

## Journey to the West (27)

### Chapter 12

The Tang Emperor keeps faith and holds a Great Mass;  
Guanyin inspires to the reincarnated Golden Cicada.

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(For the details of the story, please refer to Chapter 12 in *Journey to the West* as translated by W. J. F. Jenner, published by Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, ISBN 7-119-00653-3)

Do you know that Tang Sanzang made the *Journey to the West* to get the sutras? What type of sutras were these, and did he get all the sutras? For example, we know a very famous sutra - the Diamond Sutra. Was the Diamond Sutra brought back by Tang Sanzang? No. Even though he acquired numerous sutras, he did not bring back every one of them. Tracing back through historical time, we knew that the Diamond Sutra was translated in the Liang Dynasty, right after the five barbarian groups invaded China. Since the Diamond Sutra was not brought back by Tang Sanzang, we realize that the *Journey to the West* was not meant just to acquire sutras. Even though the sutras obtained by Tang Sanzang are very significant, many sutras already existed, such as the Weimojie jing Sutra (*Vimalakīrti-nirdēśa*) which also belongs to the generation of Emperor Liang Wu.

In the era of Emperor Liang Wu, many sutras were acquired and translated. The era of Emperor Liang Wu was much earlier than the Tang

dynasty. It is clear that sutras existed a long time ago in China. The essential part is not the sutras themselves, but more the tests and trials overcome in the process of getting the sutras. The one hundred and eight kinds of torment in different times and spaces inspire people to learn lessons of the heart and obtain the treasure of wisdom. Here is the true meaning of *Journey to the West*

I cannot stress enough that time is confused in the *Journey to the West*; emphasis should not be placed on history or the calendar. If one becomes too caught up in calculating the specific moment, one can get lost. For example, it almost seems that everything happened in year thirteen of Zhen Guan, and specifically on September 3. It is too peculiar that everything happened on the same day. It is extremely puzzling. To understand things from a better perspective, everything happening on one day only gave us a hint that we were going to get a “heart” sutra following Third era Calamity. No matter during which dynasty this sutra was written - either the Ming dynasty or some other - and no matter whether it was the story of the Tang dynasty or merely set against the background of the Tang dynasty, it is all about the period of the Third era Calamity. Therefore, it is not too late or too early for us to read The



Journey to the West. It is exactly the right time. From this viewpoint, the book has a strong affinity with the present and reading it is all the more relevant.

From the perspective of the form level, Tang Sanzang was chosen to be in charge of the Great Water and Land Mass. From the spiritual world, Guanyin Bodhisattva had a mission from Buddha to search for a virtuous man to get the sutras. In appearance, it was the emperor who was seeking for a high monk to hold the ceremony of Great Water and Land Mass; while in the spiritual world, Guanyin Bodhisattva was simultaneously looking for a virtuous man to get the sutras. So when Guanyin Bodhisattva came upon Tang Sanzang and realized that she herself had brought him into the world from paradise, she was very happy.

Now, let us appreciate the original text.

Guess what the three treasures were. They were an embroidered cassock, a nine rings staff, and three hoops ; she stored the hoops away for later use. Only the cassock and the staff were for sale. In the city of Chang'an, there was an foolish monk with some money. He saw the Bodhisattva disguised as a monk with skin disease, wearing a ragged robe and in bare feet, carrying a beautiful shining cassock. He approached her and asked, "Hey, how much is the cassock?" Guanyin answered, "The cassock is worth 5000 taels of silver and the staff is worth 2000." The foolish monk laughed, "You must be a lunatic. These two things wouldn't be worth 7000 unless they con-

