

The Letters

Day 4: May 11, 1977¹

South Pasadena, Los Angeles

Dear Shifu,

Homage to the Venerable Master,

May he lend his compassion to all beings!

This work is very much like a Chan session.² Constant mindfulness is hard work and we are making slow and steady progress. Three steps, one bow.³

Heng Chau is a good protector. He has already saved us from one nasty situation which he will tell about below. Many lay people have protected us and show us great care. I am not talking very much at all. This is a wonderful chance to practice my vow to speak only words in service to the Triple Jewel.⁴

I am forever grateful for the opportunity to cultivate the Way.⁵

Heng Sure

Dear Shifu,

Keeping our wonderful protection requires carefulness.⁶

We've met relatively few obstacles so far, but many tests.

¹ The pilgrimage began on May 7, 1977, at Gold Wheel Temple on Huntington Drive, South Pasadena, California.

² Chan Session: an intensive retreat devoted to sitting meditation, usually of seven days' duration.

³ At the time of the pilgrimage (1977–79), the art of translating Buddhist texts from the Chinese had had only a scanty history. In their letters the bowing monks sometimes made translations—especially of technical terms concerning Buddhist practice—which were so literal that the awkwardness of the English obscured the meaning. In such cases, rather than altering the language of the letters, the editor has added brief explanatory footnotes.

⁴ The Three Treasures of the Triple Jewel are the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.

⁵ To “cultivate the Way” (Chinese xiu dao, 修道) means to actively engage in spiritual practice aligned with the Buddha's teaching.

⁶ The Master told the monks upon their departure that if they upheld their moral precepts and bowed with a single mind, then members of the spiritual pantheon would stand by and protect them because a journey of this nature was fraught with dangers and difficulties.

Our first day out we started bowing along a row of bars in a tough neighborhood. Lots of drunks and macho toughs. Our first solo, we were really less than confident. Wet and muddy from the streets (it had just stopped raining, a small clearing when we started bowing), we were not an awesome sight. On the second bow the action started.

A huge drunk tapped me on the shoulder from behind, “Hey what you making with this?” I feebly tried to explain through his stupor. He’s seven inches from my face. He slowly pulls one of those sentimental, wavy-haired, hippie pictures of Jesus out of his wallet. He keeps shaking it in front of my face, waiting. I gracefully exit to stay close to Heng Sure. A souped-up car whizzes by full of drunk and violent men, “You queers have until sundown to be out of this neighborhood!” We’re only three minutes out and already so much flak.

We trudge on. Many groups of people forming ahead as the word quickly spreads. “You’ll never get anywhere that way, ha! ha!” laughs someone.

“Hey, Joe, they’re blessing your gas station! ho! ho!” mocks another.

