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The Venerable Master Hsuan Hua Brings the Dharma to the West [In Memory of the Venerable Master Hsuan Hua, Vol 1]

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The Venerable Master Hsuan Hua Brings the Dharma to the West

by Ron Epstein (Upasaka Guorong)

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LAYING THE FOUNDATION

1. The Origins of the Master's Mission to the West

The Venerable Master's vision was as vast as the Dharma Realm, and he taught and transformed all beings without regard to path of rebirth, country, ethnic origin, religion, and so forth. There are two countries, however, where he had special affinities in this life: China and the United States. Although the majority of his disciples are Chinese, history will probably remember him primarily for his work in bringing the teachings of the Buddha to the people of the West.

The story begins in rural Manchuria at his mother's grave site. The Master, then in his late teens or early twenties, was observing the Chinese filial practice of three year's mourning. As a novice Buddhist monk, he did it in a uniquely Buddhist way by building a meditation hut of sorghum thatch and sitting in continuous meditation there. One day he saw the Venerable Master Huineng, the Sixth Patriarch in China of the Chan (Zen) Lineage, walk into his hut. The Patriarch spoke with him for a long time. The Master remembered him saying:

The five schools will divide into ten to teach and transform living beings: a hundred and then a thousand, until they are endless, . . . countless like the sands of the Ganges . . . the genuine beginning [of Buddhism] in the West.

That was part of the Patriarch's instruction to the Master in which he told him that he should leave China and spread the Dharma in the West. Afterwards the Master got up to accompany the Patriarch out of the hut. Only after the Patriarch had disappeared did the Master remember that the Patriarch had entered Nirvana long ago (A.D. 713).

Despite knowing from this initial vision of the Sixth Patriarch that he would eventually go to the West to propagate the Dharma, the Master had little contact with Westerners until he moved to Hong Kong in 1949. There he had his first substantial experiences with Western culture.

After his Dharma-lineage predecessor the Venerable Chan Master Xuyun (1840-1959) entered Nirvana and the Master completed the proper ceremonies in his memory, he felt that conditions had ripened for pursuing his Dharma mission in the West. Several of his lay disciples from Hong Kong had already gone to the United States to study.

In November 1960 the Master went to Australia to investigate the conditions for the growth of Buddhism there. He spent a difficult year there and then returned to Hong Kong briefly. In 1958 a branch of the Buddhist Lecture Hall had already been established in Sa Francisco by his disciples there. In response to their invitation, the Master decided to go to San Francisco and arrived there early in 1962. At the small Chinatown temple, he lectured on the Amitabha Sutra. During that period various Americans who were interested in Zen, such as Richard Baker, former Abbot of the San Francisco Zen Center, visited the Master.

In the fall of 1962 the Cuban missile crisis broke out. Wishing in some measure to repay the benefit that he had received from living in the United States, and seeing clearly the catastrophic threat imposed by the missiles in Cuba, the Venerable Master embarked on a total fast for thirty-five days, during which he took

only water. He dedicated the merit of his sacrifice to end the hostilities.

2. The Monk in the Grave Period

In 1963, because some of the disciples there were not respectful of the Dharma, he left Chinatown and moved the Buddhist Lecture Hall to a first-floor flat on the corner of Sutter and Webster Streets on the edge of San Francisco's Fillmore District and Japantown. The Master's move marked the beginning of a period of relative seclusion during which he called himself 'a monk in the grave'. It lasted until 1968. He later continued to refer to himself in that way and wrote the following poem:

Each of you now meets a monk in the grave.
Above there is no sun and moon, below there is no lamp.
Affliction and enlightenment--ice is water.
Let go of self-seeking and become apart from all that is false.
When the mad mind ceases, enlightenment pervades all.
Enlightened, attain the bright treasury of your own nature.
Basically, the retribution body is the Dharma body.

