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HERMITAGE IN A CEMETERY: LESSONS FROM THE LIFE OF HSUAN HUA

Words: Victor M. Parachin

"To sum it up, talk less and meditate more."

One of the most unusual Buddhist hermitages was built in a cemetery by a nineteen year-old monk. His simple A-frame hut was patched together with sorghum stalks along with other available dry plants and sticks. He spent three years in that hermitage located beside the grave of his beloved mother using those 36 months as a final way of offering respect to his mother along with continuing meditation practice and Buddhist text study. As part of his spiritual discipline, he ate only one small vegetarian meal at mid day and slept while sitting up.

That 19-year-old monk was Hsuan Hua who was born on April 16, 1918 in China's Northeast Jilin Province. His mother was a dedicated Buddhist who engaged in daily meditation

and adhered to a strict vegetarian diet. Her influence over him was significant as he, too, embraced Buddhism and vegetarianism as a child. A second spiritually formative, traumatic event came to him as he walked across a field and discovered the body of a dead child wrapped in straw. Shocked by the sight, he returned home telling his mother who gently told him that all human being will eventually die.

That encounter with death affected him profoundly causing him to assess life's brevity and raising questions about how to live most skilfully.

As a result, he began training as a Buddhist monk. He described Zen training as rigorous saying that in China "Zen sitting

cannot be considered fun" adding that it involved a great deal of hardship. Often the first meditation sit was at three in the morning and could continue until midnight alternating between sitting and walking. The sleep schedule was only three hours a night with an occasional, optional rest period for an hour some afternoons.

Because of war and communist suppression of Buddhism in China, Hua made his way to British Hong Kong (1948) where he lived in a mountainside cave. As more and more Chinese fled the mainland, Hua experienced an urgent need to assist them by offering teachings, raising funds and establishing



new monasteries and temples to accommodate the influx of Chinese Buddhist refugees.

Over the next decade, he increasingly felt drawn to help bring Buddhism to the West. Working with his disciples, he established the Dharma Realm Buddhist Association (DRBA) in San Francisco in 1959. Eventually, nearly a dozen branch monasteries of the DRBA would be established in the United States.

His vision for promoting Western Buddhism revolved around three themes:

- 1) **Bringing the full teachings of the Buddha to the West and establishing an authentic monastic community of the fully ordained monks and nuns**
- 2) **Organising and supporting the translation of the entire Buddhist canon into English**
- 3) **Promoting Buddhist education through the establishment of schools and universities**

To make his vision a reality, Hsuan Hua established a headquarters centre in Northern California called *The City Of 10,000 Buddhas At Wonderful Enlightenment Mountain*, located approximately 100 miles north of San Francisco. It is one of the largest Buddhist compounds in the Western Hemisphere. The facility offers daily meditation and chanting along with a variety of classes and workshops. It also hosts the *Buddhist Text Translation Society*.

As he became better known in the United States, an increasing number of Americans sought him out for meditation instruction. He often reminded them that meditation is an invaluable spiritual tool for living a fulfilling life. In his book, *The Chan Handbook: Talks*



About Meditation, Hua cites these three benefits of a consistent meditation practice.

First, there will be more life clarity. "We humans are born confused and die confused. We are confused while asleep and confused while awake. What value is there in that kind of life? The reason we practise sitting in meditation and want to learn Buddhism is because we do not want to be confused."

Secondly, meditation opens the door to ultimate awareness. "How do we get enlightened?" he asks and responds: "Enlightenment is like unlocking a door that has been restricting our entry and exit. We need a key to unlock that door. Without a key, we will remain locked up in this room forever. So, where is the key? It is right there with you. It is very easy to find. How will you find it? You can do so by sitting in meditation."

Thirdly, a lifetime of meditation prepares one to die peacefully and untroubled: "We sit in meditation in order to find a way to ensure that, when it is time for us to die, we will not suffer physical sickness, we will not crave wealth, sex, fame, food and sleep, and our minds will not be upside down. We want to pass away with a smile, be without discomfort.

