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Remembrance and Gratitude [How Buddhism Changed My Life! : The Moon Reflected in a Thousand Rivers]

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REMEMBRANCE AND GRATITUDE

by Ron Epstein (Upasaka Guorong)

In Memory of the Venerable Master Hsuan Hua, Volume One.

Burlingame, CA: Buddhist Text Translation Society, 1995, pp. 205-207.

After having been invited to the United States by some disciples from Hong Kong, the Master established a Buddhist Lecture Hall in San Francisco's Chinatown in 1962. 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 in a run-down Victorian building on the edge of San Francisco's Fillmore District and Japantown. The other floors of the building contained individual rooms for rent with communal kitchens. Those rooms were occupied by poor, elderly black people and a bunch of young Americans who were, in various ways, eagerly searching for meaning in their lives.

I first met the Master in January, 1966. I was a poor student in need of a place to stay and rented a room on the second floor of the building. The young people in the building all consciously or unconsciously knew that the Master was a very special person, but because we knew next to nothing about Buddhism, we had no categories to use to express our understanding or lack of it. We knew that the Master was a Chinese Buddhist monk, but didn't really know what that meant. One young man had actually taken refuge with the Master, but we didn't know what that meant either, or even whether it was different than leaving home. Basic Buddhist courtesy and the notions of making offerings and moral precepts were totally alien to us. The Master never mentioned that he was a Patriarch and had thousands of disciples in China and Hong Kong.

Many local Chinese Buddhists were angry at him for leaving Chinatown. Only a handful of the most loyal disciples would regularly come to see him and make offerings. Nonetheless, the Master would share what he had with the people in the building. He would put bags of rice in the communal kitchens, so that no one would have to go hungry. Sometimes, on Buddhist holidays or when he had extra food, he would invite several of us to lunch and often prepare the food himself. We all thought the food was delicious.

In those days when sometimes only one or two people who didn't even understand Chinese came to hear the Dharma, the Master lectured the same way that he did in later years when there were hundreds or even thousands. I remember going to listen to him lecture on the Lotus Sutra. With the same awesome demeanor that we have all come to know, he would sit at the head of two fold-out picnic tables with an ancient blackboard behind him. Often there was no one to translate, and when there was, it was usually two young high school students who could not translate very well. I didn't understand the Sutra at all, but when I went, it was to be in the Master's presence and to listen to the sound of his voice.

More popular with some of the young Americans was the Master's open meditation hour from seven to eight every evening. There were usually a few people there, and I sat with him more and more the longer I lived in the building. Although the popular San Francisco Zen Center was just a couple of blocks away, I began to be sensitive to a special quality of my meditation when in the Master's presence.

It took me about six months to have a clear realization about the Master. When it finally came, I was amazed. I still knew practically nothing about Buddhism, but I understood that the Master was like no one else I had ever met in my entire life. I saw that he was truly without any vestige of selfish individuality, and thus I could never feel any real conflict of interest with him. He knew me more deeply than I knew myself, accepted me in a way that no one else did, and was compassionately concerned about my welfare, so that there was nothing to fear from him. I sensed that he had great wisdom and special psychic power, and yet there he was everyday, always appearing ordinary and entirely inconspicuous. I suspect that the insights I had about him at that time were in no way special to me, but that something similar or even more profound was deeply felt by

all those, Buddhist or not, whatever their ethnic background or education, who opened their awareness to him.

A few months later, with great excitement I travelled to Asia to meet the Buddhadharma in its homeland. How strange it was for me to naively encounter for the first time the 2500 year old shell of Buddhist institutional tradition. With precious few exceptions, I found it to be devoid of any living spirit. Shortly after my return to the United States, I entered the university world of academic Buddhist scholarship and became a graduate student first at the University of Washington and then at Berkeley. I marvelled at the extensive and keen intellectual knowledge of the Buddha's teachings possessed by some of my mentors. Yet at the same time I wondered why almost all of them vigorously resisted allowing the living spirit of the Buddhadharma to enter their personal lives. The two-fold disillusionment I experienced during those years was painful to bear. Yet perhaps for me, those difficult lessons were necessary to help me learn to cherish the rarity and the preciousness of a genuine Master.

It would have been enough for me just to have had the opportunity to be in the presence of such a genuinely selfless person. Yet the Master was so much more for me and my family. We, like so many others, literally owe our physical lives to him. And he never failed to be there for us, to counsel us in times of personal crisis, and to advise us and our children. It goes without saying that we are grateful beyond words for what we received.

Equally or even more valuable to me is that he gave ultimate meaning to my life. He showed me every day in his every single action that the wonderful world of the Buddhadharma portrayed in the Sutras is not fantasy, fairy tale or intellectual abstraction. He showed me that it is real and alive, and even more importantly, a possibility and practical ideal for our own lives. I remember him saying that we should explain the sutras as if we ourselves had spoken them, to make them our own and not distance ourselves from them. Clearly that is the example that he expressed through his own life.

The time of receiving is now over. It is time to grow up and become an adult in the Dharma. That is not easy for me, even after so many years. It is important not to be overwhelmed by the enormity of the debt owed, and the fact that, within the scope of my limited understanding, it can never be repaid. The Master always told us, "Do your best." Now more than ever before, it is time for me to do what I can, in my limited way with my limited vision, to continue his work both within myself and in this difficult world of impermanence and suffering. Although he has left his physical body, I know that the Master is still here, deep down in my heart, in the true pure land which has no inside and outside.