It was at that Sutter Street location that the Master first started having regular contact with young Americans who were interested in meditation. Some came to his daily, public meditation hour from seven to eight every evening, and a few Americans also attended his Sutra lectures. He lectured there on the Amitabha Sutra, the Diamond Sutra, the Heart Sutra with his own verse commentary, on his own commentary to the Song of Enlightenment, and also on portions of the Lotus (Dharma Flower) Sutra.

In July of 1967 the Master moved back to Chinatown, locating the San Francisco Buddhist Lecture Hall in the Tianhou Temple, the oldest Chinese temple in America. There he lectured on the Verses of the Seven Buddhas of Antiquity and the "Universal Door" Chapter of the Lotus (Dharma Flower) Sutra.

On Chinese New Year's Day in 1968, the Master made two important pronouncements to a small gathering. First he predicted that in the course of the year the lotus of American Buddhism would bloom. At that time there was still little outward sign of the influx of young Americans which would begin that spring.

Secondly, noting the great fear among large segments of the community that there would be an earthquake in the spring of that year, he declared that as long as he was in San Francisco, he would not permit earthquakes large enough to do damage or cause injury or death to occur. Every subsequent Chinese New Year he would renew his vow. When the San Francisco earthquake of 1989 occurred, the Master was out of the country in Taiwan.

In the spring of 1968 a group of university students at the University of Washington in Seattle wrote to the Master and requested that the Master come to Seattle to lead a week-long meditation session. The Master had Nancy Dana Lovett, a disciple, write for him to Ron Epstein, another disciple who was a member of the Seattle group, to tell the group that he could not come to Seattle, because if he left San Francisco, there would be an earthquake. He suggested that they come to the Buddhist Lecture Hall in San Francisco instead. The group went and that spring both a Buddha-recitation session and a Chan (Zen) meditation session, each a week long, were held. About thirty people attended.

3. The 1968 Shurangama Sutra Summer Lecture and Cultivation Session

At the conclusion of the spring sessions, the Master suggested to several of the participants that a three month lecture and cultivation session be held during the summer months. About thirty people decided to attend. During that 98 day session, the Master lectured on the Shurangama Sutra twice a day, and near the end of

the session three and even four times a day, to explain the entire Sutra. The lectures were also open to the general public. The session itself started at six every morning and officially ended at nine in the evening. In addition to the Sutra lectures, the schedule consisted of alternate hours of meditation, study, and discussion, so there was very little free time.

Although those who attended were of varied age and background, the majority were young Americans of college age or in their middle or late twenties. Most had had little or no previous training in Buddhism; however, several had studied Buddhism at the undergraduate level and some at the graduate level. A few had also had a little previous experience with meditation. The handful who had some competency in Chinese provided translations, which started out on a rather rudimentary level and became quite competent during the course of the summer.

Events of special note that took place during the session included two refuge ceremonies, at which most of the regular participants became formal disciples of the Master, and a precept ceremony late in the summer in which almost all the disciples took vows to follow moral precepts of varying numbers, including some or all of the Five Moral Precepts up to the Ten Major and Forty-Eight Minor Bodhisattva Precepts. One participant took the vows of a novice monk. The Master's teachings that summer specially emphasized the moral precepts as a foundation for the spiritual life. In this way he used them as an effective antidote against the proclivities of the popular culture for drug experience and sexual promiscuity.

4. Five Americans Leave the Home-Life

Soon afterwards four other Americans, three of whom had also participated in the summer session, left the home life. In December of 1969 the five, three men and two women, received full ordination at Haihui Monastery near Keelung, Taiwan, and became the first Americans to do so. They were Bhikshus (monks) Heng Chyan, Heng Jing, and Heng Shou, and Bhikshunis (nuns) Heng Yin and Heng Chih.

5. The Master's Plan for American Buddhism

With the founding of a new American Sangha, the Master was then ready to embark on an incredible building program for American Buddhism. The Venerable Master has explained that his life's work lay in three main areas: 1) bringing the true and orthodox teachings of the Buddha to the West and establishing a proper monastic community of fully ordained monks and nuns (Sangha) here; 2) organizing and supporting the translation of the entire Buddhist canon into English and other Western languages; and 3) promoting wholesome education through the establishment of schools and universities.

