

# **Mahayana Buddhist Practice In the West: A Chan Monk's Perspective**

**Rev. Heng Sure, PhD**

I grew up in the 1950s and 60s in Toledo, Ohio, of Scots-Irish ancestry, and was president of my high school student council as well as my church's Methodist Youth Fellowship. My childhood was as mainstream mid-American as corn on the cob. My first encounter with Asian religion happened when I took a Chinese language class in high school and then picked up a bilingual ancient Buddhist scripture in the local public library. I knew I had to find out why the book's Chinese characters felt strangely familiar and compelling. In college my roommate introduced me to Buddhist meditation; he later became a disciple and ordained monk under a Chinese Buddhist Chan Master. When I got to University of California, Berkeley to study Buddhism in 1972, I drove across the bridge to Gold Mountain Monastery to visit my roommate.

Inside the door of Gold Mountain, my first impressions were physical: I noticed the chill in the air, smelled the sandalwood incense, and marveled at the three large Buddhas seated in full lotus posture on a raised dais with gold-colored dragons curling around the roof. When I heard the tapping of a "wooden fish" drum and the rhythmic chanting of mantras, and saw the Caucasian monks and nuns wearing robes and bowing in the Buddha hall. I saw my former college roommate who had ordained as a monk. He was sitting beside Master Hsuan Hua and translating his Mandarin Chinese Dharma talk into English. His head was shaven, and he wore a long robe and a dark brown sash clasped over his left shoulder. If it weren't for the audio headphones over his ears he might have stepped out of a Tang Dynasty court painting. I had an epiphany: I knew I had returned to my spiritual home.

Three years after entering Gold Mountain, I knelt on a platform in a monastery in rural Northern California called the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas and professed the many vows taken by Buddhist monastics since the time of the Buddha, 2500 years ago. Strange to say, promising to live with so many precepts felt not at all repressive. Instead as I stepped into the lineage of monks and nuns of ages past, my heart felt liberated and joyful. My spiritual aspirations seemed to be supported by high-flying wings. By taking the Bhikshu precepts, I set aside the cultural perspectives of an American college student in

the 1970s and become a celibate monk , a vegetarian, a mendicant. I vowed to replace my anything-goes lifestyle for the values of the Buddha's Bhikshu Sangha, the longest-running monastic fraternity on the planet.

Taking the vows is a ritual process; living into the vows required bone-deep changes. When I think back to what I went through in making these changes, certain peak experiences emerge from the mist of memory.

One of those moments was learning to bow. Even though I've done lots of bowing, my initial experience with bowing was full of hesitation and questions. On Saturday mornings at Gold Mountain Monastery the Western monks and nuns lead the newcomers in bowing to an English translation of the repentance liturgy of Medicine Master Buddha. Men and women bowed on two sides of the hall while chanting passages of text and the names of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. When I bowed the first few times, pictures from Sunday school arose to mind: I recalled stories of God punishing the Israelites for worshipping graven idols. How was bowing to Buddha images any different? For a long time the gesture seemed forced and unnatural but I stuck with it, in large part because there was a vegetarian lunch immediately afterward and I was a graduate student cooking for myself in a studio apartment in Berkeley. After half an hour of bowing and chanting I realized my body felt unusually comfortable. My thoughts slowed down, my breathing was deep and regular and tension left my shoulders. Bowing felt like yoga, only more spiritually focused.

Bowing also allowed my mind to contemplate the text of the liturgy. The bowing provided a space and the words of the Dharma-teaching went deep into my consciousness:

“Therefore the sicknesses of living beings are one single illusory sickness, and the medicines given by the Thus Come One are, likewise, one illusory medicine...So we can know that all the Dharma spoken by the Thus Come One has a single quality and a single flavor. It is the quality of liberation, the quality of leaving (affliction), the quality of cessation, and ultimately, the quality of Nirvana. In the end, it returns to emptiness.”

