Vajra Bodhi Sea: Auspicious Beginnings

By Ron Epstein
(President from 1970 to 1976)

On the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of Vajra Bodhi Sea, my heartfelt congratulations to its editor and staff, and also to all those in the past who have worked very hard for its success as a premier Buddhist publication.

The current editor-in-chief, Dharma Master Heng Mao, recently reminded me that I had been the first president of VBS and asked me to write a few words about how it began. Before doing so, I want to make clear that, despite my fancy sounding title, I personally can claim little credit for VBS's success. In my case it was more a matter of the Venerable Master giving me an undeserved high hat to wear. In the early days of the publication, all I did was submit a few short translations. And then later on, I would submit an occasional article or translation. That's all.
The idea for VBS was all the Venerable Master's. At that time, in English there was nothing like it anywhere in the world. From the very beginning he wanted a bilingual English-Chinese publication, but he realized he would have to wait until he had the qualified people to do the Chinese portion. If we look at the very first issue, we can already get a very good idea of the Venerable Master's vision and how it was understood by the young American disciples, both Sangha and laity, who worked to bring it to fruition. Although a paper copy of the issue is now a rare Dharma treasure, you can now easily find it online at http://www.drbachinese.org/vbs/publish/1/index.htm.

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The calligraphy of the Chinese for Vajra Bodhi Sea, jingang puti hai, which you can still find on the cover of this issue, was personally written by the Venerable Master. As we look inside the covers, we see elements of what has now become the standard format of VBS. At the beginning of the first issue is the first excerpt of the Venerable Master's commentary on The Sixth Patriarch's Dharma Jewel Platform Sutra, on which he had lectured during the summer of 1969. That is followed by a remarkably direct column, based on the Venerable Master's remarks, entitled “Demon-Cutting Sword,” which blasts phony Dharma teachers and urges people to recognize what constitutes a true Buddhist teacher and true Buddhist teachings. Along with its sequel in issue two, the column upsets the local phony, of which there were many. Upon reading it, one angry leader and his followers stormed the fourth floor Buddhist Lecture Hall in Chinatown, only to be subdued by the spiritual Dharma protectors before they could enter the temple, so that they left soon after arriving, entirely cowed, with nothing substantive to say, and their tails between their legs.

The next two articles, 'Studying Buddhism in the Scientific Age' and ‘Why Leave Home?’, and the final four, ‘Buddhist News,’ ‘Schedule of Events,’ ‘For 84 Days They Sat, Unmoving,’ (about the 1969 summer session) and ‘Open Letter from American Bhiksus and Bhiksunis,’ all highlight the importance of a fully ordained Sangha that is pure in precepts, and of vigorous self-cultivation that balances study of the Buddha's teachings with intense meditation.

‘The Record of Water Mirror Turning Back Heaven’ is the first installment of the preface of the Venerable Master's work of the same title. The preface is a remarkable critique of the history of human warfare, for which the tape containing the Master's commentary


現在還可以在封面上看得到的中文毛筆
題字「金剛菩提海」，是上人親自寫的。裏面的幾個部份，現在成了標準的排版格式。第一期一開始，就是上人於1969年夏天講的「六祖壇經淺釋」的選摘。接下來是個驚人的專欄，
依上人的說法，叫「斬魔劍」；這是要破斥邪師，呼籲大家認識真正的善知識與真正的佛法。緊接著第二期的這個專欄，就觸怒了許多本地的邪師。讀了之後，有個氣急敗壞的首領
帶著徒眾衝向座落於中國城四樓的佛教講堂。
但還沒進到廟裡，就被護法神降服了；因此他們來沒多久就離開了———心驚膽戰，講不出有
內容的東西，就夾著尾巴離開了。

接下來的兩篇文章是「科學時代學佛法」，
「為什麼要出家」。最後四篇是「佛教新聞」，
「法務行程」，「84天坐禪，如如不動（1969
暑期班）」，「美國比丘、比丘尼的公開信」；
這幾篇文章都是強調一個受具足戒僧團的重要
性，而這個僧團必須是具足清淨戒體、精進修
行和禪教並進的。