ferred immortality and Buddhahood. Take them away! No deal!" The Bodhisattva did not want to argue and just walked away with Moksa. After a while, they reached Donghua Gate and there ran into prime minister Xiaou Yu who happened to be off duty and on his way home. Although the crowd was being pushed to the roadsides to make ways for the Xiaou Yu, Guanyin proceeded to the middle of the street holding her cassock to meet the prime minister. Seeing the beautiful shining cassock, the prime minister stopped his horse and sent his attendants to ask the price. The Bodhisattva replied, "The cassock costs 5000 taels of silver and the staff 2000." Xiaou Yu said, "What is the merit of these things to make them so valuable?" The Bodhisattva answered, "The cassock has its merits and its shortcomings. It can be something valuable and can be worthless." Xiaou Yu remarked, "Why so good and why so bad?" Guanyin claimed, "Wearing my cassock, one does not degenerate, does not descend to Hell, does not suffer from vicious disaster and does not encounter foul play. Those are the merits. If monk becomes greedy, lascivious, vicious, foolish, or non-vegetarian, non-ascetic monk, or a blasphemous vulgar man, one cannot receive the merits of this cassock. The robe then becomes a bad thing." Xiaou Yu asked again, "Why can it cost so much or nothing?" The Bodhisattva continued, "If one does not follow Buddhist law or respect the Three Treasures, yet still persists in owning the robe and staff, I will definitely charge him 7000 taels of silver. In that sense, they can be very expensive. On the other hand, If one respects the Three Treasures, abides in goodness, and follows Buddhist law, I will give him the robe

and staff as a gift. That is when they cost nothing.” The prime minister got the message and felt happy to know this good man. He got down from his horse and greeted Guanyin with courtesy and exclaimed, “Respected master, please pardon me, Xiaou Yu and my sin. Our great Tang emperor loves goodness and all his officials in the court obey Buddhist law. Soon, we will establish The Great Water and Land Mass, and the cassock could be well used by Xuanzang, who will conduct it. Let us go see the emperor.”

Let us review the whole process and try to describe how Guanyin Bodhisattva bestowed these treasures on the people. She and Moksa pretended to sell their treasures on the street. One was an embroidered cassock, the second was a nine rings staff, and the third was three hoops. She stored three hoops away for later use. We know of course that one tight hoop was eventually worn by Sun Wukong. Guanyin Bodhisattva brought all these to Chang’an to sell.

Guanyin Bodhisattva did not appear in her own form; instead, she presented herself in a very sloppy manner with ragged clothes, bare feet, and shaved head; nevertheless, the cassock in her hand was shiny and beautiful. Therefore, her purpose was not really to sell these three treasures to people in Chang’an. Her intention was to let people see Tang Sanzang. The treasures from Guanyin Bodhisattva were for people with affinity and insight, and she also took this opportunity to enlighten general people and to teach the idiot monk the importance of reaching beyond superficial appearances.

In fact, the cassock was not necessarily meant to be sold at all, but was meant to be given to someone with affinity. Guanyin Bodhisattva tried to sell them to many people, but nobody was interested. Only the Prime Minister Xiaou Yu received the message and felt happy knowing that there was some profound meaning in these treasures. He welcomed the Bodhisattva with courtesy and led her to court to meet the emperor. Therefore, Guanyin Bodhisattva sold the cassock in hope of encountering the prime minister, who could introduce her to the emperor and then Xuanzang.

Tang Taizong was very happy to hear about this encounter, because both things were valuable treasures for Xuanzang, so he offered to buy them for the Hierarch. Guanyin Bodhisattva felt that her conditions were fulfilled and decided not to take any money. Later on, Xuanzang entered the court, clothed in the cassock as if he had been awarded the highest position in the court exam. At this moment, Xuanzang must have felt like that because only the highest monk can be selected to be in charge of the Great Water and Land Mass. It is an honor beyond measure.

At the Great Water and Land Mass, the master recited on the dais the Sutra of Transcending Death, talked about the Heavenly Charm to Protect the Nation, and expounded upon the scroll of Cultivating Merit for some time. Guanyin Bodhisattva approached exclaimed, “That monk can only discuss the Lesser Vehicle. Why can he not talk about the Greater Vehicle?” Xuanzang heard and jumped off the dais with delight. He

addresses the Bodhisattva with a gesture,” Old Master, little disciple begs your pardon for the crime I have committed here. All the monks here talk about the Lesser Vehicle, and none know the Greater Vehicle. Guanyin Bodhisattva replied, “Your Lesser Vehicle cannot transcend death. It can only deal with the vulgar with harmony. I have three treasures of the Greater Vehicle which can transcend death and suffering, can lead to boundless longevity, and free souls from endless transmigration.”