Bowing to this deep insight felt transformative and healing. Master Hua instructed that bowing was not for the purpose of getting anything, instead we bowed to get rid of pride and arrogance and to create room for goodness in our minds once pride was gone. This made sense: most

religions teach that pride is a sin. Bowing with my head at shoe-top level, it was more difficult to feel arrogant; instead I felt humble and soft. I contemplated how many of my mistakes in life had come from loneliness, from a feeling of brokenness, and alienation from others. On Saturday mornings at Gold Mountain, when the bowing was over, I felt relieved of a burden, lighter and more connected with the world around me and the people in it. The feeling of connection remained for hours. Bowing became a practice I willingly and literally threw myself into.

When I eventually moved over to the Monastery from Berkeley, I asked my monk-roommate for an appropriate practice to begin my cultivation. He suggested I bow to a sutra text, one character at a time; this immediately struck me as a ridiculous notion. I was studying for my Master's degree at a prestigious public university; I was always reading half a dozen books and newspapers at once. Bowing down to one book, one character at a time simply seemed too slow. He anticipated my reluctance and said, "Don't think about it, don't talk about it, just do it, and tell me later how it felt."

I lit a stick of incense, opened the *Flower Adornment Sutra* and grumbling to myself that this was a waste of time, made the first bow to the first character: da for "great", or "large." One hour later, I had bowed onto the second page, and my mind had downshifted into a slower gear, in tune with my bowing metabolism. I contemplated the characters one by one and had another epiphany: reading great books slowly enhances the comprehension and appreciation. All printed works are not created equal. Bowing with the body moves the mind towards respect; speed reading deprives the reader of much of the value of written communication.

Since then I dedicated years of my monastic formation to bowing, to making ritual prostrations. I made a pilgrimage at one point in my early monastic formation, bowing to the ground once every three steps. It took thirty-three months of steady bowing to travel from South Pasadena, California up the Pacific Coast Highway to the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas in Ukiah. The pace of bowing and the insights gained from putting my body prone to the ground thoroughly amended my approach to reading and my respect for sacred books and their effect on the mind and spirit.

Like many Westerners I first discovered Buddhist thought and concepts through books. I read Kerouac's *Dharma Bums*, and found an English translation of the Sixth Patriarch's Sutra in my public library. To step up from being a reader on Buddhism to becoming a Buddhist disciple, the Mahayana

tradition offers the ceremony for Taking Refuge with the Three Jewels and receiving the Five Precepts.

I recall the day I took the Three Refuges and the Five Precepts at Gold Mountain Monastery; the Venerable Abbot Master Hsuan Hua said, "Today is your new birthday. You may consider everything you've done heretofore as over and gone. You can consider that everything you will do and who you will become is born anew today as a disciple of the Buddha."

Given the bad habits I had as a graduate student living in an extended family in the Berkeley Hills, I realized I could benefit from some wholesome lifestyle changes. Because the integrity of the teacher was believable, and because I had enough of my confusion and was committed to change, the choices offered by the refuges and precepts seemed to be a practical first step towards along the path towards wisdom.

From the point of view of the Chinese Mahayana, the act of "Taking Refuge with the Triple Jewel" is the equivalent of baptism, or christening in the Abrahamic faiths. One takes refuge in a ninety-minute ritual procedure, wherein one asks for a teacher to transmit the refuges, invites the "Permanently Abiding" Triple Jewel to draw near and bless the event, repents of past offenses, and then vows to take the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha as one's new spiritual affiliation.

The presiding Master confers a Dharma-name on the new disciples and from then on that name represents one's connection to an ancient lineage of Buddhist disciples stretching back to the historical Buddha himself. I felt a weight lift from my heart soon after taking refuge; a fundamental struggle between alienation and belonging had been settled. Clearly the act of taking refuge was more than a ritual; also it became clear that the answer to my search for identity was a spiritual matter, and lay beyond the physical body my parents gave birth to.

A next step into the Dharma comes by requesting and receiving the Five Precepts. This ceremony allows one to make a life-long promise to refrain from taking life, from stealing, from engaging in sexual misconduct (generally interpreted as refraining from adultery and promiscuity or more strictly, as staying chaste until marriage), from telling lies, and from using intoxicants of

any kind.

