

Three Steps One Bow

Bhikshu Heng Sure

Dear Shih Fu and Great Assembly,

I should follow the Thus Come One and leave behind all worldly practices, perfect all Buddhadharmas, and dwell in the place of level equality.

AVATAMSAKA SUTRA

Ten Conducts

I'm beginning to appreciate this wish with every passing day we bow the Flower Adornment highway. On our pilgrimage to the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas we found refuge in a strict diet of words and images: no T.V. or radio, no magazines or newspapers, no phone calls, no movies, no store shopping. We wrote letters only to our Good advisor. We kept silent except for Buddhadharma-speech, and limited our books to the AVATAMSAKA SUTRA, Vajra Bodhi Sea, and a handful of texts from BTTS's Sutra treasury.

After a month of steady bowing on the diet we reached Santa Monica. As we turned up the coast on Highway One, to our surprise our minds began to vomit up a steady stream of noise and pictures, as if we had wandered into a 24 hour-a-day film reviewing room. The feature films contained every word, image and idea that we had gathered over years of reading newspapers, magazines, novels, text books, and while staring at cinema, television, and classroom blackboards. Who could have guessed the mind is a sensitive sponge that absorbs every mark that crosses the eye and enters the ear.

We bowed for miles through still, tranquil, national forests while our thoughts spit out the debris of our worldly education: I'd bow down to and praise the Buddha between eucalyptus and redwood leaves and suddenly see Ed Sullivan introducing the Beatles, or perhaps a super-bowl touchdown. I'd stand up with the Avatamsaka Assembly's name on my lips, but with a Shaw Brothers martial arts epic or a samurai movie in my mind's eye.

After months of confusion, I compared notes with Heng Ch'au. He was experiencing the same state, as if an immense garbage can was being emptied and cleansed. It came clear that our education in worldly knowledge and views was thorough. Moreover it did great harm to our "efficacious natures." The more we bowed, the lighter and cleaner we felt; the emptying process continued, as if deep wounds on the psyche were being healed by a powerful, wholesome medicine.

Like the Agada herb can purge all poisons, the Buddhadharma, in the same way eradicates the illness of afflictions.

AVATAMSAKA SUTRA

Verses in Praise in the Tushita Heaven Palace

Chapter 24

Sights and sounds mark our senses. We discriminate good and bad marks and form attachments to the marks we like and reject those we dislike. I began to read at age eight and gradually marked my mind

with so many words and ideas I became a book-worm, addicted to the grooves in my mind. Only at age 28 did I give my brains a rest by cutting off the word addiction and focusing on bowing to a single book, THE GREAT MEANS EXPANSIVE BUDDHA FLOWER ADORNMENT SUTRA. There were few moments in the twenty-year interval when I wasn't filling by eyes and ears with worldly marks, and coating the mirror of my mind with dusty dharmas: comic books, of cowboys and talking ducks, cops and robbers, T.V. shows; radio ads for Winstons and Chevrolets, assorted tales of super-spy 007, defiled nightmares in Fellini's, and Pechinpaugh's films, toothpaste jingles, top 40 hit-parade tunes, and glossy photos from Life magazine. While bowing I reviewed countless hours of useless data from public school textbooks, New Yorker covers, and Sunday Times, theatre reviews. The tide was relentless and impersonal, just like dumping out an over-flowing trash barrel. My mind spontaneously wanted to erase all marks and purge every last candy bar wrapper and coffee ground.

Unaware that the mind impartially records every sight and sound we feed it, over those twenty years I filled my worldly garbage bin and learned to be greedy, how to fight, to seek worldly fame and success, to be a winner and how to benefit myself. I learned to flatter, to cover, to value one-upsmanship. My knowledge and worldly ways scarred my senses, inflamed desires, and made me a stranger to the true heart, the deep, sensitive home of wholesome, righteous values that we all begin with.

We told the Master the details of our purging experience. He shook his head and said with a gentle, kind, innocent boy's voice, "I don't understand any of those worldly things."

The inner house cleaning continued; the senses began to crave the sweet dew of Buddhadharma the way a burned hand delights in a cool, healing salve.