This is an important paragraph. First of all, the Bodhisattva had seen Tang Sanzang lecturing on dais. Unexpectedly she criticized Tang Sanzang and ridiculed him for only talking about the Lesser Vehicle. This disparagement might have embarrassed an ordinary person, and left him at a loss to deal with the predicament. But Xuanzang, on the contrary, was very happy and jumped off the dais and bowed to the Bodhisattva to acknowledge that he was only talking about the Lesser Vehicle and did not know the teachings of the Greater Vehicle.

Is the Diamond Sutra the Greater Vehicle or the Lesser Vehicle? In general, people say it is the Greater Vehicle. Surprisingly, the Bodhisattva thought Tang Sanzang could only lecture on the Lesser Vehicle but not on the Greater Vehicle. What is the reason? Do you think the Diamond Sutra was known at that time? In fact, it had been in circulation for a long time. Why then he was criticized for only discussing the Lesser Vehicle? As far as we know, in the Tang Dynasty, the Diamond Sutra had already been inherited by Zen

Buddhism. That is to say, when they passed on the Buddhist law, they must have transmitted this sutra. When the Fifth Patriarch transmitted his Buddhist teaching to the Sixth Patriarch, he actually included the Diamond Sutra which was already a very famous sutra. In addition, we know that the Diamond Sutra is the Greater Vehicle. When the Bodhisattva said, “Why do they only talk about the Lesser Vehicle, and not the Greater Vehicle?” she was addressing not the nature of the sutras, but rather the method of teaching.

What is a teaching method? It is the method of our cultivating Tao. Clearly, studying sutras and cultivating Tao are completely different. Because studying sutras is an intentional method, but cultivating Tao is not. Therefore, the Bodhisattva was not talking about whether the Tang dynasty had the Greater Vehicle. We should understand, normal people think that when the Bodhisattva mentioned the Greater Vehicle, she was pointing to the sutra itself, but actually she referred to the teaching method.

To return to the story:

Guanyin calmly said to the Tang Emperor, “That master of yours lectured on the Lesser Vehicle which cannot transcend death. It can only deal with the vulgar with harmony. I have three treasures of the Greater Vehicle which can transcend death and suffering and, can lead to boundless longevity.” Taizong asked eagerly “Where is your Greater Vehicle?” The Bodhisattva replied, “It is in the palace of Buddha in Great Thunder Sound Temple in the land of India in the West. It

can resolve all misery and eliminate all disasters.” Taizong said, “Do you remember about the Greater Vehicle?” Guanyin answered, “Yes, I do.” Taizong exclaimed with happiness, “Tell Xuanzang to lead the way so that this master can get on the dais to give his teaching”

The Bodhisattva brought Moksa and flew up onto the dais. Then she stepped on a cloud reaching the ninth level of sky. She appeared in her original form with pure bottle and willow to give salvation to sufferers. On the left was Mucha Hue-An (Moksa) who exhibited high spirit and held a stick. The Tang emperor was elated and worshiped the sky along with all the court officials, who knelt down and burned incense. In the temple, all the monks and nuns, as well as the common people, scholars, craftsmen, workers and merchants, all worshiped and prayed, “Good Bodhisattva! Good Bodhisattva!”

Again, what are the differences between the Lesser Vehicle and the Greater Vehicle? Guanyin Bodhisattva said that the Lesser Vehicle cannot transcend death. It can only deal with the vulgar with harmony.” Dealing with the common people with harmony means to take risks to help the common people to transcend. It refers to getting along with people with pleasure and harmony, as indicated in the proverb, “When in Rome, do as the Romans do.” According to this proverb, when we find ourselves in a new environment, we then have to abide by the rules of the place we find ourselves. To make it clearer, it means to follow their customs whether they are right or wrong.

What does it mean for the Lesser Vehicle? Chinese people value loyalty, piety, chastity and justice. Therefore, some lecturers on the sutras emphasize loyalty, piety, chastity, and justice. It sounds all right, yet it is “dealing with the vulgar with harmony.” It is only following the common rules that other people do. Is this Buddhist law? In fact, it is not Buddhist law, but only common law. Is it wrong to follow the common law? Absolutely not. What can be wrong with the consensus? It is only courting the popular taste, yet it will not allow one to achieve Buddhahood or ascend to a higher level. Therefore, it was pointed out by Guanyin, “This Lesser Vehicle cannot transcend death.” She emphasized again, “Only the Greater Vehicle can transcend death.”

(To be continued)