Requesting these precepts required me to make a major change in my thinking about personal freedom and rules. I grew up as a typical American boy, defining freedom as doing whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted to. I watched movies and television serials that celebrated outlaws and mavericks, secret agents and cowboys. In popular culture self-made people and rugged individuals took as much freedom as they could get away with. Rules were for ordinary citizens who couldn't find a way around them, in the thinking of the time. I asked my monk friend how many precepts a Bhikshu observed, and I was shocked at the answer: over 300! I could not comprehend how anybody could live with so many rules. Yet the people who held precepts did not look oppressed or miserable in any way; in fact, quite the opposite. When I observed that monks lived without money, possessions, family, stimulants, newspapers or television, I questioned how such a lifestyle could survive in the affluent marketplace of North America.

On Buddha's birthday in 1972, I drank tea with my monk friend later in the afternoon, after the crowds of disciples had dispersed. He told me that the Buddha's monastic Sangha is one of the oldest direct democracies in the world, decisions are made by asking consensus of all the monks. Authority in the Sangha comes from virtue and seniority in precepts. The Sangha is free of class distinctions: within the Sangha, from the Buddha's time, farmers, scholars and princes cultivated side by side and shared their material goods equally. Further, the Sangha gave women the right to access the highest goals of cultivation without gender bias. In 6th century BCE India, this was revolutionary; today in the religious world, it still remains rare.

Monks walk with their alms-bowls through towns but they do not beg. They do not even speak, nor do they accept money. The monks instead serve as "fields of blessings," that is to say, they make themselves available for lay-people who wish to practice generosity by offering food. Supporting the lifestyle of a cultivator of the path to wisdom has always been regarded as meritorious to the giver, hence the name "field of blessings Sangha."

Monks are not social parasites. They give to society by preserving literacy and knowledge of the path to spiritual wisdom. Monks teach school, they write and translate, they live lightly on the earth, ecologically speaking, needing only a few vegetables a day to sustain their lives. Their monasteries preserve green space, offer stewardship of nature and refuge for animals. By taking men out of

the army, the Sangha serves as a counter-point to a nation's militarization, and rulers' aspiration for armed conflict and political domination through force. Monks thus directly contribute to a more peaceful society. Throughout history the Buddha's monastic Sangha, with certain exceptions, has rarely marched to war under the Buddha's flag, and does not pray for the military victory of one army over another. Removing young men from the possibility of bearing arms significantly impacts the policies of a nation towards peace and war, in ways both visible and invisible.

In the West, where the marketplace dominates so much of our social identity, monks take the revolutionary stance of refraining from mercantile activity. For example, I held the precept of not touching money for the first 25 years of my life as a monk. Monks who observe that practice hold no personal assets, they have no savings account, credit cards or checking accounts. This was only possible because some monks were willing to pay the bills, and keep the monastery's accounts. Monks eat vegetables, we wear the same robes year after year; our needs are simple and easily met. Since the Sangha lives low on the food chain, having access to cash was not important. Not touching money did not restrict my freedom; the effect on my mind of leaving the marketplace behind was profoundly liberating. I did not need ATMs or banks, catalogs, advertisements, sales, or credit reports. My body rarely went into stores or malls. Most significant of all was that my mind didn't go into stores either; I spent no mental effort thinking about things to buy or trade. The amount of time this practice freed up is considerable. The freedom that comes from knowing self-sufficiency, from not needing anything, is the true reward of not holding money. One thought of sufficiency exposes the seduction of advertising's manufactured desire. By stepping away from the urge to consume, one can see the illusion of happiness based on getting stuff and the myth of the marketplace as it really is.

Manufacturing issues new products on a cycle; advertising creates the illusion of need and pushes consumers away from contentment with one's old possessions into craving the new items. Getting the desired item rarely delivers the happiness that was promised and affliction is the result.

