

# *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

Tuesday, January 9, 1979

## "Affinities"

At the end of day an outgoing, short man named Jack, and his tall, lanky friend, John, walk over from their farm house. They offer us lodging and a shower. We decline and explain our vow to stay outside.

"Nineteen months! You've seen a lot of weather," says Jack.

John is at least 6 foot 7 inches with an unusually long neck and bulging eyes. He says he's a landscape gardener and an animal trainer.

"Yeah," adds Jack, "Look quick, over there, that's one of his birds!" We turn to see some large feathered animal peeking out from behind a shed. It ducks back.

"Shy, I guess," says Jack.

"There! Look quick. He's peeking out again. See him? See him?" says Jack all excited.

Out steps a huge long-legged bird, bigger than a man. "That's my ostrich," says John proudly.

With its long neck and bulging eyes, the ostrich is the spitting image of its owner. Affinities.

There's a saying:

In flocks of good and evil, people always seek their own kind.

Because of past karma we establish ties with certain living beings. When those affinities pile up, they tip the scale and people transform and are born as animals. When those affinities wear thin and the debts are paid, the scale tips back and animals can be reborn as people. Like a teeter-totter. And sometimes we get caught in a gray zone, in between, where we are a bit of both: we resemble our pets and animals and our pets and animals resemble us. If we eat a lot of mutton, for example, we establish affinities with the sheep nation and then when causes and conditions ripen, we are reborn as a lamb. Beef eaters gradually start to take on a heavy, bovine appearance. Pork eaters look and smell like pigs. Seafood lovers smell fishy. How does one come to resemble the ostrich one keeps as a pet? Affinities.

We try to exercise before meditation but get rained out. The front seat is full of mud and wet clothes. The flat tire is on the rooftop. We park in the dripping wet grass in the roadside ditch next to a small woods. The frogs croak and belch loudly while the shy ostrich cranes its long neck and quietly stares at us. It's getting dark, a passing park ranger gives a friendly wave and we cram into the car to meditate and study the *Avatamsaka*. Another day is gone, our lives are that much shorter, like the frogs in the evaporating pond outside our door. Nothing stays, time passes like a dream.

"You must lose sense of time... I mean, the days and months must get lost, huh?" asked a reporter.

"How can we lose what was never ours to begin with?" I wonder to myself. Tonight's Sutra passage says it well,

His mind does not falsely grasp at dharmas which have passed by,  
Nor does he greedily attach to things that have yet to come.  
He does not dwell anywhere in the present,  
Because he understands the three periods of time are completely empty and still.

*Avatamsaka Sutra*

Friday, January 12, 1979

We bow into the outskirts of Half Moon Bay--back into the city energy: rush hour to and fro, private property, fences, no bathrooms, and lots of questions.

Began at 4:00 this morning as we camped in an abandoned lot by a trailer court,

"Private property! Move on!" blared a loudspeaker from a squad car, flooding us with spotlights.

"Are you burglars?" asked the officer, peeking into the car.

"No, we're Buddhists," I answered.

They look at the image of Gwan Yin Bodhisattva hanging above the Sutras, and a stick of burning incense on our make-shift altar: a cedar shingle wedged flat between the backrests of two seats leaned together.

"Buddhists? Okay, have a good evening," nods the officer politely. "We're looking for burglars."

Obstacles. Outside: bad weather, local toughs threaten to beat us up and run us out of town, city ordinances prohibit camping in car. Inside: disturbing dreams, winter hibernation laxness, shadows of doubt and delusion. Medicine: return the light and examine oneself, all obstacles arise from evil karma created in the past. Crying about it is a door to the hells. Anger is self-

defeating. Blaming others is passing the buck, and leaving the debt unpaid. What to do then? Repent and reform.

Moreover, Good Man, to repent of karmic obstacles and reform is explained like this: the Bodhisattva reflects--from beginningless kalpas in the past I have created all measureless and boundless evil karma with my body, mouth, and mind, because of greed, hatred, and stupidity. If this evil karma had a substance and form, all of empty space could not contain it.

*-Avatamaka Sutra  
Chapter 40*

And so we bow and again cleanse the heart. It's a slow and painstaking Dharma-door, but reliable. If there is a shortcut, we haven't heard of it--not in the Sutras, not from our teacher, not from our hearts. Everything tells us to enter one door deeply and to be patient. There is no other method. Returning home is a long, hard road, but only because we drifted so far away.

