

Ch'an Master Hsu Yun (1840-1959)

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Each issue of 'The Mountain Path' up to now has carried an article on some saint or guru. The previous two have been Hindu saints. With the abrupt manner one associates with a Zen Master this time we present a Zen (or in Chinese, Ch'an) Master with the combined strength and gentleness one often finds in a Hindu Swami. The author of this article, Lu K'uan Yu to give him his Chinese name, is well known to students of Zen for his three-volume work 'Ch'an and Zen Teaching' and his more recent 'The Secrets of Chinese Meditation' reviewed in this issue (both published by Rider & Co. London). Himself a disciple of Hsu Yun, he is well qualified to write about him.

Ch'an Master Hsu Yun was born on 26th April 1840 at Chuanchowfu in Fukien province. His father was an official of the prefecture and his mother died immediately after giving birth to him. His uncle was childless and adopted him as his heir; so his grandmother decided that he should take two wives to continue both families.

When he was 11, his grandmother died and monks were invited to perform Buddhist rites. This was the first time he saw monks or sacred objects and it made him very happy. After this he read the sutras which deeply impressed him. When his uncle took him on pilgrimage to Nanyo, he became so attached to the holy place that he was reluctant to return home. When he was 14, his father discovered that he wanted to renounce the world and, in order to keep him, engaged a Taoist to teach him meditation. After practising Taoism for three years, he decided that its teaching failed to reach the ultimate goal. One day he fled to Nanyo but was soon found and brought home. Some time later his father sent for the two girls and celebrated Hsu Yun's marriage. Although the latter lived with his two wives, he had no intercourse with them but taught them the Dharma, which they understood.

At 19, together with his cousin Fu Kuo, he fled to Kushan monastery at Fuchow where his head was shaved, and here he followed the Master Miao Lien and received full ordination. After being ordained, his cousin left in search of enlightened masters but was never heard of again. Hearing that his father had sent servants to look for him, Hsu Yun hid in a grotto behind the monastery where he practised austerities for the next three years. At 25 he learned that his father had died in Hunan province and that his stepmother with his two wives had entered a nunnery.

During these years in the grotto, he made very good progress and had most interesting experiences. He says in his autobiography: "I was able to make my heart content and became free to go anywhere I wanted. As there were mountains to stay on and herbs to eat, I started wandering from place to place." At 31, he went to Wenchow where he met a monk who urged him to call on the old master Yung Ching who was well-versed in both teaching and Ch'an transmission. This master urged him to resume eating rice and to use the Kung An (koan) "Who is dragging this corpse of mine?" and ordered him to study the Ch'an rules, the Lotus teaching and other important sutras. From 36 to 43 he went on a pilgrimage to P'u T'o island off Ningpo, which was the bodhimandala of Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva, thence to the monastery of King Asoka at Ningpo and to many other holy places where he called on well-known masters and made good progress in his Ch'an practice.

At 43, he took stock of his achievements which were not complete and remembering how he had sacrificed his love for his parents in order to join the Sangha, he was ashamed that he had attained so little. In order to repay his debt of gratitude to them, he decided on a long pilgrimage from P'u T'o to the Five-Peaked Mountain (the bodhimandala of Manjusri) in the North-west to pray for their rebirth in the Pure Land. From the thatched temple of Fa Hua on P'u T'o island, he set out with incense sticks in his hands, prostrating himself every three paces until he reached his destination.

In his long walk with prostration at every third step and concentration on repeating Manjusri's name, he succeeded in realizing singleness of thought which was the key to his subsequent success in Ch'an training. Twice he was in danger of death and twice he was saved by Manjusri who appeared as a beggar called Wen Chi to hide his identity, instead of Wen Shu as he was called in China. The first time he had been caught in a heavy snowstorm and was very hungry, tired and exhausted for several days after which he was given some yellow rice gruel which brought him back to life. Later he caught malaria and dysentery and was dying in a deserted temple on the top of a mountain when the beggar appeared again to give him the hot water and medicine that saved him. Chi asked several questions which Hsu Yun did not understand and could not answer

because he was still unenlightened and did not understand the living meaning of Ch'an dialogue (Japanese, mondo). Although he was told by the beggar that the latter was known in every monastery on the Five-Peaked Mountain, when he arrived there and asked the monks about Wen Chi no one knew him. Later he mentioned the incident to an elderly abbot who brought his palms together and said: "That beggar was the transformation body of Manjusri Bodhisattva." Only then did the master realize that he had actually met the Bodhisattva who had saved him twice on the long journey.

After sitting in meditation, he paid reverence to the Bodhisattva on the Five-Peaked Mountain, thus fulfilling his vow taken three years before to pray for the liberation of his parents. During this long journey, which took three years, he succeeded in realizing singleness of mind (i.e., the pure and undisturbed mind) even in the midst of hardship, adversity, illness and danger. On the mountain he saw, as many other pilgrims including devotees from foreign countries have done, balls of light dancing from one peak to another.