Socially, the impact of a group of people who don't participate in the illusions of the marketplace is powerful and wholesome. The Buddha's Sangha are not mercantile beings; they leave the marketplace behind; they share their wealth and goods in common. They pay attention instead to the desire thoughts in the mind that create greed and discontent and that move the mind away from

satisfaction and well-being.

Seen from the perspective of the Buddha's wish to end sentient beings' suffering, the Sangha's precepts appear as a different set of rules from those I rebelled against as an adolescent. The rules the Buddha taught came not from social conventions legislated by bodies of lawmakers, argued by lawyers and courts, enforced by police, and punished by jails. Precepts, particularly the Bodhisattva Precepts, came from the Buddha's insight. After his great awakening, he saw the potential perfection of human nature and how certain behaviors harm that nature and delay progress on the path towards liberation. He gave the precepts as guidelines on a map past the pitfalls of behavior that obstruct Bodhi, or awakening. Holding the Buddha's precepts does not restrict freedom, it speeds you on your way to the end of suffering and the birth of wisdom.

From this viewpoint, the precepts of the Sangha appear not as repressive, rather they create a brotherhood and sisterhood of vow-holders who devote their lives to protecting and sustaining the Buddha's code of ethics, the path to liberation that is egalitarian, wisdom-based and socially engaged.

By giving his disciples a moral code that was based on wisdom, the Buddha lifted his Sangha out of the mundane cultural standards of caste, wealth, gender, and privilege. He offered membership in the Sangha to women, to outcasts, to the poor and the rich alike. The patchwork robe and shaven head of the Sangha made it possible for people to set aside superficial distinctions and culture-bound limitations and to walk the path to spiritual growth and human evolution. For these reasons I feel that Buddhism, seen in this light, will redefine freedom in the West and teach us a deeper dimension of democracy and equality.

## **Mahayana Buddhist Practice in America at the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas**

Master Hua taught a traditional form of monasticism. He encouraged his students to meditate in full lotus, to be on time for hours of ceremonies; to eat only one vegetarian meal a day. Master Hua taught an authentic and living tradition that came directly from the Chan Masters of antiquity. I had done sporadic Zen-style meditation in Japan, but zazen

was only one of the daily practices Gold Mountain Monastery.

Practice is central in the Buddha's teachings, and is emphasized much more than belief in doctrine per se. Practices are many, and come grouped in various sets, schools, and traditions. These include the study of the Vinaya, which teaches moral guidelines for the monastic and lay community as well as organizational principles for the Sangha community. Chan practice (Japanese: Zen) focuses on seated meditation and the various ways to use the mind while meditating. Pure Land practice teaches devotion to the Buddha Amitabha and seeking rebirth in his Pure Land. Mantra practice teaches memorizing and reciting mantras and practicing mudras. Sutra practices investigate the scriptures, and include various intellectual approaches to the Buddha's discourses and later commentaries including memorizing, explaining as well as commenting on them. On any given day throughout the year, Mahayana practitioners, monastic and lay alike, will observe precepts, meditate, recite the Buddha's name, chant mantras, and listen to or study sutras. After many centuries in China entire monasteries developed around practices: some teachers taught students to exclusively recite the Buddha's name; others to practice Chan meditation. Monastic Buddhism in the West has not yet reached its first complete century so the variety of practices appear throughout the day in each monastery.

From my first day of retreat 31 years ago, the sights, sounds, and smells that accent a day of practice in a Mahayana monastery have been my regular environment. The daily schedule is similar for most Chinese monastic communities and the same is true to a large extent for Vietnamese and Korean monasteries. The sound of a wooden mallet striking a stiff board wakes the monks at 3:30 AM. Thirty minutes later monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen, enter the main hall and stand at bowing benches before the Buddha images on the main altar. Men stand to one side of the hall, women to the other. Those individuals who observe more precepts stand to the front. A nun lights a stick of sandalwood incense and then place it in the large censor in the middle of the altar. The monk who serves as master of ceremonies will strike a large brass bowl-shaped bell, then lead everybody to make three prostrations, bowing slowly down to a cushion on the floor. The Mahayana style of bow is called a "five-point bow," meaning that the person bowing first puts his or her two knees, two hands, and then forehead onto the cushion, pauses briefly for contemplation, and then rises, lifting head, knees and hands. After three slow bows he or she

makes a half bow from the waist. All participants perform these bows, cued by a small hand-bell.