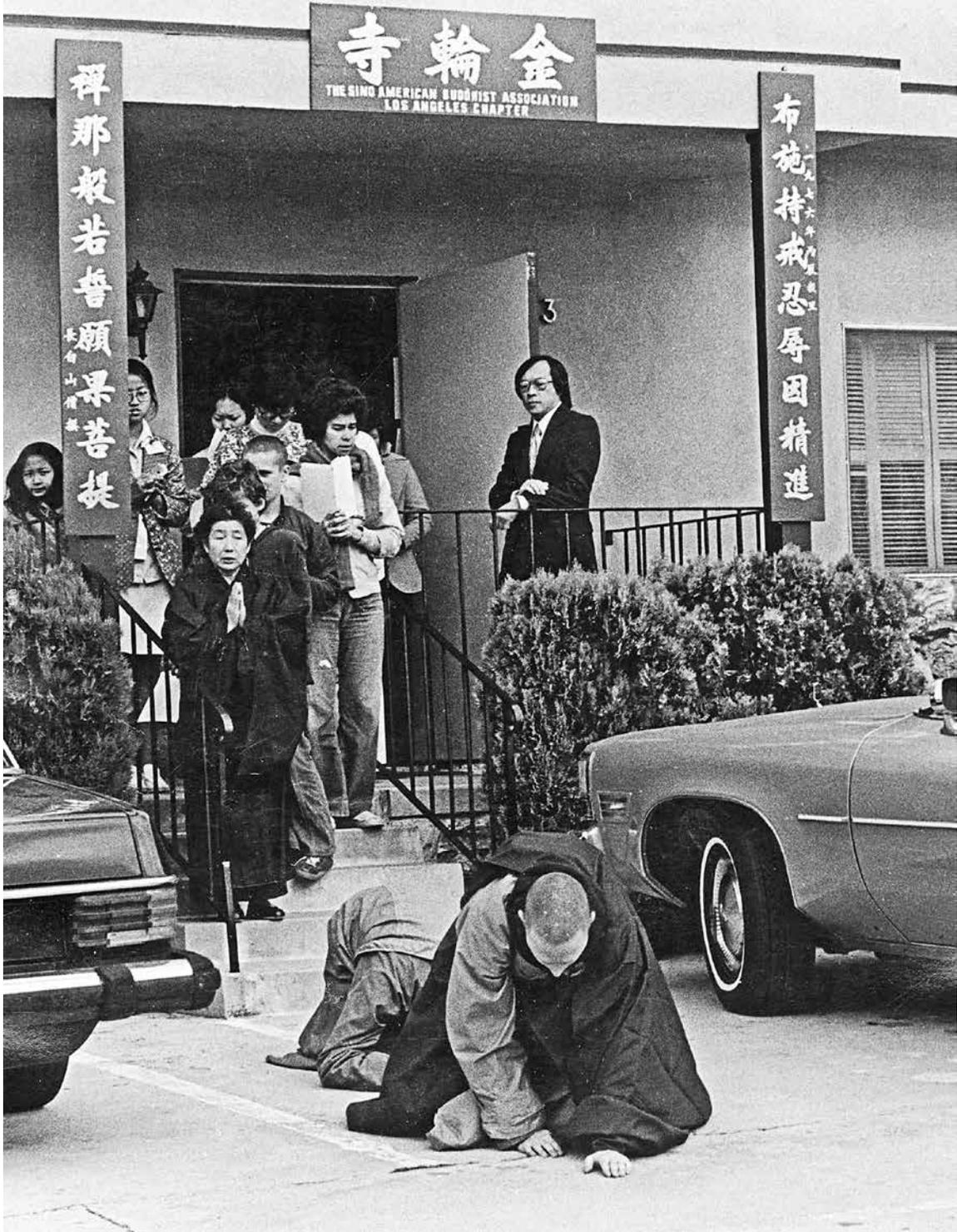
Some pass us like we’re old popsicle sticks. They are indifferent, as if in TV *sama-dhi*. But each group dissipates as we bow into them. How we must seem to them! They test us verbally—no response. “Hey, think I’ll kick ‘em in the ass when they kneel down!” No response. A larger, older group of men gather at one corner. The leader stands a good 6’5”. His sidekick has been running in between us, patting us on the heads, posturing, and trying to provoke us. No response. Heng Sure is constant—pushes forward. I close the gap. Suddenly they make way, telling the lingering one, “Let ‘em be, they ain’t doin’ nothin’.” We bow through. I feel the two leaders stalking from behind. It’s hard to put down all my years of martial arts training, but I know there’s no real protection save sincere cultivation. We keep bowing, walking . . . Finally the hulk pulls alongside and politely asks, “Pardon me, Sir, may I ask what you’re doing?” I nod, finish a bow and explain.

“Wow, that’s something! Don’t he talk? You’ve got the hard job. I can dig being peaceful. All the way to Ukiah! What’s this Buddha about?” etc. They are moved. Something soft and genuine peeks out. The edge is gone. Ice melts to water. “Peace to you guys,” he says and crosses us with his blessing as he walks away. “Take care.”

We are beat! Time to find a camp. The clouds are back. It’s starting to rain.

Forgot toilet paper.

2:30 A.M. Parked across from a tortilla factory in South Pasadena. I woke up reciting mantras. I hear footsteps shuffling and quiet voices. A shadow passes by the right side of the car. Bang! An arm forces itself through the vent window, trying to open



First bows on the streets of Los Angeles, beginning of pilgrimage with send-off from Gold Wheel Community members who are reciting the Great Compassion Mantra, May 1977

the door. Dogs outside barking wildly. I yell, “Hey!” I can make out four dark figures moving away from the car. They re-group down the street. A little later I hear rocks hitting the pavement around us. I wipe the moisture off the window and see them, now with night sticks or bats, coming for us, buzzed on something, throwing rocks and charging down the center of the street to attack us. I jump the seat, grope for the ignition and start the engine. Engine won’t turn over. Panic sets in. I recite Guan Yin’s name and try again. Varoom! the engine roars. I pull out. One of them jumps at the car trying to stop us. We made it!

