand and refusing to harm life, he moved towards his own liberation and silently influenced others to go towards the good as well. In the *Avatamsaka* the practice of holding pure precepts is named "The Practice of benefitting."

Bhikshu Heng Chau

January 1, 1979

A man stops, bows, and asks us, "I've stopped three times. Could I bow along behind for a while?"

"Are you sincere," I ask him.

"Oh yes!" he says, emphatically nodding his head.

"O.K. If you are sincere, then you're welcome," I reply.

I stopped to adjust my knapsack about a half-hour later and noticed a car full of rude, threatening men pull up alongside the visitor while he bowed with closed eyes and folded hands. They hurled jeers, insults and taunts non-stop, but our friend paid no attention to them and continued bowing. The men pulled out with a squeal of rubber and sprayed him with a cloud of dust, but he kept bowing. Then the car turned around and came speeding towards the visitor and let fly a full can of beer. It smashed on the ground with a violent impact inches from his head. He didn't even flinch. Before leaving, he came up and asked how to recite Kuan Yin Bodhisattva's name.

"Namo Gwan Shr Yin Pusa, Namo Gwan Shr Yin Pusa ... Is that right?" he asked enthusiastically.

I nod assent.

"Thank you. I'll come back again," he says with a big smile.

That's sincerity. The beer can could have killed him had it hit his head. Perhaps his sincerity brought a response. It's said,

"The Sages do not constantly respond. They respond to adequate sincerity. When one's profound and deep sincerity reaches the ultimate point, then one obtains the aid of the Buddhas."

-Avatamsaka Prologue

End of day frost and chill descend. With the short winter daylight hours and cold weather, we find little chance to bathe and shave.

"Have you washed in the blood of Jesus!?" shouts someone from a Passing car.

"We're so busy bowing we haven't had time to wash in anything ... not even water," I think to myself.