*He vows that all living beings be covered by wholesome Dharma
and eradicate the hubbub, dirt, and dust of the mundane world.*

AVATAMSAKA SUTRA

Ten Transferences

Chapter 25

I vowed to memorize the Ten Conducts chapter of the AVATAMSAKA SUTRA and encountered immediate obstacles. The harder I tried to remember the Sutra, the more layers of confusion would surface. Broadway musicals, baseball team line-ups, the names and faces of friends and family, and headlines from newspapers read years ago would suddenly emerge just when I wanted to enter deep concentration. Yet the Ten Conducts Dharma phrases had an uncanny strength to purify.--every effort to heal the scarred spirit with Sutra-wisdom was rewarded with more garbage from inside. I finally caught on that the proper knowledge and views, the sounds of Dharma, the words the Buddha spoke, act like a high-powered magnet. Buddhadharma neutralizes the toxins of afflictions, and nourishes the sprouts of Bodhi. I was experiencing the magnet in action, healing my mind. As much Sutra-Dharma as I could memorize extracted an equal portion of rotten ideas and upside-down views.

I began reciting the story of Forest of Merit and Virtue Bodhisattva's wholesome contemplation Samadhi near Santa Maria in the winter of 1977. I learned the "Conduct of Happiness," and the "Conduct of Benefitting" by the time we reached Big Sur, six months later. The memory project was slow going, but it proved the best thing I had ever done for my life. Twenty years of formal education, thousands of books, and countless hours of movies and T.V. had filled my mind with rotting timbers,

the slightest amount of Dharma I could absorb, despite the huge resistance and stubborn obstacles I encountered, felt like solid timbers, like sturdy beams and joists in a mansion of Dharma.

Broken precepts stain the nature; Sutra study washes the nature clean and restores the mind to natural health. What's more, the Buddhadharma is medicine. Once the tide of useless noise began to abate, new states and false thoughts appeared in meditation in the silent spaces created by bowing and purging. Often a line from the Sutra would respond spontaneously within to clear the air and point the road back to stillness.

Our policy naturally emerged:

"If the Buddha didn't speak it, we don't read it."

Bodhisattvas accomplish proper mindfulness...They cannot be thrown into confusion by the many kinds of sounds: Loud big sounds, rough and foul sounds, bawling sounds that confuse the hearing, and sounds that ruin the six senses.

AVATAMSAKA SUTRA

Ten Conducts

Part II

I came to appreciate the power of worldly views to damage the mind and the power of proper views to restore peace of mind. The difference was clear, but the habit-energy pulling me back to the old familiar ruts of worldly smartness, being "hip," and clever was hard to recognize, and hard to subdue. The silence and singleminded concentration opens a door to wonderfully peaceful and pure worlds, and to self-awareness. But until the garbage can is completely empty, until the fires of ignorance are completely extinguished it takes only a tiny spark to bring the embers back to life.

I walked into Tathagata Monastery cafeteria one Saturday noon during a Buddha's birthday celebration. A loudspeaker blared the drumbeat and jingling chords of some rock 'n roll tune I'd never heard before. My ears reeled, my body unconsciously responded in an organic "first thought" reflex. I felt invaded, defiled. The pulsing music hit my mind like drops of ink on a white sheet. It was the first and only time I heard "Songs for Awakening." The words may have been Dharma-inspired, but the back-alley rhythm of the bass and drums turned the pure Way-place briefly into a Saturday afternoon sock hop at the YMCA. The song echoed in my mind for weeks. It would rise just at the gate of stillness and set the warm embers on fire once more. Samadhi power for beginners is hard-earned and easily lost. The experience was a good advisor in reverse: I saw clearly that I have a deep, lingering attachment to the dust of sounds. Having no genuine samadhi, my ears are still cocked for the sounds of drums, guitars, flutes, and female voices. I used to listen to these for hours on end. The Way-place is a hospital, a refuge for ears scared by worldly sounds. Proper Dharma purifies the ear with the Buddha's voice of sweet dew. To meet rock 'n roll in the monastery dining hall shocked me back into old grooves I want very much to forget.

The Bodhisattva who leaves deluded confusion in the *Avatamsaka Sutra's* Fifth Conduct has unmoving samadhi power:

Disciples of the Buddha, if each and every one of these kinds of sounds filled up asamkhyeyas of worlds and continued non-stop for limitless

numberless kalpas, they would completely ruin and confuse living beings' bodies, minds, and all their sense faculties. But they would not be able to harm this Bodhisattva's mind.