ESTABLISHING A BUDDHIST SANGHA IN THE WEST

1. The First Ordination Ceremonies in the West

Because of the increasing numbers of people who wished to leave the home-life to become monks and nuns under the Master's guidance, in 1972 the Master decided to hold at Gold Mountain Dhyana Monastery the first formal, full ordination ceremonies for Buddhist monks and nuns to be held in the West. He invited virtuous elder masters to preside with him over the ordination platform. Five monks and one nun received ordination. Subsequent ordination platforms have been held at the Sagely City of Ten Thousand Buddhas in 1976, 1979, 1982, 1989, and 1992, and progressively larger numbers of people have received full ordination. Over two hundred people from countries all over the world were ordained under him.

2. The Master as Reformer

The Master was determined to transmit the original and correct teachings of the Buddha to the West and was

outspoken about not infecting Western Buddhism with corrupt practices that were widespread in Chinese Buddhism. While encouraging his disciples to learn the ancient traditions, he cautioned them against mistaking cultural overlay and ignorant superstition for the true Dharma. He encouraged them to understand the logical reasons behind the ancient practices.

Among the reform that he instituted were the following: he reestablished the wearing of the precept sash (kashaya) as a sign of a member of the Sangha; he emphasized that the Buddha instructed that monks and nuns not eat after noon and encouraged his Sangha to follow the Buddha's practice, which he followed, of eating only one meal a day at noon; he also encouraged them to follow his example in the practice of not lying down at night, which was also recommended by the Buddha. In the early days at Tianhou Temple in San Francisco's Chinatown, some of the disciples, in order to train themselves in this practice, found appropriate-sized packing crates abandoned in the streets and modified them so that they could sit in them at night and keep themselves from stretching out their legs. The Master also criticized the current Chinese practice among many Buddhist lay people of taking refuge with many different teachers, and he himself would not accept disciples who had previously taken refuge with another monk.

Some of the Master's American disciples were initially attracted to the Master and Buddhism because of their interest in extraordinary spiritual experiences and psychic powers. Many of them were trying to understand remarkable experiences of their own, and many with special psychic abilities were naturally drawn to the Master. Clearly recognizing the danger of the popularity of the quest for special experiences in American culture, the Master emphasized that special mental states can be a sign of progress in cultivation but can also be very dangerous if misunderstood. He taught about the Buddha's monastic prohibitions against advertising one's spiritual abilities and made clear that spiritual abilities in themselves are not an indication of wisdom and do not insure wholesome character.

Generally speaking, the Master was concerned with the pure motivation of those who left-home under him and did not want the American Sangha to be polluted by those who had ulterior, worldly reasons for leaving the home-life. To that end he established these fundamental guidelines for monastic practice:

Freezing to death, we do not scheme.
Starving to death, we do not beg.
Dying of poverty, we ask for nothing.
According with conditions, we do not change.
Not changing, we accord with conditions.
We adhere firmly to our three great principles.

We renounce our lives to do the Buddha's work.
We take the responsibility to mould our own destinies.
We rectify our lives as the Sangha's work.
Encountering specific matters, we understand the principles.
Understanding the principles, we apply them in specific matters.
We carry on the single pulse of the patriarchs' mind-transmission.

In addition he summarized the standards of conduct that he upheld throughout his life for all his disciples, both Sangha members and lay people, in Six Great Guidelines: not contending, not being greedy, not seeking, not being selfish, not pursuing personal profit, and not lying.

One of the Master's more remarkable endeavors in the area of monastic reform was his attempt to heal the two thousand year old rift between Mahayana and Theravada monastic communities. He encouraged cordial relations between the Sanghas, invited distinguished Theravada monks to preside with him in monastic

ordination ceremonies, and initiated talks aimed at resolving areas of difference.