The master of ceremonies chants the opening phrases of the Shurangama Mantra, the Great Compassion Mantra and the Ten Small Mantras, and Heart of Prajna Paramita Sutra, while a wooden drum keeps time to a slow rhythmic meter. Mantras are chanted in Chinese syllables meant to approximate Sanskrit sounds. After the mantras are finished, which takes thirty minutes, next the assembly chants the praises of Medicine Master Buddha, and circumambulates the hall while reciting the Buddha's name. The service includes the Ten Kings of Vows of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva, and a vow to Take Refuge in the Triple Jewel: the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. Finally there are we sing praises to Vajrapani and Sarasvati, two celestial Bodhisattvas, and make prostrations to the lineage of ancestral patriarchs. This morning chanting service continues throughout the year without change.

Following morning chanting, the novice monks and nuns as part of their monastic formation, make ritual prostrations for an hour, chanting "Namo Fundamental Teacher, Shakyamuni Buddha" as they rise and bow on alternate sides of the hall.

An hour of meditation anchors each day in stillness. The Chan tradition teaches sitting in full lotus posture and encourages meditators to investigate a meditation topic (*hua-tou*). Many people investigate the question, "Who is mindful of the Buddha?" Meditation periods are an hour long, interspersed with 20 minutes of walking. Then at 7:00 everybody returns to the Buddha Hall to recite the *Flower Adornment Scripture* for an hour. The chanting is done primarily in Chinese, each word accompanied by the sound of a wooden fish. The melody rises and falls in a pattern, and since the Sutra is long, the group moves through the text sequentially throughout the year. At 8:00 AM the laity eat breakfast, while the monks and nuns begin their workday. Some teach in the schools, some administer the monastery's finances and paperwork, some cut grass and maintain the buildings, some translate scriptures, some take care of the grounds, tend gardens or prepare food.

The entire assembly pauses at 10:30 for the meal blessing, a twenty minute ceremony of chanting to express gratitude for the offering of food, and then walks in file to the dining hall for the communal meal. The community eats

together in silence, and the meal is completely vegetarian. Some of the vegetables and fruit are grown in the monastic gardens, the starch and condiments are offered by lay donors.

After lunch and a thirty-minute rest, people gather in the Buddha Hall to bow the Great Compassion Repentance begins. This ceremony is ninety minutes long, and after offerings and repentance, includes the chanting of twenty-one Great Compassion Mantras. This mantra is intended to instill in each practitioner the compassionate heart of Guan Shi Yin (Avalokiteshvara) Bodhisattva. The wooden fish keeps time while the assembly circles the hall, reciting the 87 phrases of the Great Compassion Mantra in unison to a rising and falling melodic line. From the end of the Repentance everybody returns to his or her own

Work period continues until 5:00 PM, when everybody gathers to meditate before evening chanting at 6:30 PM. Every night at 7:30 the community meets to listen to a lecture on a Mahayana sutra text. Master Hsuan Hua began this custom in 1968, making it a priority in the community to open the scriptures and explain the words of the Buddha line by line. "Turning the Dharma-wheel" in this way has become a hallmark of Chinese Buddhism in the West, and the intent is to translate the Buddha's voice in the Mahayana Sutras into the world's languages. To end the day the assembly chants the Heart of the Shurangama Mantra 108 times and then returns to their rooms to rest.

Individuals who think that Buddhism is only meditation are often surprised to discover that the Pure Land devotion is the dominant form of practice for Mahayana Buddhists of East Asia. The Pure Land tradition arises from the vows of the Buddha Amitabha who vowed to create a paradise in the West called Sukhavati, "Utmost Happiness," where suffering would not exist. He vowed that anybody who recited the words "Namo Amitabha," (I return and rely on the Buddha of Infinite Radiance") would at the time of death, be reborn into a lotus flower in the Land of Utmost Happiness. When that person's karma was purified, the lotus will open and the person will see the Buddha and emerge into Amitabha's Pure Land.