水鏡回天錄，第一次印出的是上人這篇文章
的序。這篇序對人類歷史上的戰爭是一個卓越
的批評，可惜的是上人原文講解的錄音帶被洗
掉了，而由恒靜法師寫出了其中之大意。在以
後的幾期中，除了上人的講經外，常常看到他
對時事的評論，還有他在廟上或應邀弘法的開
示。

最後是「哈，我從夢中醒來！麥克，你
呢？」以及「修行的學者」兩文；這是第一期
對個人的簡介報導，後來這演變成《金剛菩提
海》每期簡介僧俗人士的專欄（即現今之「菩
提鏡」與「菩提臺」）。

經過這麼多年之後，重讀第一期《金剛菩提

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on the written text was unfortunately erased. The main ideas were filled in by Dharma Master Heng Jing. In subsequent issues, in addition to the Venerable Master's sutra lectures, we often find his topical remarks on important issues of the day, either given in instructional talks at the temple or in his speeches given at various venues to which he was invited.

Finally, 'Hah! My Dream-Life Awakened (How about you, Michael?)' and 'The Cultivating Scholar' are first installments of what became the brief monthly biographies of Sangha and laity that are a hallmark of each VBS issue.

In taking a look at this first issue after so many years have passed, I am impressed by its light-hearted and enthusiastic tone that is at the same time deeply sincere and confident, which comes through strongly from VBS's young staff. The editor-in-chief was Stephen Lovett (AKA Lo Wei Te, Kuo Chan, and later Heng Kuan). Other staff members included Dharma Masters Heng Chi'en, Heng Jing, and Heng Shou, and also Tan Kuo Shih (Madalena Lew), Tan Guo Cheng (Stella Tse), Ku Kuo Ti (Orne Grant), Li Kuo Chi'en (Kim Lee), Huang Kuo Jen, and Tun Kuo Hsun (Theresa Dinwiddie).

Vajra Bodhi Sea has come a long way in forty years. First it taught young Westerners about the true Dharma; later its bilingual issues reached Asia and influenced the Buddhist practice of countless people there. In the dark days of Buddhism in China, copies were smuggled into the mainland from Hong Kong and passed hand to hand, from monk to monk. I personally heard them tell of the importance of its Dharma sustenance in getting them through those difficult times. Today many Chinese university students read VBS on the Internet and are strongly drawn to the Venerable Master's teachings. My hope for the future of VBS is that it never loses its compass and retains a fresh and enthusiastic relevance in the face of ever changing times.

提海}我仍深深被那些年輕工作人員輕鬆又熱情，同時還誠懇而信心具足的口氣所感動。當時的主編是斯蒂芬·洛維特（法名果瞻，就是後來的恆觀）；其他人員還包括恒謙法師、恆靜法師、恒授法師，以及譚果式（譚慕潔）、譚果正（譚慕貞）、區果地（奧恩·格蘭特）、李果乾（李鍾山）、黃果仁和董果薰（泰瑞莎·丁威迪）。

40年來，《金剛菩提海》走過了很長的路。它是教導年輕的西方人正法，後來以雙語版發行，在亞洲影響了無數人修行。在中國佛教受破壞的日子，人們從香港把《金剛菩提海》帶進內地，在僧侶間互相傳閱。我親自聽見他們告訴我這份正法食糧的重要性，使他們能度過那些困難的時期。現在許多中國大學生，從網上讀到《金剛菩提海》，因而親近上人的法。

我對《金剛菩提海》未來的期許是：《金剛菩提海》永遠不會丟失方向，並且在不斷變化的時代，保留其清新和熱誠的實質作用。

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易象乾教授（中）於1968年參加楞嚴講修班，前為上人手書的《楞嚴經》墨寶。

Dr. Epstein (center) participating in the Shurangama Lecture Class in 1968. In front of him is part of the Shurangama Sutra written in the Venerable Master's calligraphy.