

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE OTHER ZEN AND THE PURE LAND: THE CHINESE, KOREANS AND VIETNAMESE

I

The Chinese

The Chinese were actually the first Buddhists to reach America, whether the date is marked by the legendary party of monks who accompanied Hui Shan in the fourth century or from the immigrants of the 1860s. But it was not until Tripitaka Master Hsuan Hua began teaching the five schools of Ch'an, T'ien-t'ai, Vinaya, Esoteric and Pure Land in San Francisco's Chinatown in 1962 that the full range of Chinese Buddhism came into view in America.

Hsuan Hua was born in northeast China in 1908. At the age of eleven, while walking across a field near his village, he found a child's corpse wrapped in straw. He had never seen death before and he asked his mother, who was a devout Buddhist, what it meant. She said that all human beings eventually die. Hsuan Hua wanted to know if there was any way to escape death, and a stranger, who happened to be visiting, told him, "The only way to escape is to practice the Tao (Way) so as to enlighten one's mind and understand one's inner self." Hsuan Hua

resolved then to become a monk. His mother was pleased, but she asked him to wait and care for her and his father.

He was a model of filial piety until his parents died. Then he took the vows of a novice, and sat in meditation in a little hut beside his mother's grave for three years. He ate only one meal a day and never laid down to sleep. One night the villagers saw a bright light coming from Hsuan Hua's hut. They rushed to the cemetery with buckets of water, but when they arrived there was no fire. There was nothing but Hsuan Hua sitting quietly, deep in meditation.

In 1947, at the end of World War II, Hsuan Hua made a pilgrimage three thousand miles across China to pay homage to the great master, Venerable Abbot Hsu Yun (Empty Cloud), who was then one hundred and nine years old. Hsu Yun recognized Hsuan Hua's enlightenment, and transmitted the mind-seal of the Wang Yei lineage to him, an event that Master Hua commemorated with a verse:

The noble Yun saw me and said, "Thus it is."
I saw the noble Yun and verified, "Thus it is."
The noble Yun and I both thus,
Universally vow that all beings also be thus.

In the summer of 1949 he fled the Communist revolution and emigrated to Hong Kong. He arrived penniless and immediately went into retreat in a mountainside cave where he spent two weeks sitting on a flat rock in full lotus position. Within a short time a stream of Buddhist refugees fleeing from the new Communist regime began to pour into Hong Kong. They had left suddenly, the landholdings of the larger monasteries had been confiscated, the smaller temples turned into government offices and some senior monks had been executed as "landlords." They left behind sutras, images and all the other dharma treasures that had been accumulated over hundreds of years.

Hong Kong was mainly Christian. Most of the monks were elderly, and desperately in need of food, shelter and clothing. Master Hua left his cave and raised funds to provide for them. He also built temples and lecture halls, reprinted sutras and taught the dharma.

In 1959 word came that the Venerable Master Hsu Yun had died in China at the age of one hundred and twenty, and Master Hua left Hong Kong, first for Australia, where he taught Chinese at a university, and then for America, where some of his Chinese disciples had founded the San Francisco Buddhist Lecture Hall in 1958.

He began his life in America in Chinatown, waiting patiently until

those who had "conditions" (that is, karmic links) with him appeared. He was first known only in the Chinese community, but gradually word spread that an enlightened Ch'an master was living in Chinatown, and Americans, many of them graduate students in Chinese, began to come around. The master was then living and teaching in the tiny fourth floor room of the Buddhist Lecture Hall that once been a Taoist temple on Waverly Place, and it was there, in the summer of 1968 that he held his first ninety-six day long Dharma Assembly on the *Sburangama Sutra*.

Everyone lived together in that one room, listening to the master's lectures, eating one meal a day, studying Chinese, meditating, chanting and working; at night some of the people slept sitting up in the meditation posture on the roof. At the end of the session the master said, "This year the Dharma flower will bloom in America—a five-petalled flower." In 1969 five students who had attended the Assembly accompanied the Master to Keelung, Taiwan, where they received the shramanera (novice), bhikshu and bodhisattva ordinations. When they returned to America their shaved heads were marked with the five incense burns customary for ordination and they wore the flapping brown T'ang Dynasty robes of the orthodox Chinese monks.

In the winter of 1970, Master Hua and the Sino-American Buddhist Association (which replaced the original Buddhist Lecture Hall) renovated a large, red-brick, former mattress factory in the Mission District of San Francisco, and called it Gold Mountain Monastery—Gold Mountain being the name of a monastery in China and also the name that the first Chinese immigrants had given America. Gold Mountain was very much a traditional Chinese monastery. It was there, on June 7, 1972, that master Hua and the five American bhikshus conducted the first ordination ceremony in America—lasting one-hundred and eight days in this case. According to the *Mahavamsa* (the "Great Chronicles" of Ceylon), King Mahanama had said that Buddhism could not truly be said to have taken root in a country until a native-born son could be ordained in his native land by his countrymen. Now that condition had been met.