4. Founding of the Sino-American Buddhist Association and the Dharma Realm Buddhist Association

The Master felt that one of the marks of decay of proper monastic practice in China had been the gradual shift of emphasis from large monastic training monasteries to small individual temples, each with one or two monks or nuns free to do more or less whatever they pleased. In order to insure that tendency for laxity of practice did not take hold in the West, the Master wished to unite all his Sangha members and lay people under a single organization, that could both help to maintain uniform pure standards of conduct for members of the Sangha and discourage the making of offerings to individuals instead of to the Sangha as a whole. In order to strengthen central organization and in recognition of his growing number of American disciples, in December, 1968 the Buddhist Lecture Hall was expanded into the newly incorporated Sino-American Buddhist Association. As that organization became more international in scope, in 1984, the name of the organization was officially changed to the Dharma Realm Buddhist Association.

5. Monasteries and Temples Founded by the Master in the West

With the large influx of Americans wishing to study the Dharma the small Tianhou Temple was quickly outgrown, and in 1970 the Association moved to a large three-story brick building, which was remodelled to become Gold Mountain Dhyana Monastery. In 1976 the Master established the Sagely City of Ten Thousand Buddhas, which now encompasses almost five hundred acres of land at Wonderful Enlightenment Mountain in northern California. Among the many other temples, monasteries, and retreat centers established by the Master are Gold Wheel Monastery in Los Angeles, Long Beach Monastery in Long Beach, California, Gold Buddha Monastery in Vancouver, Gold Summit Monastery in Seattle, Avatamsaka Monastery in Calgary, the Berkeley Buddhist Monastery and Institute of World Religions, and the Administrative Headquarters and International Translation Institute, both in Burlingame, California.

TEACHING THE DHARMA AND TRANSLATING THE BUDDHIST CANON

1. What the Master Taught

In retrospect, the vigor, depth and breadth of the Master's efforts in teaching in the West are nothing short of incredible. In his early days of teaching Westerners, he often had little or no help. He cooked, taught them to cook, sat with them in meditation and taught them to sit, entertained them with Buddhist stories, and taught them the rudiments of Buddhadharma and Buddhist courtesy and ceremony. He gave lessons in Chinese and in Chinese calligraphy lessons, and taught the fundamentals of the pure Buddhist lifestyle.

As his Western students progressed in their understanding and practice, he did not slack off in the least. He continued not only to lecture daily on the Sutras, but to give various other classes. He lectured on the four major Mahayana Sutras, completing the *Shurangama Sutra*, the *Lotus (Dharma Flower) Sutra*, and the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, and finishing a substantial portion of the *Nirvana Sutra*. He also lectured on the *Heart Sutra*, the *Diamond (Vajra) Sutra*, the *Sixth Patriarch's Platform Sutra*, the *Earth Store Sutra*, the *Song of Enlightenment* and a host of other Buddhist works.

He also trained a whole staff of translators and taught many disciples how to lecture on the Sutras themselves. In almost every formal teaching situation, in order to train his disciples, he would first ask them to speak and only speak himself after they had had the opportunity.

The Master's teaching methods included yearly Sutra lecture and cultivation sessions modeled on the first *Shurangama Sutra* Session. He laid down vigorous standards for meditation and recitation sessions, giving

frequent instructional talks during the sessions. He explained the importance of the Buddhist Dharmas of repentance and encouraged the bowing of the Great Compassion Repentance, the Great Repentance Before the Ten Thousand Buddhas, and other repentance ceremonies.

Much of the Master's most important teaching took place outside of his formal Dharma lectures. For the Master, every situation was an opportunity for teaching, and he paid little attention to whether the recipients of instruction were formal disciples. For him every worldly encounter, whether with disciples or politicians or realtors, was an opportunity to help people become aware of their faults, change them and to develop their inherent wisdom. The Master was always open, direct, and totally honest with everyone in every situation. He treated everyone equally, from the President of the United States to little children. Everything he did was to benefit others and never for himself.