That's the world-transcending *kung fu* that proper Dharma Way-places can nurture.

Looked at a TIME magazine clipping last month for the first time in six years. Felt like I'd ripped the petals off a delicate wildflower in my mind. The reverberations from reading the articles, and scanning the ads and photos trashed my concentration for weeks after. Why? Real samadhi takes time to mature and to gain strength. The slightest mote of worldly dust, before one's samadhi power is solid is all it takes to mar the mirror of the mind.

*With one thought unproduced, the entire substance manifests.
When the six organs suddenly move, you're covered by clouds.*

Read a piece on Scientology in the TIME clipping and recalled old friends who'd gotten tangled in the web of that curious religion. Emotions flooded my mind.

Looked at the faces in the photos next to the text and began reflexively to analyze them in terms of physiognomy, a parlor trick I haven't played for years. Fortune-telling used to amuse friends but it's a deviant livelihood for a Bhikshu. All the same, the old habit energy responded at a glance. Pointed out

my observations to Heng Ch'au. He warned me of my error but the words were already in the air. The tongue moves quick as a snake and gossip is an offense!

Read an ad for travel to Canada printed in the column next to the Scientology story. The first look ripped open a Pandora's box of memories from visits to my father's family in Canada. I'd erased those images with difficulty. They rose again and haunted my heart. Leaving home is hard work.

Glanced at an illustration from a science text, a picture of defiled, teased, and turbid.

The experience threw my mind back into smoke-filled grad school lounges, Berkeley coffee shops, bus station bathrooms, the places where people read and rap about TIME.

I saw the name Mick Jagger in a one-paragraph news and instantly my mind flashed back to my old associations. While growing up I listened to the Rolling Stone's deviant rhythms for a decade, exactly as long as I've been a refuge disciple of the Buddha. I hadn't thought of the Rolling Stones for years, but my eyes devoured the article, like releasing an arrow from a bow held at full draw. Old habits are hard to change, ignorance longs to return to the flow, and with a little encouragement, the mad mind will jump right back into the pit of confusion.

Once unleashed, the monkey mind began to climb. Washing clothes in the Gold Wheel basement, I scanned a Radio Shack ad for bizarre, computerized Christmas toys and felt my energy and heat scatter. Like a chain reaction, the single pebble of newsprint triggered an avalanche of memories. Sounds, smells, tastes, sensations, and ideas from the past flooded body and mind. Felt like I'd stepped from a tall, clear mountain top into a smoky, raucous Hong Kong alley. I understood the truth of "when six organs suddenly move, you're covered by clouds" as never before. The principle is literally true, just how it is. Fighting energy rose, thoughts of outrage as I read the ads for electronic handgun games, space-rocket contests, motorized, battery-powered remote control tanks, cordless microphones ("be an announcer!"), computerized star-war games. These were toys for children! The urge to protect the madness on the page was overwhelming. Fire rose to my head. I felt anger at the world that teaches kids to kill and fight, that teaches us to rely on batteries and transistors for our fun. I felt ashamed of myself that I could ever have a fighting thought or utter a harsh word or in any way contribute to the evil and destructive energy I saw mirrored on that page of modern Christmas toys. No fighting is so important!

Ordinarily I would not have picked up the paper in the first place, but my mind has only recently forgotten the ways of the world and once a crack opens in the dam, the waters are difficult to restrain. Needless to say, concentration was hard to approach after that experience. I returned, shared my state with Heng Ch'au, and instantly regretted it. My fire was catching, my angry vibrations smoked up his Way-place and obstructed his concentration, give him hours of extra work to settle his mind.

*Originally there's not one thing going on;
We people make all our own troubles.*

Had I controlled the one thought of ignorance that sought outside to read the TIME clipping, all the confusion would have been avoided. I did without the Rolling Stones for ten years, did without TIME and battery-powered appliances for six years and my spirits thrived. Seeking outside that little bit scattered my spirit in ten thousand directions.

As the Master expressed it at Gold Wheel,

*As much worldly dharma as you can put down,
That's how much world-transcending Buddhadharma you can pick up.*

Disciple Kuo Chen (Heng Sure)

bows in respect