Cultivation is just for that purpose!"

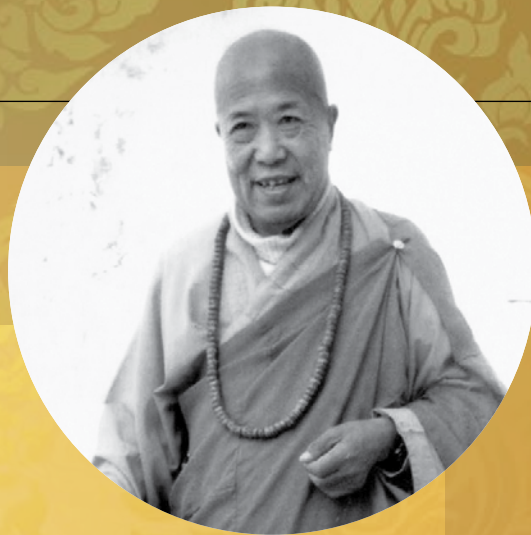
Hsuan Hua died in his sleep on June 7, 1991 in Los Angeles while visiting a monastery. He was 77 years of age. He is a highly regarded contributing figure in bringing Chinese Buddhism to the West in the 20th century. Hua established twenty-seven monasteries and temples throughout the world. One writer eulogised Hsuan Hua this way: "Throughout his life, he worked selflessly and vigorously to benefit the people of the world and all living beings. His wisdom and compassion inspired many to correct their faults and lead wholesome lives."

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WORDS OF WISDOM FROM HSUAN HUA



- The aim of sitting in meditation is to open our wisdom. Enlightenment is the opening of our wisdom. With wisdom, we will no longer be confused, the way we have been in the past.
- We want to learn how not to be attached to self and others.
- The Buddha is not very different from an ordinary person. The difference is that he has great wisdom. Great wisdom accesses spiritual penetrations whereupon the mind and spirit have no obstruction.
- You need to become one with empty space. Then there is some hope for enlightenment.
- We must be persistent in our practice and constantly guard it. Practise should not be erratic. We need firm sincerity and honest determination.
- Whoever you are, if you have a true and sincere mind, if you are not careless in the least, if you do not go along with what worldly people do, but do the contrary, then you will be able to attain the benefit of Buddhism.
- Train yourself to take things that go against you.
- There may be things you don't like to hear, but people will say exactly those things to you. There may be things you don't like to eat, but you will be given that very food. There may be things that you absolutely can't bear, but you have to bear them. When adversity comes, accept it compliantly.
- You shouldn't ruin your body and bring all sorts of illness on yourself. If you do, then you'll have to find a doctor and pay him money, and still he might not be able to cure you. Isn't that a lot of trouble?
- If we want to leave suffering and gain happiness, we must have wisdom.
- If, in every instant, your state of mind does not give rise to ripples such that you are without afflictions, without mark of right and wrong, and without mark of people and self, then you are applying effort and this is the efficacious result of sitting in meditation.
- With fear in the mind, we cannot achieve righteousness.
- In the world today, there are too many who take life and too few people who save lives.
- We should have a firm will. Adverse conditions mold great people.
- The main purpose of meditation is to eradicate all our past evil karma, regain our original wisdom, and bring our good roots to fruition. We must be patient, and that means not being afraid of hardship.
- Walking and sitting, sitting and walking provide the key that will open our wisdom.
- The advantages to meditation are manifold. Whether we study, work, or take care of the house, daily meditation increases our concentration, lessens the pressures of life, and increases our physical health.
- When we sit in meditation, we should not be moved by sounds or be turned by forms. We should not do that. We should hear without listening. We should see without perceiving.
- All of you should realise that cultivating the spiritual path is not an easy matter.
- The mind is like a monkey or a wild horse, and you must tie it up so it does not run away.