2. Travelling to Spread the Dharma in the West

Whenever and wherever he was respectfully invited to speak the Dharma, the Master always tried his best to oblige, even if it was at the cost of his own physical well-being. In addition to his almost continual travelling in the United States and Canada to lecture and several major trips to Asian countries, the Master also visited South America and Europe.

In 1973 the Master travelled to Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay and other countries in South America. His main purpose was to establish affinities with the people, and so he spent much time while there reciting mantras of great compassion and transferring the merit to the local people.

In 1990 at the invitation of Buddhists in many countries of Europe the Master took a large delegation there on a Dharma tour, knowing full well that, because of his ill health at the time, the rigors of the trip would shorten his lifespan. However, as always the Master considered the Dharma more important than his very life. Among the countries visited were England, France, Belgium, Germany, and Poland.

3. The Buddhist Text Translation Society and *Vajra Bodhi Sea*

In 1970 the Master founded the Buddhist Text Translation Society with the eventual goal of translating the entire Buddhist Canon into English and other languages of the West. The Master saw clearly that reliable translations into English with readable and understandable commentaries were essential to the understanding and practice of the Buddhadharma by Westerners. To date the Buddhist Text Translation Society has published over a hundred volumes, and the work of translating Buddhist scriptures, many with the Master's own commentaries, is ongoing.

Also in 1970 the Master founded *Vajra Bodhi Sea*, a monthly journal of orthodox Buddhism. It has been published continuously ever since. Initially in English, it now appears in a bilingual Chinese-English format.

PROMOTING EDUCATION

The Master felt that one of the weaknesses of Buddhism in China was that it did not give high priority to education and failed to develop a widespread network of Buddhist schools and universities. In order to begin to remedy that situation in the West, the Venerable Master founded Dharma Realm Buddhist University, primary and secondary schools, and developed financial aid programs for needy and deserving students.

The Master taught that education is the best national defense. He counseled that in elementary school children should be taught filial respect, in secondary school love of country and loyalty to it, and at the university level students should learn not only professional skills but a sense of personal responsibility for improving the world they live in.

The Master balanced tradition with educational innovation. He pioneered what he called the development of each individual's inherent wisdom, and he was always ready to employ new ways of teaching. For example, he wrote several songs in English himself and encouraged his disciples to use that medium for teaching the Dharma.

1. Dharma Realm Buddhist University

In 1976 the Master established Dharma Realm Buddhist University with its main campus at the Sagely City of Ten Thousand Buddhas. Its main goals are to provide education to all the peoples of the world by explaining and propagating the Buddha's teachings, developing straightforward minds, benefitting society, and enlightening all beings. The University currently offers undergraduate and/or graduate degrees in Buddhist Study and Practice, Translation of Buddhist Texts, Buddhist Education, and Chinese Studies. In his final instructions, the Master indicated that special attention should be paid to the fulfillment of his vision for the University.

Over the years many well-known professors from American universities, including Edward Conze, P. Jaini, David Ruegg, Henry Rosemont, Jr. and Jacob Needleman to name just a few, came to pay their respects to the Master and to listen to his teachings. He was also invited to lecture at various universities, including Stanford, Berkeley, University of Washington, University of Oregon, UCLA, University of California at Davis, University of Hawaii Davis, and San Francisco State University.

2. Sangha and Laity Training Programs

In 1982 the Master established the Sangha and Laity Training Programs. The Laity Training Program emphasizes Buddhist Studies and Practice for lay people in a monastic setting with an emphasis on moral discipline. The Sangha Training Program emphasizes religious practice, monastic discipline and temple management. Through these programs the Master has been able to train fully qualified and committed staff for the various programs and activities of the Dharma Realm Buddhist Association.