The master then went west and south, passing through many holy places where he paid reverence and sat in meditation until he reached the holy site of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva on mount O Mei in West Szechwan. There he saw at night countless Buddha-lights, like a constellation of bright stars in the sky. He continued his westward journey and entered Tibet where he visited the Potala, the seat of the Dalai Lama, and that of the Panchen Lama at Tashi Lunpo monastery. He then left Tibet to visit the holy sites of India, after which he crossed to sea to Ceylon, and thence to Burma. He then returned to China where he first visited the Cock's Foot Mountain in Yunnan which was the bodhimandala of Mahakasyapa, and then passed through the provinces of Kweichow, Hunan, Hupeh, Kiangsi and Anhwei. In his autobiography the master wrote of these two years of travel: "The scenery changed every day but my pure mind was like a bright moon hanging solitarily in the sky. My health grew more robust and my steps were rapid."

In his 54th and 55th years, the master stayed on a mountain to read the tripitaka. At 56, he was invited to the famous monastery of Gao Ming at Yangchow to assist its abbot in supervising the twelve weeks of Ch'an meditation. On his way to Yangchow, he slipped and fell into a rising river and was caught in a fisherman's net. He was carried to a nearby temple where he was revived. He was very ill but went on to Kao Ming monastery where he was asked to help at the forthcoming meditation weeks. Without disclosing his illness, he politely declined the abbot's request, asking only to be allowed to attend the meditation meetings. His refusal was regarded as an affront to the whole community and, according to Kao Ming's rules of discipline, he was punished by being beaten with a wooden ruler. As the master was practising the relinquishment of attachment to ego, ksanti-paramita and virya-paramita, he willingly accepted this punishment which aggravated his illness. In order to cure it, he sat firmly in the meditation hall day and night with increasing zeal. He said in his autobiography: "In the purity of my singleness of mind, I forgot all about my body. Twenty days later my illness vanished completely. From that moment, with all my thoughts entirely wiped out, my practice took effect throughout the day and night. My steps were as swift as if I was flying in the air. One evening, after meditation, I opened my eyes and suddenly saw I was in brightness similar to broad daylight in which I could see everything within and without the monastery ..." Knowing that he had only achieved an advanced but not the final stage, he refused to cling to it, resolving to wipe out the final hindrance caused by his last subtle attachment to ego and Dharma. One night when the meditation ended after six successive incense sticks had been burned, a monk came to fill his cup of tea. As the boiling water splashed over his hand, he dropped the cup, which fell to the ground and broke with a sound which was heard by his pure mind¹ that was now able to perform its non-discriminating function of perceiving externals. Instantly he cut off his last link with samsara and rejoiced at his realization of the Absolute. He wrote in his autobiography: "I was like someone awaking from a dream" which meant that he had leaped over the worldly stream to the other shore of Bodhi. He then chanted the following two gathas:

1 - A cup fell to the ground
With a sound clearly heard.
As space was pulverised,
The mad mind came to a stop.

2 - When the hand released its hold, the cup fell and was shattered,
'Tis hard to talk when the family breaks up or someone dies.
Spring comes with fragrant flowers exuberating everywhere;
Mountains, rivers and the great earth are only the Tathagata.

1 - 'Pure mind' is a technical term for the innate primordial intellect.

After his own enlightenment, the master immediately began his Bodhisattva work of guiding others out of the sea of suffering. His first act was to pray to the Buddha for the liberation of his mother whom he had never seen. Previously he had taken the vow to go to the monastery of King Asoka at Ningpo to pay reverence to the Buddha's relics and to burn off there one of his fingers as his offering to the Buddha for her liberation. Each day he prostrated three thousand times and increased the number until he ached all over and was seriously ill. He became so weak that the chief monk did not approve of his burning a finger on account of the risk involved. The master burst into a flood of tears and finally the superintendent of the monastery and another monk agreed to assist him in fulfilling his vow. He was helped to the main hall where together with the assembly, he paid reverence to the Buddha, performed the ritual and recited the text of the rules of repentance and reform. He wrote later: "With singleness of mind, I repeated the Buddha's name and prayed Him to liberate my affectionate mother. At the beginning I felt pain, but as gradually my mind became pure, my awakening wisdom manifested clearly ... When my finger had burned off, I arose to bow down before the Buddha. I did not need others to support me and entirely forgot my illness. After walking unaided to present my thanks to the assembly, I returned to the sick bay. Everyone present was surprised at my transformation, and I moved out of the hut for sick monks."

From then until his death, the master performed his Bodhisattva work by expounding sutras, transmitting the precepts, reconstructing many temples that had fallen in ruins, building new ones and starting seminaries for novices, Buddhist associations for lay men and free Buddhist schools for children. His field of activities was not confined to China but also included Burma, Thailand, Malaya, Singapore and Hong Kong where the number of his disciples could not be counted.

In the course of this Bodhisattva work, the master survived dangers, illnesses, poisoning, beating, torture and persecution. A translation of his autobiography is being published by instalments in World Buddhism, a monthly journal published in Dehiwela, Ceylon. Before passing away on 13th October 1959, the master said to his attendant: "After my death and cremation, please mix my ashes with sugar, flour and oil, knead all this into nine balls and throw them into the river as an offering to living beings in the water. If you help me to fulfil my vow, I shall thank you for ever."

Hsu Yun in his extreme old age had chosen hardship and suffering to protect the Buddha Dharma in his country instead of seeking safety across the water in Hong Kong.



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