

The Great Vows
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Today, I will talk about the Great Vows we recite at each Zazenkai and each sesshin:

Sentient beings are numberless, I vow to save them.
Desires are inexhaustible, I vow to put an end to them.
The Dharmas are boundless, I vow to master them.
The Buddha way is unattainable, I vow to attain it.

It is important that we recite these vows with both attention and intention. The vows are lifeless and meaningless if we are simply reciting the lines; in that case we may as well not bother with them.

In his Dharma talk yesterday, Sensei Bruce Blackman talked about rushing mind, the mind that is constantly flitting from one thing to another. Are we reciting these vows with a rushing mind? With a mind that is darting back and forth between the words we are saying and some other consideration of our lives? Be attentive to what your mind is doing. Reciting the vows is practice too.

The bodhisattva strives to liberate all beings from the cycle of birth and death. The Great Vows For All are a statement of intent to do exactly that. They are an expression of the desire to attain enlightenment not for the sake of oneself, but for the benefit of all beings.

In his book *Taking the Path of Zen*, Robert Aitken Roshi wrote: *I have heard people say, "I cannot recite these vows because I cannot hope to fulfill them." Actually, Kanzeon, the incarnation of mercy and compassion, weeps because she cannot save all beings. Nobody fulfills*

these "Great Vows for All," but we vow to fulfill them as best we can. They are our practice.

There is a Japanese expression "gossho no bompu" which applies to people who live their lives driven by their desires. I believe it also describes those with rushing mind. Gossho are obstructions to practicing the Way and are caused by our past actions or karma. People who are gossho no bompu are those who are constantly reacting or responding to their desires. The bodhisattva is gansho no bosatsu, or one who lives by vow. The bodhisattva is an ordinary person who takes a vow to live a life of compassion for the benefit of all sentient beings. The more we practice being bodhisattva, the more our hearts and minds open and we find that generosity, compassion, and wisdom are always accessible to us right here, right now.

If we pay attention to what we are saying when we recite the Great Vows for All, it does seem like we are vowing to do the impossible. ***Sentient beings are numberless, I vow to save them.*** How can this be possible? I cannot even meet every sentient being; my lifetime is far too short to even accomplish that. And what is meant by *saving* them? First, notice that the vow is to save ***all*** sentient beings, not to save a particular sentient being. We miss the heart of the vow if we try to make it manageable, if we try to reduce it to saving a smaller set of sentient beings. What happens if we vow to save our community or our neighborhood? What happens if we vow to save a single sentient being – surely that is more manageable. The problem is a vow like that creates separation. In taking that vow, I'm setting myself apart from the other being and also setting myself up as better off in some way; I'm saying that the other being is in need of saving and I can help. Like Mighty Mouse – here I come to save the day. Obviously, the lesser vow is flawed. Vowing to save all sentient beings is humbling. It takes us out of our normal frame of reference. It forces us to confront our own inadequacy and to practice in spite of it.

The Buddha said that life is dukkha – life is suffering. In the phenomenal world, everyone is suffering. We suffer together and we also save each other together. There is no separation. So anything I do to save another also saves me, and anything I do to save myself saves all sentient beings in equal measure. How do I go about saving myself? Through practice.

Zen teacher Taitaku Pat Phelan said: *“When we take these vows, an intention is created, the seed of an effort to follow through. Because these vows are so vast, they are, in a sense, undefinable. We continually define and redefine them as we renew our intention to fulfill them. If you have a well-defined task with a beginning, middle, and end, you can estimate or measure the effort needed. But the Bodhisattva Vows are immeasurable. The intention we arouse, the effort we cultivate when we call forth these vows, extends us beyond the limits of our personal identities.”*

Desires are inexhaustible, I vow to put an end to them. We are human and in being human we have desires. In taking up this vow, we are not vowing to extinguish all desires, we are not vowing to becoming emotionless people. We are vowing to recognize our desires, to accept and acknowledge them, but to not attach to them. Having a desire is fine; attaching to it, clinging to it and wanting it to be actualized always leads to suffering no matter what the outcome. In attaching to desires, we always feel that something is missing. If I could have this, if I could achieve this, my life would be better. Perhaps, as zen students, we attach to the desire for kensho – if I can achieve kensho I will be at peace. Attaching to desires always leads to suffering. If the desire is met, sooner or later it no longer satisfies, we become disillusioned, and we move on to a different desire. If the desire is not met, we suffer disappointment. Either way, we are in turmoil, constantly buffeted by desires. On the other hand, if we can have desires but realize they are

just constructs of the mind, empty of substance, and if we can simply be with whatever arises, then we find true peace.

The Dharmas are boundless, I vow to master them. Dharma has several meanings in Zen Buddhism. It refers to “cosmic law and order” or the truth of the universe. It refers to the teachings of the Buddha. And it is also a word used to refer to phenomena. So here we are vowing to master the truth of the universe, the teachings of the Buddha, and the entire phenomenal world. That’s a tall order. How do we go about doing that? It’s important to remember that Zen constantly admonishes us to live in the present moment, that the past and the future are constructs of the mind. So we aren’t vowing to be a master of the dharmas at some point in the future. Zen doesn’t live in the future and neither do we. We are vowing to practice constantly, here and now, doing our best in the present moment. We are vowing to be aware of the phenomenal world, of the law of karma, and of the Buddha’s teachings now, moment by moment. We are vowing to practice awareness of the present moment each moment. There is nothing else.