There are reasons why recitation of the Buddha's name became the most popular form of practice: you can recite even if you can't read the texts, you can recite if your body can't endure the physical demands of Chan meditation. You can recite while walking, cooking, waiting in line at the

bank or riding the bus. The only requirements for success are faith, vows and regular practice. Another reason that Amitabha's Dharma-door became popular was that during hard times, during famine, catastrophic droughts, floods, and civil conflict, the description of Amitabha's Pure Land offered an attractive and conflict-free alternative to a mundane reality filled with misery.

In the monastery people recite the Buddha's name from morning to night. While the goal is to be reborn in the Pure Land after death, alternately, people can recite steadily until body and mind reach a state of single-minded concentration known as "The Buddha-recitation Samadhi." This state, according to accomplished Pure Land masters is indistinguishable from the samadhi one can attain while doing Chan meditation.

Mahayana Buddhist practice has great potential to find a home in Western culture. Westerners have a scientific bent and the Buddhism is practiced scientifically. The historical Buddha can, without pushing the point, qualify as a disciplined and rational researcher. The Buddha's six years of ascetic practice were conducted methodically, scientifically, in that he carried on empirical experiments beneath the trees and in the clearings of Nepal's forests. He learned spiritual disciplines, proposed and tested hypotheses, applied variables, corrected errors and retraced his steps. He applied the successful methods, left a paper trail (the sutras) and later made his discoveries accessible and testable for later experimenters.

Buddhism has begun to catch on in the West because Buddhist meditation is oriented towards psychology. For the last dozen years, on Thursday nights the Berkeley Buddhist Monastery hosts the local Vipassana group, usually about 80 individuals who come to meditate and listen to a Dharma-talk. The meditators are adults, some in their sixties and seventies, and most are affluent mainstream Californians. Many are either culturally Jewish or self-identified as "wounded Catholics in recovery." The most interesting demographic about this group is their profession - - among the regulars, nearly one in three is a psycho-therapist or someone who studied psychology in school

Why the popularity of Buddhist meditation among psychologists? The Buddha successfully analyzed himself using therapeutic methods on himself, and taking his own body and mind as a laboratory. He observed the rising and falling of thoughts, he saw patterns, he saw ideas and impulses arrive and leave and then over time noticed deeper strata of mind that did not shift. He

analyzed the personality and identified its components: body, feelings/sensations, thoughts, deeper mental structures and consciousness.

I had a friend in graduate school who studied for his doctorate in Clinical Psychology. His original motive was to understand mind and to understand the human condition. He turned to psychology, only to discover that advanced academic study of the mind required him to experiment with white rats and do statistical and demographic studies of groups of citizens in Marin County, California. He pushed through to completion of his degree but his early interest in Freud's discoveries was left far behind.

He and so many other psych students found Buddhist meditation delivered real-time, hands-on study of the mind in vivo, with its neuroses and its wonders intact. For a culture that largely identifies itself through the lens of psychology, to have the Buddha sutras explain the landscape of a healthy, perfected human mind is a most welcome revelation.

The Buddha's sutras can be explained as blueprints of his consciousness; his discourses to the monks and nuns contain descriptions of the workings of the mind, when healthy, as well as methods for countering afflictions and neuroses.

These observations sketch a framework for the arrival of Mahayana Buddhist practice in America. Since history repeats itself, and as it took two centuries for Mahayana practice to put its roots down in China after its coming from India, it may require another 150 years for a truly Western Buddhism to arise from the soil of North America. Whatever the form it takes, the monastic Sangha will surely play a prominent role in its development, and the democratic, science-friendly and psychologically sound aspects of the Dharma will certainly have a hand in developing the Buddhism that leaves the West and returns at last to the land of its birth, to India.

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