3. Developing Goodness and Instilling Virtue Schools

At the suggestion of Carol Ruth Silver, who was then a San Francisco Supervisor, the Master founded Developing Goodness School in 1976. In addition to nurturing the roots of goodness and virtue in the young children, the school was devoted to quality education. It promoted a bilingual Chinese-English curriculum and taught the fundamentals of both Western and Chinese cultural heritages. Principal Terri Nicholson and her staff taught the first classes in the furnished basement of the International Institute for the Translation of Buddhist Texts on Washington Street in San Francisco. The school moved to the Sagely City of Ten Thousand Buddhas in 1978. Instilling Virtue Secondary School opened its doors in 1980, and a separation into boys' and girls' schools occurred in 1981.

4. The Master's Ecumenical Teachings

In consonance with his Dharma Realm vision, the Master often said that Buddhism was too limiting a label for the Buddha's teaching and often referred to it as the teaching of living beings. Just as he was critical of sectarian divisions within Buddhism as not being in the true spirit of the Dharma, he felt that people should not be attached to interreligious distinctions either, that it is important for people of all religions to learn from the strengths of each religious tradition. To make that vision a reality, he invited his good friend Paul Cardinal Yu Bin, the Catholic cardinal of Taiwan, to join him in establishing a World Religions Center at the Sagely City of Ten Thousand Buddhas and to be its first director. He suggested that the cardinal be a "Buddhist among the Catholics" and that he himself would be a "Catholic among the Buddhists." Unfortunately the cardinal's

untimely death delayed the plans for the Center, which in 1994 opened in Berkeley as the Institute of World Religions.

The Master also directed Dharma Realm Buddhist University to host a World Religions Conference in 1987 at the Sagely City of Ten Thousand Buddhas. Also in 1987 the Master gave a major address at the Third International Buddhist-Christian Dialogue Conference in Berkeley. Once the Master was invited to give a eulogy at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. In 1989 the Master was invited to the Quaker Retreat Center at Pendle Hill, Pennsylvania to give a series of talks, and in 1992 he was the guest speaker at the yearly Vedanta Society gathering at Olema, California. Also worthy of mention is the ongoing friendship that the Master had with Father John Rogers, Catholic Chaplain of Humboldt State University.

THE MASTER'S ENDURING LEGACY FOR THE WEST

Throughout his life the Venerable Master was widely known for his selfless humility and his compassion for all living beings. He worked tirelessly and without regard for his own health and welfare to dissolve the boundaries of ignorance that obstruct true self-understanding. He constantly worked for peace and harmony throughout the world on all levels, between people, between species, between religions, and between nations. Although his mission has been to the Dharma Realm, in this brief account we have tried to focus on his contributions to Buddhism in the West. In this light, we conclude with a brief overview.

When the first Chan (Zen) Patriarch Bodhidharma came to China, although Buddhism had arrived several centuries earlier, most people in China were still confused about the central meaning of the Buddha's teaching and could not distinguish what was true from what was false, what was superficial from what was essential. Patriarch Bodhidharma cut through that confusion and taught people to illuminate their own minds, see their true natures, and become Buddhas. The Venerable Master Hsuan Hua came to the West about a hundred years after Buddhism's first introduction here. When he arrived there was much genuine interest but also tremendous confusion and misunderstanding. Teaching that Buddhism flourishes only in countries where the Sangha is strong and pure, the Master established a reformed monastic community and emphasized the importance of moral precepts both for Sangha and laity. Understanding the practical and pragmatic nature of the American character, he emphasized vigorous and proper meditation practice in the spirit and lineage of Patriarch Bodhidharma, so that the eternal truths of the Buddha's teachings could be directly and personally experienced. Seeing clearly the dangers of widely prevalent wrong notions about the Buddha's teachings, he explained the major scriptures in a clear and simple manner while bringing out their contemporary, practical relevance. Then he worked to make those teachings available in English so that they would be accessible to Westerners. And finally, he chose to live and teach in the West so that every day he provided a living, breathing manifestation of the true meaning of the Buddha's teachings. In that way he touched and profoundly transformed the lives of countless Westerners and planted the seeds of Bodhi (enlightenment) in their hearts.