News from the Dharma Realm

Trip to China

Members of the delegation to China included (from left to right) Anthony Tsai, Heng Chang, Heng Wu, Heng Chi, Heng Sure, Heng Ch'au, Prof. Men Yi Ping, and Heng Hsin.

This talk by D.M.Ch'au, given on June 29, 1990 in Wonderful Words Hall, is a continuation of a series of reports by members of the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas delegation to China in the Spring of 1990. See issues #243 and #244 for a talk by D.M. Sure.

I would like to say a little bit about our trip to China mostly from the point of view of living in a non-Western country and then the experience of coming back. The trip we made some years ago to India produced a culture shock of going from the West to the East (India). This time for me, however, the culture shock was experienced not in going to the East (China), but in coming back to the West (United States). I want to say very clearly though, that the culture shock was not in coming back to the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas, because here I felt just fine, very elated and happy to really be home. The only place in the world where I travel that feels like home anymore is in coming back here. Every place else feels "foreign." And this time America felt in many ways more foreign to me than the foreign country I went to.

To briefly outline the trip: we arrived on the fourth of May and stayed in the Shanghai area, mostly at Dragon Flower Monastery (龍華寺). We did some traveling in and around the Shanghai area to visit other temples, such as Jade Buddha Monastery. But most of the time in Shanghai was spent in the preparation and transmission of the Three Platforms of the transmission of the Three Platforms of the Precepts to about a thousand people—six or seven hundred monks and nuns and between three and four hundred lay people. The lay people either took the Five Precepts or the Bodhisattva Precepts.

Incidentally, they don't take the Ten Major and Forty-eight Minor Bodhisattva Precepts as we know them from the Brahma Net Sutra. They take a simplified version that is not nearly as strict. The people who take them consider this revision to be expedient. We stayed at Dragon Flower Monastery until the twenty-fifth—about three weeks—and on the twenty-sixth we took a train south to Ningpo and stayed in that area for a while visiting Way-places such as Ten Tung Sz (天童寺) and Chi Ta Sz (七塔寺).

After a few days there, we traveled by ferry boat to Pu Tou Island and spent about three or four days on Pu Tou Shan, bowing and seeing the island there. Pu Tou Shan is actually made up of two islands—Pu Tou and Lo Chieh, an adjoining island. The combined names are Pu Tou Lo Chieh (普陀洛伽), meaning Potalaka. Pu Tou and Lo Chieh—those two together make up the complete pilgrimage to Gwan Yin's sacred mountain.

From Pu Tou Shan we took a much longer boat ride, about eight or nine hours overnight, back to the Shanghai area. We rested in Shanghai for a day or two and then set out by bus to Jyou Hwa Shan (九華山), Nine Flowers Mountain, the sacred mountain of Earth Store Bodhisattva. We stayed there for about three or four days, climbing the mountain, bowing to the various shrines, then we were bussed back to Shanghai.

After a few days rest, we took an airplane to Cheng Du (成都) and stayed overnight. The next morning we started out by bus—a very rugged bus trip—to Mt. Omei (峨嵋), the sacred mountain of Universal Worthy Bodhisattva. We didn't spend as much time as we anticipated at Omei. Our visit was cut short. After bowing to the mountain, we endured another rugged bus ride back, with visits to the various temples in the Cheng Du area, and then a flight to Taiyuan（太原). We stayed in Taiyuan a few days, getting ready for a long bus ride to Wu Tai Shan (五台山) -- Five Peaks Mountain -- the Way-place of Manjushri Bodhisattva.

We bowed and hiked Wu Tai Mountain for about three days and then took a bus back. Again, this was a very arduous journey because the roads in China are very primitive. Most are under construction or repair, and the type of construction being done is labor intensive. Dirt and gravel with hot tar are poured out of little buckets that people carry. There is no machinery to do the work; all of it is done by hand. So, bus rides are usually long, hot and uncomfortable.

From Taiyuan we flew to Xian (西安). In the Xian area we saw the Way-places of Ven. Sywan Dzang and Ven. Dau Sywan, the Vinaya Master. Also we had an interesting visit to Jung Nan Shan (終南山), South Mountain, outside of Xian. Afterward, we flew back

to Shanghai to rest for a couple of days before taking another trip south to the Soujou area. The trip included visits to Han Shan Sz (寒山寺), Xian Sz (西安寺) and Lingyan Shan (靈岩山), a training academy on an interesting mountain overlooking the Soujou area. There was one other noteworthy side trip to Famen Sz 法門寺 (five or so hours by bus from Xian to the Dharma Door Temple). Here a finger-bone relic of the Buddha was discovered and enshrined.

So that was pretty much the extent of our travels through China. We were able, by talking to people, to learn a good deal more of what is going on all throughout the rest of the provinces. But again, how reliable this information is we really don't know.

Before I went to China I was always under the impression that Nine Flowers Mountain or Pu Tou Mountain or South Mountain were merely mountains by metaphor. I thought that people called them "mountains" for poetic effect, but that they weren't really what we would consider mountains; that the term "mountain" was used because they were Way-places and meant to give you the feeling of leaving the world. But in going there, I discovered they really are mountains, and quite spectacular mountains. Jou Hwa Shan in particular and Jung Nan Shan are just like the Chinese landscape paintings; they rise up abruptly, stand magnificently tall, have incredible rock formations, and are marbled with winding hiking trails.

Many of the hiking trails are laid over with three-foot-wide slabs of stone. I would say that each block probably weighs two to three hundred pounds. They are laid in step by step by step, mile after mile after mile. It must have taken years and years of incredible human effort to lay these by hand.