Went to Gold Wheel Temple and slept in driveway until 4:00 A.M. Adrenalin exhaustion. A hard day, this one. We are accidentally killing many little bugs and ants under our bowing hands and feet. Every day we feel stronger, more mindful.

Dreams within dreams bowing through L.A. It’s inconceivably wonderful, Three Steps, One Bow.

Peace in the Way,
Heng Chau

Day 8: May 14, 1977
Lincoln Heights, Los Angeles

Dear Shifu,

We continue to bow about one and a half miles a day, averaging five hours of bowing and one and a half hours of 20-minute rest periods in between each hour. We rise at 4:00 for morning recitation and finish by 6:00 P.M. to wash up and recite evening recitation as always. The day also includes a tai chi lesson from Dharma Master Chau in the morning and short reading and translation of the *Avatamsaka Sutra* at night before we recite the first lines of the Surangama Mantra forty-nine times and then pass out. We are living in an old Ford Falcon van⁷ belonging to one of the upasakas,⁸ sleeping out on the streets of L.A. and washing in the park. Our lunch comes from several Dharma-protecting upasikas.

The upasakas and upasikas are watching over us with care. They are working to make our trip go smoothly—getting letters from the police, giving us coins for parking meters, etc. The other morning when it rained, we bowed in the Woo’s garage and

⁷ The Ford van was soon to be replaced by the Plymouth station wagon that was to be the monks’ shelter for the rest of their journey.

⁸ Upasākas and upāsikās are male and female lay disciples who have taken refuge in the Three Treasures, and who uphold the five precepts: not to kill, not to steal, not to commit adultery, not to lie, and not to take intoxicants.

ate lunch there. We bowed through a tough neighborhood called Lincoln Heights. We reached the front of Lincoln High school just as classes finished. We were immediately surrounded by forty or fifty jeering, shouting, swearing rowdies. When they saw their words couldn't move us, they started to laugh and before long they began to bow along behind us, until we had fourteen boys in line bowing to the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. They all grew more respectful after about six bows—the toughest ones couldn't keep it up—and they went away, silent and sober. No more trouble that day.

The next day at 10:00 I had the sudden awareness that somewhere the demon armies were working up another test for us, a challenge that would appear before long. Friday morning as we neared the end of Lincoln Heights at 10:15 I sensed something up ahead, but I have taken my glasses off and have glued my eyes to my nose for the rest of the journey, so I don't see many details on the road. Heng Chau told me later what he saw. A gang of five older men gathered at a taco stand on the corner. One of them was a real demon—ugly, with a misshapen body like a pear. He was jumping around and pointing at us and in his hand he carried a five-foot, sharpened, twisted metal whip. He moved a trash can in front of our path to block the walk and he began to beat it with his whip, making a great noise and denting the sides of the can, all the time pointing at us and trying to provoke his buddies into a similar rage. Heng Chau says he was a genuine, big-league baddie, beyond the reach of reason or words. As I bowed along I didn't see any of this, but suddenly I had the strong feeling of invisible aid, a wonderfully good, powerful presence. I had a great feeling of calmness and light.

Heng Chau says that as I bowed right into the middle of the group at the taco stand, the leader suddenly went out like a light. He lost his anger and he grew very obedient, like a small child. The others sat motionless at their tables as I bowed around the garbage can below their feet and walked on across the street to bow on the other side. A young, clean man stepped out of his doorway and asked politely, "Can you tell me about your religion, please? I'm very impressed by what you are doing . . ." and Heng Chau told him briefly what the trip was for. He explained quite well.

I can't say for certain who was there leading us through the streets of Los Angeles, but it certainly felt like there were some special responses that morning.

If there is a living being who has a thought of hostility towards the Bodhisattva, the Bodhisattva also views him with kind eyes. To the very end he has not the slightest anger.

