

# *Water-Mirror Turning Back the Tide of Destiny*

*Elder Li Tung Sywan*

*Essay and commentary by Tripitaka Master Hua*

Elder Li Tung Sywan was a native of Taiywan in Shansyi province. He lived during the Tang dynasty. He had wisdom that surpassed most people, and his conduct transcended the mundane. He wore a hat made from birch bark. His clothing was fashioned from hemp cloth. Regardless of whether it was winter or summer, he walked barefoot. Each day he ate only one biscuit and ten dates. Cultivating the truth and nourishing his nature, he had no disagreement with the world.

One day he met an extraordinary monk who transmitted the *Flower Adornment (Avatamsaka) Sutra* to him. He penetrated the Sutra's meanings and principles, and he reached a profound understanding of its main purport. He prepared to write a treatise on it, and he set out to look for a still and quiet place. He met a tiger who carried the Sutra on its back. Together they arrived at the entrance to a cave. The tiger bowed to the ground, and the elder went inside the cave.

The cave was spacious and clean. However, there was no water. In the middle of the night, a violent wind arose and knocked down a huge tree. A sweet spring emerged from the hole.

Every night, the elder emitted a light from his mouth that shone as brightly as if it were daytime. He wrote a treatise on the *Flower Adornment Sutra*. Each day, two heavenly maidens brought food and made offerings of the four study room treasures. Four years passed, and the treatise, containing forty volumes, was completed. After that, the two maidens did not come anymore.

When he was ninety-six years old, the elder sat upright and passed away. The crown of his head emitted white light, which shot straight up into the sky. At his funeral, white-spotted deer circumambulated his grave, crying mournfully. White cranes also hovered around the area for a while and then flew off.

A verse of praise says:

*A hat of birch bark and hemp clothes,  
A skinny face and an unusual bone structure,  
Remaining barefoot in winter and summer,  
He had dates for food through spring and autumn.  
Coincidentally he met an unusual monk  
Who transmitted to him the Sutra as profuse as motes of dust in  
countries.  
A treatise was written in forty volumes:  
The great cause for accomplishing Buddhahood.*

**Another verse says:**

*Endowed with extraordinary features, this remarkable man was  
outstanding and did not mix with the crowd.*

*Bearing thirst and enduring hunger, his goal was to transcend the  
dust.*

*A ferocious tiger carried the Sutra on its back and helped him find  
a quiet place.*

*Heavenly maidens brought him food as he finished his masterpiece.  
Profound meanings were revealed, layer upon layer.*

*Expounding the Flower Adornment, new doors were opened in  
succession.*

*Penetrating the esoteric and arriving at transformation, he reached  
the treasure-trove.*

*Sentient and insentient beings enter the Buddha's city.*

**Commentary:**

**Elder Li Tung Sywan was a native of Taiywan in Shansyi province. He lived during the Tang dynasty.** In China there are natives of Shandung province and natives of Shansyi province. The natives of Shandung are fond of fighting, whereas the natives of Shansyi are very patient. The ancients said,

*A three-foot dragon head and ten thousand volumes of books:*

*What was heaven's intention in creating me?*

*Shandung's prime ministers and Shansyi's generals:*

*They are heroes, and so am I.*

"A three-foot dragon head" refers to a jeweled sword of Dragon Springs. "Ten thousand volumes of books" means one who has studied that many books. People who studied in ancient times were masters of the pen and the sword. "What was heaven's intention in creating me?" Why did heaven create me? "Shandung's prime ministers and Shansyi's generals." Although the natives of Shandung are fond of fighting, nevertheless, sages emerged from that province, and great generals such as Gwan Gung and Sywe Jen-gwei were natives of Shansyi. "They were heroes, and so am I. "Those prime ministers and generals are great heroes; I am also a great hero. I should take them as models.

Today's topic is the Elder Li Tung-Sywan. He was able to cultivate in this way. We should also cultivate in the same manner; in fact, we should excel him.

This elder **had wisdom that surpassed most people.** He was very intelligent and carefree, **and his conduct transcended the mundane.** He was different from most ordinary people. He liked to live in a natural style, but he was not a hippie. **He wore a hat made from birch bark. His clothing was fashioned from hemp cloth.** This shows that he was very poor. He supported himself and was self-sufficient. He lived by planting the fields himself. **Regardless of whether it was winter or summer, he walked**

**barefoot.** He would not wear shoes or socks; he went barefoot. From this we know he did not have greed. He did not keep any extraneous belongings. **Each day he ate only one biscuit and ten dates.** Cultivating the truth and nourishing his nature, he had no disagreement with the world.