In 1976 the Sino-American Buddhist Association purchased the 237-acre Mendocino State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, just outside of Ukiah, California, which they called the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas. They installed an eighteen foot statue of Avalokiteshvara in the meditation hall and transformed the two hundred eighty cells of Mendocino's state maximum security prison into cells for monks at Tathagata Monastery. A building on the other side of the property became Joyous Giving House Convent. They also established Dharma Realm University, a

nonsectarian institution which provides a Buddhist atmosphere where someone might study engineering as well as the Chinese classics.

At Gold Mountain all five schools of Chinese Buddhism are taught and practiced: the vinaya (discipline) schools emphasize the two hundred fifty rules of conduct for bhikshus and bhikshunis, and the five precepts for lay disciples; the T'ien-t'ai school stresses sutra study and recitation; the Esoteric school involves the use of mantras and dharanis; the Pure Land school, based on faith that anyone who recites the name of Amitabha will be reborn in the Pure Land (a Buddha-field from which it would be comparatively easy to attain enlightenment), practices through chanting; while the Ch'an (Zen) school uses sitting meditation and *kung-an* (koan) work.

Westerners are often surprised at the union of Ch'an and Pure Land. These two methods seem logically inconsistent, Pure Land being based on faith and "other power" and Ch'an on the great doubt and "self power." Furthermore, the Pure Land doctrine seems more Christian than Buddhist—"like a fairy tale," as one student said to Master Hua, "where by simply relying on Amitabha our problems will be effortlessly solved."

But for the Chinese Ch'an masters, the Pure Land practice of chanting Amitabha's name with single-mindedness was a valuable, expedient means, one through which the cultivator could realize that the Pure Land was his own true nature. Ch'an and Pure Land were complementary rather than contradictory. "The most important point of recitation is to melt the drift of false thoughts so that one becomes pure and spotless like the driven snow," Master Hua told his American students, and the practice at Gold Mountain frequently includes sessions where Amitabha's name, *namo-om-i-t'o-fa*, is chanted—or sung—melodiously in Chinese manner.

These recitation sessions, which sometimes last as long as a month, often precede a week or more of the strictest Ch'an sessions. At that time there is silence throughout the meditation hall, while cultivators sit with the kung-an, "Who (or what) is reciting the Buddha's name?" from 2:30 in the morning until midnight. Periods of sitting alternate with occasional lectures by the master and with brisk walking—which sometimes breaks out into running.

Life at Gold Mountain Monastery and at the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas follows the most severe practice of all American Buddhist communities. Bhikshus and bhikshunis live apart and adhere closely to the Vinaya. They rise at 3:40 in the morning for a program that includes bowing, chanting, services, meditation, language study (Mandarin Chi-

nese, Sanskrit and European languages) and work. They eat one vegetarian meal a day, and many of them sleep in the meditation posture at night. ("Difficult for your legs for the first year or two," says Bhikshu Heng Lai, "but it's really beautiful. Your head is clear all night long.") These "bitter practices," as they are called, are an important part of the training under Master Hua, who succinctly sums up their value in the saying, "Bitter practice, sweet mind," and though at first they seem impossible, many who undertake them find that with time they become quite natural.

Master Hua emphasizes sutra studies and delivers a lecture on a sutra at the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas every day of the year. These lectures, sometimes also given by senior students, are simultaneously translated into Chinese or English. The monks and nuns of Gold Mountain have also been active in translation, and the Buddhist Text Translation Society, which was founded by Master Hua in 1970, has published a number of exemplary translations. The scholarship and accuracy of these translations are of the highest order since translations are checked and rechecked by no less than four different committees. The goal of the Translation Society is to publish the entire Tripitika in English, as well as in other major European languages.

Chinese Buddhists often spent several years wandering through China on pilgrimages that entailed ascetic practices and self-imposed hardship. Heng Ju, a bhikshu from Gold Mountain, revived this ancient practice when he undertook a bowing pilgrimage from San Francisco to Seattle in the fall of 1973. An adventurous, ex-Navy submarine mechanic, Heng Ju had been inspired by the bowing pilgrimage that the Venerable Master Hsu Yun had taken across China in the 1880s. Master Yun had bowed, knees, elbows, forehead and hands to the ground once every three steps, six thousand miles across China. The pilgrimage had taken six years, and during it Master Yun had attained a single-minded radiance and clarity of mind that far surpassed anything he had ever known.