—*AVATAMSAKA SUTRA*, CHAPTER ON THE TEN TRANSFERENCES

Disciple Heng Sure bows in respect

Dear Shifu,

Some false thoughts⁹ and recollections: a group of disciples brought picnic lunch and change for the parking meters. I can't begin to fathom Chinese social rituals and protocol. In Chinatown an old couple exclaimed in Chinese, "Why, they're foreigners!" No, I thought, we are just bringing over the quality stuff you forgot (Buddhism). In fact, until we are all enlightened, we are all foreigners.

Heng Sure's pants are back, fixed and patched with a bright Hawaiian floral print. The long robe helps cover the patch and keep a proper deportment. The kids in Lincoln Heights would have eaten us up for such an inconsistency.

People are skeptical, they scrutinize everything we do—from our shoelaces to where our eyes wander. No room for mistakes or indulgence.

Steering the Middle Way with offerings is hard. When we get "junk," we fix it up by rinsing off the oil, diluting the sugar, and sewing the holes with patches. When we get "gold," we tarnish and cover it. Think we'll dye the circus hobo pants Bhikshu¹⁰ brown and gray.

LAY DISCIPLE: "Well, you'll be out of L.A. in a month."

MONK: "Oh?"

LAY DISCIPLE: "Yeah. I figure the hardest part is over (Lincoln Heights). Chinatown is a little better, and Beverly Hills, no problem."

MONK: "The hardest part is inside. It's never easy."

LAY DISCIPLE: "Oh." (smile of recognition)

Bowing: Sometimes after countless ups and downs, coming and going on the cement, there is simply nothing. Sounds, conversations, hecklers, restaurant smells, cigarette butts—no problem. At times, even the "me" gets lost, unimportant, blended into it all, yet untouched and separate. Patience and humility comes easier after bumping noses with ants, in between lumps of welded chewing gum and broken bottles. It's just fine—the place to be now.

Cleaning house, inside-out.

Chinatown:

1. Least Buddhist of all. Animals being slaughtered openly ("fresh").
2. On main corner: We are bowing. A parade funeral replete with marching band playing "Will We Not See You Again?" motorcycle cops, crowds, small local circus on the right, a big strawberry cake appears in front of us on a chair, a Chinese T.V. newsman taking pictures. We bow through and under. Only a handful notice.

⁹ The activities of the deluded mind.

¹⁰ A fully ordained Buddhist monk.

3. Bowing two feet from swimming fish in market window tank. Waiting to die. Both of us. Blub, blubbing with their mouths, us quietly reciting. Both watching each other in our “tanks.”

4. Crazy lady who has been following us cackling, sneaks up behind and kicks me right in the acupuncture point in groin. Keep bowing wondering where we met before and where we will again. Feeling sick.

5. Drive around corner and pass through an intersection to park. A few seconds later crash, bang bang! a terrible accident. We missed it by seconds. A Chinese street gang swaggers by. What a fine way to cultivate! Much peace in the Dharma from two “foreigners.”

Disciple Heng Chau bows in respect

Day 12: May 18, 1977

Near Chinatown, Los Angeles

6:00 A.M.

Dear Shifu,

One of the laymen is going to Gold Mountain¹¹ today so this will be a quick note. We are making slow progress—about ten city blocks per day. We are now in the center of downtown L.A. and although the buildings are large and the sidewalks are broad, we find it a tougher neighborhood than Lincoln Heights or Chinatown. The rich people do not want us on their side walks and they radiate a kind of depersonalized hatred at seeing two monks being repentant beneath their feet. A well-dressed woman in her forties stamps by, inches from our heads and fingers and shouts through clenched teeth, “Where do you think you are, Mecca? That is disgusting in the United States!”

Heng Chau isn’t talking to people who don’t ask sincere questions, but his answer to this woman could have been, “Yes, you’re right. And that’s just the problem. Until it’s no longer disgusting, this country is in trouble.” Sleeping at night in this city is a very tense business. We try to find spots to park our van near to the bowing site but last night another thief stuck his hand in the open window. He went away quietly when we shut the window.

We are awake at the time and ready to do morning recitation, but it is still an unsettling experience. Heng Chau tells me I woke up last night and began talking

¹¹ Gold Mountain Monastery, in San Francisco, the headquarters of the Sino-American Buddhist Association, as it was then called, from 1971 to 1979.