**One day he met an extraordinary monk** who had attained the Way and **who transmitted the Flower Adornment (Avatamsaka) Sutra to him.** The elder had an intuitive understanding and did not need to hear it explained. All of a sudden **he penetrated the Sutra's meanings and principles, and he reached a profound understanding of its main purport.** Then he wanted to find a quiet place to cultivate and investigate the Flower Adornment Sutra. **He prepared to write a treatise on it, and he set out to look for a still and quiet place.**

**He met a tiger who carried the Sutra on its back.** Right at that moment a very tame tiger came along and carried the Sutra on its back. **Together they arrived at the entrance to a cave. The tiger bowed to the ground, and the elder went inside the cave.**

He found that **the cave was spacious and clean.** However, it was a pity that **there was no water.** **In the middle of the night, a violent wind arose and knocked down a huge tree** in front of the cave. **A sweet spring emerged from the hole.** Water was found flowing forth from the tree roots, and so the water problem was solved.

The elder stayed inside the cave to read and investigate the Flower Adornment Sutra. He read and recited during the day. **Every night, the elder emitted a light from his mouth that shone as brightly as if it were daytime.** White light naturally came forth from his mouth, and the cave was illumined so it was as bright as day. Thus he was able to apply effort both day and night. **He wrote a treatise on the Flower Adornment Sutra. Each day, two heavenly maidens brought food and made offerings of the four study room treasures:** writing brushes, ink stones, ink sticks, and writing paper. **Four years passed, and the treatise, containing forty volumes, was completed.** Within four years he had finished writing the treatise on the Flower Adornment Sutra, a total of forty volumes. **After that, the two maidens did not come anymore.** They did not bring him food.

**When he was ninety-six years old, the elder sat upright and passed away. The crown of his head emitted white light, which shot straight up into the sky. At his funeral, white-spotted deer circumambulated his grave, crying mournfully. White cranes also hovered around the area for a while and then flew off.** The white-spotted deer cried sorrowfully, as though they were circumambulating the Buddha as he entered Nirvana. Probably the deer and cranes were raised by him, and they always were his friends. Therefore they were grief-stricken at his death.

**A verse of praise says:**

*A hat of birch bark and hemp clothes.* He made a hat from birch bark and fashioned his clothes from hemp. *A skinny face and an unusual bone structure.* Because he did not

eat much, his face was quite thin. His physical frame was also unusual; he was different from most people. ***Remaining barefoot in winter and summer.*** Whether it was winter or summer, he would walk around barefoot. ***He had dates for food through spring and autumn.*** Throughout the four seasons, he would not eat much. He only ate dates or mulberries to sustain his life. ***Coincidentally he met an unusual monk.*** By chance he met a lofty monk who had attained the Way and ***who transmitted to him the Sutra as profuse as motes of dust in all the countries,*** that is, the Avatamsaka Sutra. ***A treatise was written in forty volumes:*** his treatise on the Avatamsaka Sutra was forty volumes long. ***The great cause for accomplishing Buddhahood.*** He had accomplished a great causal condition for becoming a Buddha.

Another verse says: ***Endowed with extraordinary features, this remarkable man was outstanding and did not mix with the crowd.*** He had an unusual countenance. Most people did not realize who he was very well. ***Bearing thirst and enduring hunger, his goal was to transcend the dust.*** He could endure hunger and thirst: it did not matter to him if he was a little hungry; to be a little thirsty was no problem. Why did he endure hunger and thirst? Because he wanted to get out of the suffering and affliction of the "red dust," the mundane realm. ***A ferocious tiger carried the Sutra on its back and helped him find a quiet place.*** As a response to his lofty goals, a ferocious tiger came to act as his Dharma-protector. Carrying the Sutra on its back, it looked for a mountain cave where the elder could cultivate. ***Heavenly maidens brought him food as he finished his masterpiece.*** They brought him food so he could set his heart at rest to compose a treatise on the Avatamsaka Sutra.

***Profound meanings were revealed, layer upon layer.*** He spoke in minute detail about the subtle and wonderful principles of the Avatamsaka Sutra, and he made the principles clear by unfolding their meaning layer by layer. ***Expounding the Flower Adornment, new doors were opened in succession.*** He elucidated the inexhaustible principles and wonderful meaning of the Avatamsaka Sutra. Every door that opened was new and refreshing. ***Penetrating the esoteric and arriving at transformation, he reached the treasure-trove.*** He knew how to bring about changes and transformations. Thereby he arrived at the treasure-trove, which is the fruition of Buddhahood. The Avatamsaka Sutra says, "The transformation city is artificially set up; it is not real." ***Sentient and insentient beings enter the Buddha's city.*** Both sentient and insentient entities all perfect the mode of wisdom and together accomplish Buddhahood.