Sometimes while bowing and sitting, one can feel the inner journey, the great reversal working itself out. One false thought sends the energy scattering from the center, down the back and out the bottom. One proper thought to return the light gathers back the energy, up the back, over the crest and down into the valley. Home again, warm and content in the fullness of oneself. The ancients said:

Going along with the environment will beget a person;  
Going against the current will produce a Buddha.

With desire thoughts we go out with the common flow and descend; with pure thoughts we enter the reverse-current of a sage and ascend. As in thought after thought, so it must be in life after life, as we drift in the endless river of existence. Birth and death are but costume changes, a quick stop at a pier that doesn't touch the shore. All around is a thick, dense forest and no one to ask for directions.

To get a human body and to meet the wise teachings is a once-in-a-million chance. If I don't pull myself and others from this whirlpool in this life, then when will I? Karma pushes from behind, ignorance sucks us down from below, but above is the blue sky and yellow sun and the wind is blowing Dharma, saying, "Raise your spirits, strike up your vigor. Swim, swim, swim to the other shore."

Some days we feel like our old Plymouth: bad brakes, years of neglect and abuse, slow to start, hard to stop, leaking, rusty and peeling paint, but stubborn, solid, and determined to make it to the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas.

One hundred blows could not disturb his vajra will;  
Ten thousand demons found it hard to reverse his Buddha resolve.

*-Master Hua in praise of  
Patriarch Hsuan Chuang*

Saturday, January 13, 1979

Visit Half Moon Bay police department this a.m. Sgt. Alves says, "It's O.K., do whatever you want to do walking along all of our streets, but there's a town law which prohibits sleeping in your car overnight, except at two designated areas." Turns out the two "designated areas" charge money and we only have enough small change to do our laundry and buy some gas if we run out. We don't beg; we prefer poverty to "climbing on conditions." As it says in the Gold Mountain Manifesto:

Starving, we do not beg,  
Freezing, we do not scheme.  
Dying of poverty, we do not climb on conditions.  
We accord with conditions, but do not change;  
Unchanging, yet we accord with conditions.

Later, met the Sheriff at the local gas pump.

"Bet you'll be glad to get past all these towns and hassles, huh?" he asked, sympathetically.

"Oh, it's all the same. We found if our minds are not making hassles, then nothing's a hassle," I said.

"Hmm. Maybe so, maybe so," he said, doubtfully, but thinking it over. We got another caution about Devil's Slide ahead.

"It's only six or seven miles long, but more than makes up for it in height and treacherousness," said the Sheriff.

We have received more warnings about Devil's Slide than any other stretch of land we've crossed. Should reach the base of the Slide in a couple of weeks, north of Montara, according to the map. Then we will find a way if we're sincere. Like the ancients said,

When you get to the bottom of the mountain.  
There is always a way.

Sunday, January 14, 1979

A man and wife stop to say, "We really admire what you're doing. It's such a refreshing contrast to our world. Thank you."

Dream: A dentist and his assistant working on my teeth. They are doing it as an offering, no charge. The dentist breaks down crying and says,

"The only time I can be kind and compassionate is when I've got a tool in my hand. I can't extend my caring for mankind beyond my dental props and office." He felt restricted by his profession and by his own fears of personal inadequacy.

"It's O.K.," I comforted him.

"Your work speaks for itself. You relieve suffering and cure people and don't rob them with high fees."

"I want to do more. I want to leave home and cultivate the Way. But I am married and all tied down," he said, suppressing a deeper wish to benefit others spiritually and to explore his soul.

"You got into the marriage cage so now you have to be patient and be a good father and a good husband. It's not O.K. just to pack up and leave. Slowly, bit by bit, let it naturally change. If you're sincere and patient, then there can be a response that works out best for everyone," I answered.

He vows that all beings get unobstructed Dharmas and that they eradicate and escape from all obstructive paths.

He vows that all beings leave behind the love relationships of the family life. And although they appear to be living as a householder, in their thoughts they are not attached to it.

-Avatamaka Sutra  
"Ten Transferences"  
Chapter