We watched them being repaired. They are still built and maintained by hand. Men carry them with ropes and bamboo sticks bent over their shoulders. They strain and sweat with each slab weighing sometimes two, three, four hundred pounds and carefully lay in these stairs for people to make pilgrimages. The kind of merit and virtue generated by those who take care of the shrines is inconceivable. And when you see these people doing it, literally giving up bodies and lives in exertion to lay these steps, you really appreciate every step of your pilgrimage.

The four holy mountains are incredible mountains. Some of them are quite dangerous to climb; some of the trails are too steep and demanding for people who are not strong and in very good shape. We all had a good workout even though we were in fairly good shape. The physical rigors of hiking these mountain trails and climbing their heights enhanced the spiritual experience of the pilgrimage.

One of the concerns that our hosts and guides constantly expressed was that we rest a lot and bolster our energies with all kinds of supplements, tonics and the like, which we generally refused. And they felt that since we ate only one meal a day, we would never have the stamina to climb the peaks. They were genuinely concerned. But as it turned out, they themselves, eating three and four meals a day, were the ones petering out all the way along, resting and getting tired and needing more time. We monks seemed to get more

and more strength as we hiked and bowed. I think this says something for the practice of eating one meal a day. Three square meals don't give you the kind of energy you think they will. In fact, if you eat too much, you probably lose energy.

The one impression I wanted to share is this: Buddhism, and I believe every religious contemplative tradition, whether Catholicism, Islam, Judaism, Taoism, or Protestantism, are united by a very clear and common principle; namely, that the world of pleasure, the world of material things is false, illusory, an impediment to spiritual practice, to enlightenment, or to union with God or the Divine. In other words, the path to the sacred comes about through transcending or seeing through the very common, ordinary playthings of material existence. This is particularly true in Buddhism. The subduing of the six sense organs internally, by not uniting with sights and sounds, smells, tastes, objects of touch and dharmas, is fundamental to the first stages of meditation. It is what the Ven. Nanajiviko was talking about last night. He said you develop or cultivate a disinterest in worldly things, even to the extent of disinterest in your own body and doting over it.

Every trip I've ever made to Asia, and particularly this trip, I've found something in the "backwardness" of Asian society and especially Chinese society, that is very conducive to spiritual practice and the contemplative life. The undevelopment makes it a little easier for cultivators to subdue the sense organs. Poor and primitive conditions (and I don't use these terms in a negative way) have the effect of allowing you "to return the light and look inward." The lack of material glut aids contemplation and creates less distraction.

I was keenly aware of this on first arriving in China. I actually felt a kind of relief. "Ah," I thought, "I don't have to guard myself nearly as much as I did in San Francisco or at the airport, where the billboards and the advertisements, the smells, the music and the way people dress and comport themselves is all designed to allure and entice. "That outflowing is the energy in America and most Western societies. Life here travels at a very high speed in the fast lane, hitting all the six senses and telling you to indulge, to enjoy and go out. This isn't to say that people in Asian societies are necessarily contemplatives or meditative, but only that it is easier to be so if you prefer the contemplative life. I found it easier to be more mindful and more pure in the precepts. So, the Buddha said, "With few desires one discovers contentment."

Living in that simple kind of environment where there are very few pleasures or diversions naturally stills the mind. I seldom heard any kind of music, except traditional Chinese music every once in a while floating around in the air, and I saw almost no billboards. Everybody rides bicycles, so you are not bombarded with all these images of flashy cars each with a different shape and color. The clothes people wear are generally simple—drab, colorless, and not eye-catching.

In the countryside, everything goes at a much slower pace. People get about on donkeys, water-buffalo, horses, bicycles and mostly on feet. Once into that environment, you start moving a little bit at the pace that rice grows, because that's the way and the rhythm of people's lives. China is an agricultural society. One starts slowing down to the speed of

nature and becoming more mindful. You grow more aware of what you are doing, and less interested in going out and getting something, because there is not much to get.

China is a very poor country, unlike the United States where you go to a shopping mall and have so much variety and so much money in your pocket, thinking, "What am I going to buy?" In China there is little money in anybody's pockets and little to buy. The shelves are basically empty, and what commodities do exist are not the things we hanker to buy, coming from America or the West. Here we are spoiled with high quality goods and luxuries. Perhaps that is why Lao Tzu wrote,

> *"The five colors confuse the eye,*
> *The five sounds dull the ear,*
> *The five tastes spoil the palate.*
> *Excess of hunting and chasing makes minds go mad.*
> *Products that are hard to get*
> *Impede the owner's movements.*
> *Therefore the Sage looks within, not outside.*
> *Truly, he rejects externals and lays hold of what is within."*

And so this kind of environment can be very conducive to non-outflowing. It's actually a good environment to cultivate in. However, I have to qualify this and say that I still find it easier to cultivate in the United States rather than China because we enjoy religious freedom here. So, an irony, a twist is present: although the natural environment of a "backward" country like China makes it easier to cultivate non-outflow wisdom, the actual social and political realities of setting up Way-places where people can freely get together and cultivate is occurring in the Western countries.

And so, in the Western countries I think one of the things we're going to have to deal with in a very real way in the future is how do you gather back your six sense organs in the midst of a highly material culture, geared and polished to lure and force them outward? This is precisely why a place like the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas is so important: it is neither too Western nor too Eastern. The City of Ten Thousand Buddhas takes, I feel, the best of both those worlds and combines them in a unique and special way.

to be continued...