I believe living this way cultivates upaya – skillful means. Every sentient being is unique in experience and conditioning and upaya lets the Bodhisattva assist each sentient being accordingly. Practicing this vow is bringing Avalokiteshvara, a.k.a. Quan Yin, a.k.a. Kannon, a.k.a. the Bodhisattva of Compassion to life. It is actualizing Avalokiteshvara in the present moment.

Sensei Bruce Blackman has talked about Avalokiteshvara the Bodhisattva with many hands and eyes, the Bodhisattva of compassion who hears the sounds of the world and responds to them. When we recite the Great Vows, we take on this task. We vow to clarify our mind and develop the wisdom and skills that enable us to help all who are suffering. This is an important point – we vow to clarify our mind, to

remove the subject-object dichotomy, so that helping is simply the act of responding to what is needed in a totally selfless way.

The Buddha way is unattainable, I vow to attain it. This vow reiterates the first three and we are reaffirming our commitment to them. Here we are vowing to undertake lifelong practice for the benefit of all sentient beings. We are vowing to dedicate our practice to all beings, not to simply disappear into our own personal nirvana. Bodhisattvas cannot simply sit on the cushion. Bodhisattvas hear the cries of the world and are motivated to act, to do what they can do to relieve suffering. If you have heard of the Ten Ox Herding Pictures, this is the action of the tenth one – returning to the market. As an aside – if you have not heard of the Ten Ox Herding Pictures, I recommend them to you. You can Google for them. They are an expression of states of development of the Zen experience.

Koan 46 of the Mumonkan (The Gateless Gate) also points to the issue of just sitting on the cushion to our own benefit.

The case:

Master Sekiso said, “How will you step forward from the top of a hundred-foot pole?” Another eminent master of old said, “Even though one who is sitting on the top of a hundred-foot pole has entered realization, it is not yet real. He must step forward from the top of the pole and manifest his whole body throughout the world in ten directions.”

These masters are clearly telling us that kensho is not enough, that true enlightenment is bringing the realization into our everyday lives, into our everyday interactions. Of course, kensho is not required either. True practice is bringing what we realize on the cushion into our everyday interactions. The realizations don't have to be monumental.

They don't have to be earth shattering. In fact, realization of any kind is not necessary. Practice leads to a quieter mind, to a place of stillness. We can bring that stillness forth into our everyday interactions. So what, if anything, is holding you back? Is it necessary to reach the top of the hundred foot pole before stepping off? If you hesitate, if you hold back, you are wasting opportunity, wasting your precious life, and wasting the lives of all sentient beings as well.

In my personal experience, I've hesitated. I experienced uncertainty when I started doing hospice work. Everyone I know who volunteers in hospice had a similar experience. I felt so inadequate facing the prospect of trying to comfort people I didn't know who were at the end of their lives. What can I say to someone who is dying? What can I do for someone who is dying? The inadequacy I felt was palpable and in such strong contrast to the calmness of sitting on my cushion. But in time, all that changed. Not because it became familiar and therefore had less intensity. The change came because I was able to take what I learned on the cushion, the ability to watch my mind, and use it in a non-cushion experiential situation. I was able to see the insecurity, allow it to wash over me in a non-judgmental way, and realize that it was nothing but a construct of mind – that it had no substance outside of “small mind”. Acceptance of the realization made it more than just another mental construct, made it more than a rationalization of how to get around the discomfort I had previously felt. There was a dropping away of the feeling of inadequacy, and this led to the freedom to be with dying people in a way that better met their needs. I found that I could just be with them, just follow their subtle leads in terms of what they wanted or needed. I found that there was nothing, absolutely nothing for “me” to do. The only thing needed was being present with stillness of mind.

Our practice is interesting isn't it? We start off wanting to find something for ourselves. Maybe we are looking for peace of mind,

maybe for better health, maybe for knowledge. Maybe we are driven to have the enlightenment experience – kensho a.k.a. satori. But as the mind settles, as we develop the power of concentration – joriki in Japanese, something eventually shifts within our intentions. We may have started practice driven by attaining something for ourselves, but somewhere along the way the focus begins to soften. Somewhere along the way, the Bodhisattva intention seeps into our practice and the Great Vows start to come alive.

I came across a story while preparing this talk, and I'd like to relate it to you. Three men were walking through the desert. They were lost and about to die from thirst and hunger. They come to a very high wall and the first one climbs up, shouts for joy and jumps over the wall never to return. The next man climbs up the wall and he too, exclaims in ecstasy, jumps off the wall and never comes back. Now the third man climbs up the wall. He gets to the top and sees a sort of Garden of Eden place with water and lots of fruit trees. He smiles, turns, goes back down the wall, returning to the desert to help others find their way to this paradise. He chooses to go back into the desert of the world and help others find their way.

So when we recite the Great Vows for All, each time we recite them, may we do so with attention to what we are saying, attention to what we are committing ourselves to. May our recitation of the vows be more than just speaking words we've memorized. May we awaken Avalokiteshvara.

The Great Vows for All have many translations. We recite the one used at the Zen Mountain Monastery which is almost identical to the one used at the Great Mountain Zen Center in Colorado. I recently came across the interpretation used by Thich Nhat Hanh which I like a great deal, and I'd like to close the talk with a recitation of that variation:

However innumerable beings are, I vow to meet them with kindness and interest.

However inexhaustible the states of suffering are, I vow to touch them with patience and love.

However immeasurable the Dharmas are, I vow to explore them deeply.

However incomparable the mystery of interbeing, I vow to surrender to it freely.