The first time Heng Ju tried the practice he left Gold Mountain late at night without a word to anyone. He had bowed for five miles, from Market Street to the foot of the Golden Gate Bridge. He had stopped traffic, been shadowed by the police and finally returned to the monastery, his body exhausted, wondering if he had not, at last, gone completely mad. Yet, as he said, "there was something about the experience that was impossible to describe, but which felt like it was reaching to the

core." He decided to try again, this time with the master's advice and blessing. He would bow for his own cultivation and would dedicate his efforts to the cause of world peace.

Accompanied by Bhikshu Heng Yo, who carried a pack with food and camping gear, Heng Ju left San Francisco on October 16, 1973. He bowed through rain, sleet and sun, through all the small towns along Highway 1, past laundromats, taverns, schools, shopping centers and gas stations. He suffered poison oak, blisters, sunburn and swollen knees. The first hundred miles were the worst. "We were plagued with terrible weather and lack of equipment, and I began to think that what we had set out to do was just too big, that it was totally impossible to bow a thousand miles in America for world peace." Their outlandish appearance—shaved heads, robes and bowing—seemed at first to outrage people. "Bowling a thousand miles from San Francisco to Seattle was a relatively easy task," Heng Ju said when they had completed the trip. "What is hard is trying to explain it to people." At first they handed out a three-by-five card:

Because people are constantly suffering due to the enmity and fighting among themselves, and because they fail to realize the quiescent wisdom of their own nature, Dharma Master Heng Ju, a Buddhist bhiksu (monk) is making a pilgrimage for world peace and harmony . . . in the hope that he may evince a response from the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and devas (gods) so they will prevent violence and fighting and protect and maintain peace in the world.

But they soon found it was better to talk to everyone individually. So they spoke with reporters, truck drivers, school kids, loggers, tourists, highway patrol men (who tried to run them in), born-again Christians (who tried to convert them) and a few local Buddhists. As their trip progressed—three steps, one bow; five or six miles a day—they found that the increasing coverage of newspaper and television did a great deal to explain to people who they were and what they were doing. Earlier in the trip someone had thrown a can of beer at them from a speeding car and once a drunken driver tried to run them down. But by the time they got to Gold Beach, Oregon they were greeted by a sign on the marquee of a sporting goods store saying "Welcome Heng Ju & Heng Yo. Have a good trip."

On Saturday, July 20, 1974, nine months after they had begun, Heng Ju and Heng Yo completed their thousand-mile pilgrimage. They were met in Seattle by Master Hsuan Hsu, and the assembly from Gold

Mountain as well as many others who had come together to celebrate a gathering for world peace.

When Heng Ju spoke he recited a verse that the master had given to him on the day of his departure.

Practicing what is difficult to practice
is the conduct of the sage;
Enduring what is hard to endure is the
genuine patience.
All Buddhas throughout the ten directions
have walked down this road.
The eighty thousand Bodhisattvas have
followed right along.
Blow the magnificent Dharma conch and
raise up the cry;
Shake your precious tin staff, transform
stingy greed.
Your work complete, and result full, a
return midst song of triumph
Then I'll give my disciple a meal of
berry pie!

The story, which everyone knew, was that six days after taking the vow to eat only one meal a day, several years prior to his bowing journey, Heng Ju had slipped out of the monastery and eaten a whole batch of pastries. One berry pie was left, and he wrapped it up, put it in his pocket and returned to the monastery. By evening he had begun to think about the pie, and he thought about it all through the abbot's lecture that night. About ten o'clock, when everyone was asleep, he climbed out the bathroom window, on to the fire-escape and up to the roof, where he began to eat.

But just at that moment [he said] I looked over at the fire escape to see someone else climbing up onto the roof! I stood there terror-struck, with a mouthful of pie. There was no place I could run. It was the Master! I stood there unmoving for a moment. . . . Then I began walking around in a circle on the rooftop as if in deep contemplation. The Master, too, began to circle the roof as if in deep contemplation but he was going in the opposite direction. We passed each other twice without looking at each other, but on the third lap I looked up and saw him grinning like a Cheshire cat. He said four words, "How does it feel?" That was the famous berry pie incident. The Abbot has been kidding me about it for years now.

When Heng Ju and Heng Yo got back to the monastery after their pilgrimage—they had bowed an extra hundred fifty miles up to the site of a projected monastery, just for good measure—they were welcomed

by a dharma assembly: ceremonies, festivities, dharma talks and a vegetarian feast. Heng Ju ate only one thing, a whole berry pie, presented by the abbot. As he said at the end of his talk that day. "Today you have all had a chance to see a bhiksu who bowed a thousand miles for a piece of pie."