

2018-03-06 - Hand Comforting, Part 9

Good morning, everyone! This is today's Dharma Espresso on Hand Comforting, part 9.

During the last Lunar New Year, we did three-steps-one-bow and somebody asked me how this practice originated.

Page | 1 As you know, we had about 350 to 400 people participating in the three-steps-one-bow proceeding to prostrate in front of the Venerable Master Hsuan Hua's shariras (relics). This is my response to that question:

Three-steps-one-bow originated a long time ago, perhaps over a thousand years ago. There was some written information about the three-steps-one-bow practice since the Tang dynasty, but it gained popularity during the latter part of that dynasty, and was very popular during the Qing dynasty.

The person most well-known for practicing three-steps-one-bow was the Venerable Master Hsu Yun. During the 1900s, the Venerable Hsu Yun was very famous because he was nearly the last monk of the period called the declining Qing dynasty, toward the end of the Qing dynasty and the beginning of the People's Republic era.

The unique story about the Venerable Hsu Yun was that he was born encased in an amniotic sac. The shape of the sac startled and scared his mother so much that she became seriously ill and passed away. Growing up, he felt guilty that he was the cause of his mother's fear, hemorrhaging, and death. He decided to redeem himself by doing three-steps-one-bow. He did that on his mother's behalf, bowing every three steps while walking towards the direction of Mount Wutai (Five Terrace Mountain), where Manjusri Bodhisattva was believed to reside.

According to the legend of that period, Manjusri Bodhisattva often made himself visible. Many people saw him and got their prayers granted. Thus, Mount Wutai became a pilgrimage location. People made pilgrimages there to pray for relief from sicknesses and karmic hindrances.

This has become a tradition. People have been coming to the Four Great Mountains of four Bodhisattvas for pilgrimage, praying, and doing three-steps-one-bow. It was special with the Venerable Hsu Yun. He went there not for fame, recognition, or benefits. What he did was not publicized and nobody knew about it. He only followed a trail. Even if there had been freeways at that time, he would not have followed them. He did three-steps-one-bow on the trails, and dressed raggedly. On his back was what we now call a backpack, carrying food and water, his clothes, and a mat for sleeping at night. He did not spend the nights at temples; he just stayed on the side of the trails. He only took shelter at the temples when there was one near the road.

His journey lasted over three years, sometimes in pitiful conditions. Despite rain, snow, wind, or cold weather, he walked and bowed. He did not need the glory of people to follow him, nor to advertise on Facebook. None of those! He quietly walked and bowed. Occasionally, disciples brought him food. Sometimes he had to ask for alms, or stop by the pagodas that offered food, or asked for food from people. That was a miserable period for him, but he endured those hardships silently, without any complaints.

There was one beggar who often appeared to help him carry things over some difficult trails. It was hard to bow when you carried things on the back going over those difficult trails.

Usually he left his belongings at one place, bowed for a couple of hours and came back to get them, or he brought them ahead, then walked back and bowed to the new location. Of course nobody would steal his belongings, which were normal daily things of a monk. But the beggar was very nice, kept carrying things for him, and sometimes cooked for him. He only focused on bowing. To whom did he bow? To Manjusri Bodhisattva. Did he pray for anything else? No, he did not pray for anything other than to transfer the merit of his bowing to his mother.

That was a moving story. The first time I heard about this was in Vietnam from the Venerable Master Vien Duc. There was a thin book about the Venerable Hsu Yun and how he did the three-steps-one-bow. What impressed me most was the fact that he did not ask for enlightenment, nor for any personal needs. He only did the bowing for his mother, to fulfil his filial piety. It was a great act! It is great when we practice or do something for someone we love. Sometimes we do it for many people, the whole community, the country, or the whole world. At all times, having an object for which to cultivate is a great act, a great example to follow.

Next was the mysterious story about the beggar. After the Venerable Hsu Yun bowed all the way to the top of the mountain, he realized that the beggar was none other than the manifestation of Manjusri Bodhisattva. Bodhisattvas usually disguise themselves under unexpected forms. We often wish to see them, but sometimes the Bodhisattvas have come to see, listen to, grant our wishes, and leave without our knowledge. Therefore, we need to be humble to all people around us, especially those who neither have a noble appearance nor look rich or happy. They usually come unexpected, sudden, and only make a quick encounter. Please do not forget the lesson that the Venerable Hsu Yun taught us: practice for someone we love.

Today is Tuesday, and those who checked Viber received the news that Ms. Hoang had a fall, broke her leg, and will undergo surgery this morning. Who is Ms. Hoang? She is one of the bodhisattvas who used to come on Wednesday with Lan Anh, Hong, Becky, and Tu to cook for us at Headquarters. I have never experienced any anger or irritation in my relationship with Ms. Hoang. I don't really know the cause of her fall, but let us pray for Ms. Hoang. You can recite the Great Compassion Mantra seven times. You can also do three-steps-one-bow for her. People who are in poor health or had an accident need our love and compassion. Let's take this opportunity to show Ms. Hoang our love. Whether you have met her or not, let's send her our love and pray for her, either by reciting the Great Compassion Mantra, or the True Words of Seven Buddhas for Erradicating Offenses Mantra. Anything to express our love and sincerity to Ms. Hoang is invaluable in this situation.

Thank you all. I wish you a day of peace, joy, beauty, and full of love.

Dharma Master Heng Chang

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